

Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons at the University of the Western Cape: Public History, Museum Studies, and Restitutionary Work

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Abstract

This article examines the intellectual history and *pré-terrain* of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Supranational Forum, especially of its work at its main location in the Department of History (now Historical Studies) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This is necessarily a study of the background to, and the intellectual and political environment of, a specific academic programme. It is thus a programmatic history. But this is also an intellectual history of transformations in the politics of public scholarship and in the thinking that saw a concentration on critical public history and museum and heritage studies that also enabled a more assertive and activist concentration on restitutionary museology. It is also an investigation of how our research and teaching occurred as part of African and international networks of museum transformation and cultural politics.

Keywords

Museums, universalism, entanglement, provenance, restitution, rehumanisation, ancestors, belongings, deaccessioning, deobjectification

Introduction

During the course of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum, there was a significant shift in much of the international museum world, from the politics of universalism in the 2000s to a practice marked by a growing willingness to ameliorate museum authority through ideas of co-curatorship and the ‘entanglement’ between former colonisers and the former colonised. This saw understandings of the museum shift from being seen as a locus of the care of collections for future generations to being understood as a forum for social engagement. While the idea of ‘museum as forum’ had already reared its head in the late 1970s,¹ from the 1990s or so, this became the main approach that sought to remove attention from the mere professional care of collections. This approach at times also saw some shift away from the government of collections. Alongside this, some approaches framed themselves through the idea of social museology, especially in Latin America. These developments also witnessed a new desire to implement an ethical approach to collections through provenance research, which emerged from about the mid-2010s. As part of this new sense of ethics, some commitment began to be expressed in favour of the return of the remains of the dead and of the material culture that had been acquired within contexts of injustice.

Since then, this new phase of amelioration and enlightened collections management also saw the introduction of a greater awareness of just how violent the colonial conditions were through which items entered European museum collections. There has also been a new awareness about just how much museums have been marked by social tension and contestation, such as those which have been occurring between the politics of repatriation and a new museology of restitution. These ameliorative and restitutionary approaches to museums and the care of collections have continued to coexist as distinct expressions of museum politics.

Before the late 2010s and the era of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum, our work in museum research and museum and heritage education was caught up in these transitions in museum thinking, considering debates about museums and governmentality, on the one hand, and museums and the processes of social mobilisation, on the other. Leslie Witz and I did this in the context of studying, making, and transforming museums that became immersed in building democracy in South Africa after apartheid. In my work I began to argue that restitution could become a means of deepening the museum as process.² This article wants to extend our understanding of the politics of return by arguing that restitution needs to be distinguished from repatriation, and that the desire to give back should be differentiated from building projects of restitution, claims-making, and social restoration.

1 M. Tucker, ‘The New Museum: A Forum for Dialogue, Controversy, and Visual Provocation’, *Art Journal*, 37, 3 (Spring 1978), 241–244.

2 C. Rassool, with E. Uzer and F. Hammami, ‘The Epistemic Work of Decolonization and Restitution: A Critical Conversation’ in F. Hammami and E. Uzer (eds), *Theorizing Heritage through Non-Violent Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 213–230.

Universalism, Governmentality and African Museum Development

The life of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum, which began its work in 2018, unfolded in the wake of and amidst important and ongoing shifts in the museum field internationally. The 2000s had been rooted in claims by major European and North American museums to be ‘universal museums’, and thus the most appropriate locations for the governance and care of collections from formerly colonised societies. Nevertheless, new perspectives had already begun to emerge that shifted the focus away from the stewardship of collections for future generations to museums, community relations, and social mobilisation.

The concept of the universal museum came to be associated with the declaration that was signed and presented on 8 December 2002 by the directors of eighteen major museums in the United States, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. This they did as a response to growing claims presented to major museums in Europe and North America for the return of belongings, referred to as ‘cultural property’, to their societies of origin. While affirming its opposition to ‘illicit traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects’, the declaration nevertheless asserted that ‘objects acquired in earlier times’ needed to be understood ‘in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era’, as those conditions were ‘not comparable with current ones’. In addition, the declaration asserted, such ‘objects’, whether acquired ‘by purchase, gift, or partage’, had ‘become part of the museums that [had] cared for them’ and part of the ‘heritage of the nations [that] hous[ed] them’. Most importantly, it claimed that these museums had come to serve ‘not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation’. By showcasing a wide breadth of collections from all over the world, their ‘mission’ was to ‘foster knowledge by a continuous process of interpretation’.³

The declaration had apparently been drafted and discussed by these museums in Munich two months before, and was finalised without the British Museum as a signatory. However, the most pressing task of the declaration, it seemed, was to present a defence of the right of the British Museum to hold on to the seventeen 5th century BC marble figures in its collection. These had been taken from the Parthenon 200 years before by the then-British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Lord Elgin. This case for retention and universalism was presented especially against the argument for their return that had been mounted as part of the construction of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, and in the lead up to the 2004 Athens Olympics. For then-director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, the marbles were ‘among a select group of key objects’ that were ‘indispensable to the museum’s core function’, and could never be ‘lent to any museum, in Greece or elsewhere’.⁴

While the British Museum had forwarded the universal museum declaration to the British press, immediately on its release and its presentation to the museum,

3 ‘Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums’, 8 December 2002, <https://archive.org/details/cmapr4492>. N. Fielding, ‘Museums unite against return of imperial “loot”’, *The Times*, 8 December 2002.

4 R. Barr, ‘World galleries back British Museum in dispute with Greece’, *News Observer*, 11 December 2002.

the latter emphasised repeatedly that it hadn't participated in the declaration's drafting. But later on, the idea of the universal museum, or what was also called the encyclopaedic museum, increasingly became associated with the British Museum, especially with MacGregor. This was especially in relation to claims by Africans on their belongings held by the British Museum, as well as by other European and North American museums. In expanding the case for the responsibility of continued retention, MacGregor presented an argument about the British Museum's formation as being rooted in a democratic impulse, of it being 'the collection of all the citizens', the first 'national' museum of Britain, and as one of the first museums to be called 'British' (as opposed to 'Royal'). It was the British Museum, he argued, that had laid the 'foundation of a new concept of the citizen's right to information and understanding'.⁵

MacGregor lamented how controversies over the ownership of the 'treasures' of the British Museum served to create uncertainty about the museum's 'worldwide civic purpose'. He drew attention to the British Museum's then-newly installed African exhibition presented in the Sainsbury African Galleries, and to its artworks that enabled the museum to promote 'a greater understanding of humanity'. In the exhibition, a 'disconcerting and thought-provoking' object, 'Throne of Weapons', made by the artist Cristóvão Canhavato (known as 'Kester') out of pieces of decommissioned weapons from the Mozambique civil war, spoke of 'long relationships of commercial, political and military exploitation'. The Benin Bronzes, according to MacGregor, were objects of 'technological virtuosity' that had been removed as part of the 1897 'punitive expedition', an 'act of retaliation', and then sold, ending up in the British Museum as well as in museums in Berlin, Paris, New York and elsewhere. Its display in the Sainsbury Gallery, for MacGregor, made it possible for 'a new, more securely grounded view of Africa and of African culture' to be formed out of these 'terrible circumstances'.⁶

In similar vein, other museum leaders, like James Cuno, defended the value of 'encyclopaedic' museums as fostering an appreciation of human diversity. Cuno, who directed Harvard Art Museums for more than a decade until 2002, as well as the Art Institute of Chicago, and who thereafter took over the presidency of the J. Paul Getty Trust, assembled the positions he had been building in *Who Owns Antiquity*, published in 2008. Here he mounted an argument about antiquities being 'the cultural property of all humankind', but whose continued collection had become restricted by international UNESCO conventions that came to regulate their trade. For him the impact of these conventions was not so much to curtail looting, but to pose restrictions on the duty of preservation, in favour of protecting 'narrow, selfish, national interests'.⁷

Likewise, for Cuno, repatriation was also a misguided way of granting national identity and even 'citizenship' to antiquities, as well as a means of 'anthropomorphizing

5 N. MacGregor, 'The whole world in our hands', *The Guardian*, 24 July 2004.

6 Ibid.

7 J. Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); R. White, 'Museum Collections', *The Classical Review*, 59, 2 (2009), 576–578.

ancient artifacts', thus facilitating 'the creation of a revisionist history'.⁸ While Cuno admitted that 'encyclopedia museums' had been the creation of 'a long running and often bloody colonial history', it was precisely this history that should be on display. For him, 'empire is a fact of history, and history [needs to be] on display in encyclopedia collections'. Instead of repatriation, for him there was an opportunity for 'cross-cultural dialogue' through 'encyclopedia museums' like the Metropolitan Museum and the British Museum, advocating instead for 'a vast increase in the volume of loans of cultural objects and artifacts among the world's museums'. This would require a 'cultural political détente' and promote 'the responsible sharing of collections [...] in places that themselves have no encyclopedia museums'.⁹

Our direct experience of the defence of the universal museum took place in Mombasa in August 2005, in the setting of a conference on the future of African Museums and Cultural Institutions organised by the Programme on Museum Development in Africa (PMDA), in partnership with the British Council and the British Museum. Leslie Witz and I, from UWC's African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies, had been invited to participate along with some programme alumni from different African countries. Also present in Mombasa were representatives from Ecole du Patrimoine (EPA), based in Porto Novo, Benin, as well as the International Council of African Museums (AFRICOM), based in Nairobi. And it was in Mombasa where we encountered all the contradictions of cultural assertiveness and economic dependency that characterised African heritage institutions.

PMDA had been set up as an anglophone African heritage programme through the interests of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to promoting heritage preservation through training and advocacy, which was an advisory body of UNESCO. PMDA was located in the Old Law Court in Mombasa, through the support of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and located close to NMK's other site museum, Fort Jesus. The other African heritage capacity-building programme initiated through ICCROM was EPA, the francophone platform that also served lusophone African countries. Both PMDA, later known as the Centre for Heritage Development in Africa (CHDA), and EPA found themselves caught up within the contradictions of international heritage partnerships, between the demands of agency and sovereignty and the limits posed by development and dependence.

An earlier museum capacity-building programme had been the West Africa Museums Programme (WAMP), set up in Dakar, with support from the Ford Foundation and later the Rockefeller Foundation, initially concentrating on repairing the physical decay of collections and later supporting professional training programmes through networks of museums and universities in West Africa. To its credit, it was in the setting of WAMP that criticism began to be mounted against

8 J. Cuno, 'Culture War: The Case Against Repatriating Museum Artifacts', *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 6 (Nov./Dec. 2014), 119.

9 A. Forbes, 'The Getty's James Cuno Speaks Out Against Repatriation', *Art World*, 4 November 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-gettys-james-cuno-speaks-out-against-repatriation-154453>.

the ways museums in West Africa had always been, in the words of the late Malian director of WAMP, Claude Ardouin, 'marginal institutions, created by Europeans in the classic ethnographic mould and visited mostly by tourists'.¹⁰ It was this sense of marginality that was also experienced in the settings of CHDA and EPA, with African heritage practice usually framed as practical training in preservation and the prevention of illicit traffic, with museum and heritage theory deemed to be the preserve of Europe.

Also involved in the African networks that were supported by NMK as part of African museum and heritage development was the International Council of African Museums (AFRICOM), which was located on the estate of the Nairobi Museum. Formed in October 1999, AFRICOM was an African museum development initiative formed as a sub-committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). It was unlike the Swedish African Museums Programme (SAMP), which from the late 1980s had been spearheaded by ICOM Sweden as a Swedish–African museum twinning programme. Whereas SAMP had been created through an ethos of European museum aid and development assistance, through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA),¹¹ as an autonomous and pan-African organisation of museums and an NGO, AFRICOM was more clearly rooted in a sense of African agency and national sovereignty and the need for 'building together with the community'.¹² AFRICOM nevertheless followed the conventions of ICOM in its governance and sense of representation, with delegates on its council and scientific advisory board coming from all African regions.¹³

While AFRICOM sought to mobilise the fullest range of museums and museum forms as well as museum professionals on the whole African continent (not only in sub-Saharan Africa), its main project was concerned with national museum development in Africa. And the subtext of its operations seemed to be deepening museum governmentality in Africa and enhancing possibilities for the return of African material culture to national museums on the continent. Read together with the work of CHDA, these restitution objectives seemed to contradict the conventions and relations of development aid that AFRICOM was caught up in. And it was the tensions of sovereignty and development that expressed themselves at the Mombasa seminar in August 2005.

John Mack, present in Mombasa as an art historian and social anthropologist specialising in African arts, articulated the prevailing British view against repatriation at the conference. Mack had been the Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum

10 R. Wimpee, 'In Brief: The West Africa Museums Programme', *RE:source*, 4 November 2019, <https://resource.rockarch.org/story/the-west-africa-museums-programme/>. See also the following volumes that emerged from foundation-supported workshops: C.D. Ardouin and E. Arinze (eds), *Museums and the Community in West Africa* (Oxford and Washington, DC: James Currey, 1995); C.D. Ardouin (ed.), *Museums and Archaeology in West Africa* (Oxford and Washington, DC: James Currey, 1997); C.D. Ardouin and E. Arinze (eds), *Museums and History in West Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

11 M. Ekarv, *Cultural Adventures: SAMP – Ten Years of Swedish-African Museum Exchanges* (Stockholm: SAMP, 2000).

12 allAfrica, 'Africa: Birth of International Council of African Museums', 12 October 1999, <https://allafrica.com/stories/199910120093.html>; C. Rassool, 'Building a Critical Museology in Africa: A Foreword' in T. Laely, M. Meyer, and R. Schwere (eds), *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018).

13 Both Claude Ardouin and I served as Chairpersons of the Scientific Board of AFRICOM at different times.

(including the Museum of Mankind until 1995) until 2004, and in the same year had become Professor of World Art Studies at the University of East Anglia, where he also served on the Board of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. It was Mack who, in 2001, had curated the British Museum's Sainsbury African Galleries that Neil MacGregor referred to and who had produced their companion volume.¹⁴ In April 2005, he had participated in a workshop sponsored by the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the British Council and the British Museum, and held in Nairobi, that was geared towards supporting the creation of South Sudan national identity through cultural heritage. In the year before, as a scholar who had studied the archaeology, linguistics, and 'ethnohistory' of southern Sudan more than twenty years before,¹⁵ Mack had met South Sudanese government representatives to discuss collaboration on 'the promotion of the arts and culture and their roles in nation building and civil society'.¹⁶

At the April 2005 Nairobi meeting, Mack admitted that fashioning a South Sudanese nation through museums presented some difficulty, as there was 'no established tradition of museums or other cultural institutions in Southern Sudan'. To compound matters, collections of 'historical and ethnographic objects and associated documentation' were held either in the Ethnographic Museum in Khartoum or outside the continent. While it was important 'to form appropriate ethnographic collections and archaeological material', and to intervene legislatively in the illicit traffic in Southern Sudanese cultural 'objects', he recommended that care needed to be taken not to 'follow established models especially where these have been developed in Europe'.¹⁷

In the back of his mind, Mack was seemingly aware that serious consideration would need to be given to growing collections of archaeology and ethnography through an active programme of repatriation to new museums in the new South Sudanese nation. Also, this would need to go beyond the policy and legislative framework of curbing and returning what had been lost through illicit traffic and plunder, which was limited to acts committed after 1970.¹⁸ Mack suggested instead that a useful approach might be to focus on 'more recent historical experience', through a 'programme to document the last two decades of the twentieth century', where 'intangible heritage may have to take precedence'. In addition, copies of documentary film and photographs held in collections and archives in the UK could be made available.¹⁹

14 J. Mack, *Africa: Arts and Cultures* (London: British Museum Press, 2000).

15 J. Mack and P. Robertshaw (eds), *Culture History in the Southern Sudan: Archaeology, Linguistics and Ethnohistory* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1982).

16 P. Lane, 'Protecting and Conserving the Cultural Heritage of South Sudan: Defining Priorities for Action (Introduction)' in *Protecting and Conserving the Cultural Heritage of South Sudan: Defining Priorities for Action*, Conference Proceedings, British Institute for Eastern Africa, Nairobi, 12–13 April 2005, 5.

17 J. Mack, 'Museums and Cultural Institutions in the Southern Sudan' in *Protecting and Conserving the Cultural Heritage of South Sudan: Defining Priorities for Action*, Conference Proceedings, British Institute for Eastern Africa, Nairobi, 12–13 April 2005, 34–35.

18 'Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property', UNESCO, 1970; 'Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects', UNIDROIT, 1995.

19 Mack, 'Museums and Cultural Institutions in the Southern Sudan', 34–35.

Previously, at a high-level colloquium on the 'protection of African cultural objects' organised together with the French Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, held in Paris in March 2003, Mack had explained the strict adherence by the British Museum to its own ethical policy as well as the 1970 convention.²⁰ This meant ensuring that all purchases, gifts, and incoming exhibition loans had indisputable legal provenance, and that outgoing loans would not take place where other exhibits might have been illegally excavated or exported. In addition, he emphasised the work done by the British Museum 'in co-operation with national museums in Africa' and its maintenance of 'mutual relations [...] with the African institutions'.²¹

Yet, once again, beyond the scourge of ongoing illicit traffic and the needs of training as the basis of safeguarding cultural heritage, the elephant in the room was the illicit nature of 'objects' that had entered European museums under colonial conditions. In the words of Gael de Guichen, special advisor to ICCROM, 'Africans who wanted to get to know their own cultural heritage had to leave their home countries'. In response, Mack reiterated that while this matter 'had always been under debate', the key thing 'was to establish inter-institutional relations enabling these objects to be exhibited and safeguarded'.²²

In Mombasa in August 2005, at the conference on 'The Future of African Museums and Cultural Institutions', Mack showed himself to be one of the main theorists of the anti-repatriation position when it came to African 'objects' in British collections. In the first place, he argued, African artworks and artefacts needed to be close to African diasporic communities in London and Britain more broadly, who were from the societies from which these collections had originated. Moreover, he argued, care had been taken to ensure that African 'objects' were looked after by African curators, who were able to interpret these perhaps with a greater sense of empathy. He drew attention to three African curators in British museums who were participants at the conference: Malian museum scholar Claude Ardouin, who was in transition to joining the British Museum as curator of West African collections; former NMK curator Hassan Arero, then Keeper of Anthropology at the Horniman Museum since 2002 and who went on to become Curator of African collections at the British Museum; and the Uganda-born scholar of African arts and ethnographic collecting, Zachary Kingdon, who was then curator of African collections at National Museums Liverpool. Rather than repatriation, Mack emphasised the need for partnerships between British and African museums and the need for loans and circulation.²³ It is interesting how such conferences and forums were important settings for wider debates and contests in the museum and heritage field.

20 'The Protection of African Cultural Objects', Proceedings of the colloquy organised together with the French Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, under the patronage of Mr Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic, 28 March 2003, Appendix 2.

21 'Ending the Plundering of African Cultural Objects', Report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Doc 10063, 4 February 2004, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10424&lang=EN>.

22 'The Protection of African Cultural Objects'.

23 C. Rassool, conference notes, 'The Future of African Museums and Cultural Institutions', Conference, Mombasa, August 2005.

These contestations were brought into the open in Kenya between March and September 2006, in the context of the exhibition 'Hazina: Traditions, Trade and Transitions in Eastern Africa', which opened in NMK's Nairobi National Museum. This exhibition, described by journalist Carol Odero as showing 'one of the most comprehensive artwork collections in recent Kenya', placed 140 artefacts from the British Museum on display, 'the first time the museum has lent objects to Africa'.²⁴ Indeed, Neil MacGregor described 'Hazina' as 'the first time a show has been put on in Africa from the collection of a European museum curated by an African for an African public'.²⁵ 'Hazina' was the outcome of a flagship programme funded from a substantial grant made by the British government in 2003 for the British Museum 'to forge stronger links with Africa'.²⁶ MacGregor explained that its curator, Kenyan ethnographer Kiprop Lagat, worked in the stores at the British Museum for six months, going through the 12,000 objects in the East African collection, 'piece by piece', for an exhibition which 'told the story of the region, the links between cultures over centuries', and with Kenyan and British staff working together on the display.²⁷

Idle Farah, then-director of NMK, agreed that the 'central theme' of discussion with the exhibition was 'why are these objects, which come from here, kept in Britain?' But his approach was pragmatic. For Farah, 'Hazina' was a 'test for both sides'. He was hoping that with new developments at the museum, with an extra 4,500m², 'space will not be a constraint', and he wondered whether NMK could 'have objects on a more long-term basis'. Here he refrained from commenting on the sovereignty question, instead expressing his hope of being able to 'secure longer term loans' for the Nairobi National Museum.²⁸ Neil MacGregor, on the other hand, asserted that '[r]epatriation is yesterday's question', saying that it imagined 'that an object [could] only be in one place'. That was 'no longer true' and that with 'recent advances in packing and transport', and through partnerships and loans, it was now possible 'that the collection be studied by the world and advance knowledge worldwide'. This would give effect to the objectives of the setting up of the British Museum, and questions of ownership were thus 'irrelevant'.²⁹ However, for Kenyan journalist Msanii Kimani wa Wanjiru, the mere fact of objects being able to travel did not make ownership inconsequential. If most of them had been taken during the colonial period, he asked, 'what were the circumstances under which they were taken' and 'what "knowledge" was extracted from them?'³⁰

In questioning the whole partnership project and object loans between the British Museum and NMK, Elizabeth Ouma, the NMK public programmes coordinator, and Lorna Abungu, the AFRICOM executive director, were compelled to ask: 'why [were] such exhibitions developed? For whom?', and 'what kind of collaborations should

24 C. Odero, 'Kenya Artefacts Back Home, Briefly', *Daily Nation*, 8 April 2006, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200604070956.html>.

25 N. MacGregor, quoted in Charlotte Higgins, 'Into Africa: British Museum's reply to ownership debate', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/13/arts.artsnews>.

26 C. Odero, 'Kenya Artefacts Back Home, Briefly', *Daily Nation*, 8 April 2006, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200604070956.html>.

27 N. MacGregor, quoted in C. Higgins, 'Into Africa: British Museum's reply to ownership debate', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/13/arts.artsnews>.

28 I. Farah, quoted in C. Higgins, 'Into Africa'.

29 N. MacGregor, quoted in C. Higgins, 'Into Africa'.

30 M.K. wa Wanjiru quoted in C. Higgins, 'Into Africa'.

Africa embrace and what should the mutual benefits be?’ For them, these kinds of exhibitions that ‘present African cultural material largely as works of art should be a thing of the past’. ‘Hazina’, they contended, was ‘meaningless to Africans’ without a sense of ‘context’, and ‘typecasts the African person for non-Africans’. More broadly, they argued that ‘repatriation must continue to be debated within the context of respect for the diversity of cultural values’ because, while African cultural material continued to be held in overseas collections, it was African people who remained ‘the practitioners and custodians of the culture represented by those same objects’. Now was also the time to move beyond the model where ‘curators knew it all’ and to work towards the ‘new African museum’ through which ‘communities can protect and develop their heritage’.³¹

Public History, Museum Studies, Forensic History

In witnessing these contestations about repatriation and the future of the museum in the settings of PMDA/CHDA and AFRICOM in Kenya, Leslie Witz and I were also mindful at the time of how much these questions spoke to our own museum teaching and research conducted in the setting of the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies at UWC. These were also the contests and exchanges out of which the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum was created. Indeed, the Forum followed upon twenty-five years of substantial research and teaching in the areas of public history and museum and heritage studies. These arenas of scholarship followed on from the People’s History Programme from the 1980s and early 1990s, in which collaborative research by staff and students had been resources for political mobilisation as part of anti-apartheid resistance.³² Some of us had also taught at the intervention-project in apartheid higher education, Khanya College, where we had introduced students to African History and oral history research.³³

By the mid-2010s in History at UWC, substantial areas of our research concentrated on critical museology, memory politics, and the politics of the dead body, rooted as we were in a laboratory of social transformation and reconstruction in South Africa after 1994, which UWC was. For us, public history and museum and heritage studies were socially and publicly engaged forms of historical practice, in which we and some of our colleagues immersed ourselves in the historicising work of changing old museums (such as those brought together in the flagship Iziko Museums of South Africa) and making new ones (such as the District Six Museum, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum and the Robben Island Museum), as part of

31 E. Ouma and L. Abungu, ‘An African Renaissance’, *Museums Journal*, 13 November 2009.

32 M. Fullard, G. Minkley, C. Rassool, and N. Rousseau, ‘Transforming the Cutting Edge: The People’s History Programme, UWC 1987–1989’, *Perspectives in Education*, 12, 1 (1990), 103–108.

33 C. Rassool and L. Witz, ‘Creators and Shapers of the Past: The Khanya College Oral History Projects’, *Perspectives in Education*, 12, 1 (1990), 96–101. Leslie Witz and I were African History coordinators at Khanya College Johannesburg and Cape Town respectively, and our colleague, Gary Minkley, also taught there.

the broad project of rethinking the post-apartheid citizen.³⁴ Public history for us was a sense of history as production and contestation, and not as place and time, and also about museums and heritage, not as the government of things, sites and persons, but as location for anti-racist thought and practice, critical citizenship and counter-museology.

Our work had been conducted through research projects, such as the Project on Public Pasts and the Heritage Disciplines Project, both funded by South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), as well as through national and international collaborative platforms, such as the project on The Institutions of Public Culture, with the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship (CSPS) at Emory University, Museums and Global Public Spheres (also with CSPS, Emory University), the African Heritage Initiative (with the University of Michigan and the University of Ghana), the 'South African Empire' project (with the University of Namibia, the Basler Afrika Bibliographien and the University of Basel, Switzerland), and the 'Red Assembly' project (with the African Critical Inquiry Program, Emory University, the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change (ICGC), University of Minnesota and the National Research Foundation Department of Science and Technology South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chair in Social Change, University of Fort Hare). Most importantly, the development of Museum and Heritage Studies as an arena of excellence at UWC was also shaped by the ideas and projects generated in the Centre for Humanities Research as a platform for research scholarship in the humanities, especially through knowledge constituted beyond the academy.

The major outcome of our engaged research was the co-authored book, *Unsettled History* by Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley, and Ciraj Rassool, published in 2017.³⁵ This followed some ten years after another publishing milestone, the co-edited volume, *Museum Frictions*, which arose out of our partnership with CSPS under the direction of Corinne A. Kratz and the late Ivan Karp at Emory University, and which for many years was one of the leading texts in the field of museum studies, alongside two previous series volumes published by Smithsonian Institution Press.³⁶ Further afield, our attempts at broadening conversations and comparative study over the years occurred through partnerships with CSPS at Emory University, ICGC at

34 See B. Ndhlovu and C. Rassool, 'Rethinking the National and the Museum at Iziko Museums of South Africa' in R. Silverman, G. Abungu and P. Probst (eds), *National Museums in Africa: Reflections on Memory, Identity and the Politics of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 224–243; C. Rassool, 'Community Museums, Memory Politics and Social Transformation in South Africa: Histories, Possibilities and Limits' in I. Karp, C. A. Kratz, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarra-Frausto, with G. Buntinx, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and C. Rassool (eds), *Museum Frictions: Global Transformations/Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 286–321; L. Witz, 'Revisualising Township Tourism in the Western Cape: The Migrant Labour Museum and the Reconstruction of Lwandle', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 29, 4 (2011), 371–388; C. Rassool, 'Patrimônio e Nação no Pós-Apartheid, 1994–2004: A Ordem Biográfica, O Complexo Memorial e o Espetáculo da História' [Heritage and Nation in Post-Apartheid, 1994–2004] in C. A. Furtado and L. Sansone (eds), *Lutas pela Memória em África* (Salvador: EDUFBA, 2019), 125–234.

35 L. Witz, G. Minkley, and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Pasts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

36 I. Karp, C. A. Kratz, L. Szwaja, and T. Ybarra-Frausto, with G. Buntinx, B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and C. Rassool (eds), *Museum Frictions: Global Transformations/Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); I. Karp, C. M. Kreamer, and S. D. Lavine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

the University of Minnesota, as well as the Department of History and the fields of Museum Studies and African Studies at the University of Michigan. The most significant publications from these collaborations were *The Politics of Heritage in Africa*, co-edited by Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua and Ciraj Rassool,³⁷ produced under the banner of the African Heritage Initiative of the University of Michigan, that saw us brought into direct conversation with colleagues at the University of Ghana, *The South African Empire*, co-edited by Dag Henrichsen Giorgio Miescher, Ciraj Rassool, and Lorena Rizzo,³⁸ and *Red Assembly: The Work Remains*, co-edited by Leslie Witz, Helena Polandt-McCormick, Gary Minkley, and John Mowitt.³⁹

Our research took place in a manner that was engaged with the practical and epistemic work of museum transformation and development, and in direct relationship with museum-making as scholarship. It also occurred as part of graduate education. The main setting for this has been the Museum and Heritage Studies programme that was created in 1998, and which, after more than 25 years, emerged as perhaps the leading location for graduate museum and heritage education on the African continent. Originally known as the 'Diploma' programme, named after the qualification it offered, a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies, it was reborn as the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies in 2003. The programme produced almost 400 graduates from South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mauritius and Seychelles. While most graduate qualifications were offered at the level of Postgraduate Diploma, sometimes through the recognition of prior learning for very deserving students, the programme was also offered at the Master's level with a significant number of students completing doctorates.⁴⁰ Later on, under South Africa's new qualifications framework, the Postgraduate Diploma qualification was replaced by the BA Honours degree.

For the first few years Museum and Heritage Studies at UWC became partnered with the University of Cape Town, especially since we needed the involvement of fields of curatorship and architecture, which conventionally did not exist at historically black universities. We also had a long partnership with the Robben Island Training Programme (RITP), part of the Robben Island Museum, which was largely responsible for professional courses in conservation and management, and which maintained close links with ICCROM. Through its then coordinator, Gerard Corsane, RITP also brought an intellectual history that was close to the University of

37 D. Peterson, K. Gavua, and C. Rassool (eds), *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, The International African Library Series).

38 D. Henrichsen, G. Miescher, C. Rassool, and L. Rizzo (eds), *The South African Empire*, published as a special issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3 (June 2015).

39 L. Witz, H. Polandt-McCormick, G. Minkley, and J. Mowitt (eds), *Red Assembly: The Work Remains*, published as a special issue of *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 42 (Nov. 2016).

40 C. Reeves, 'Evaluation of the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies', February 2007.

Leicester, whose Museum Studies Master's course was seen as a leader in the field.⁴¹ And yet, the Leicester programme seemed to thrive because of what it offered for the cultural work that was needed in the late 1990s and early 2000s for the invention of Europe through the European Union.

Our programme in Museum and Heritage Studies was never only a professional heritage management and preservation graduate qualification, but deliberately sought to create a platform for critical and theoretical engagement with substantive issues of museum transformation and heritage development. While our programme certainly promoted the care and management of museum collections and heritage sites, it also sought to go beyond the discourse of preservation through an engagement with museums beyond collections. In our teaching, we were thus critical of the then-prevailing understanding of the duties of museums that were reflected in the understanding of ICOM in a museum definition that had been established in 1974 and amended slightly in 2007, one that was rooted in the care of collections.⁴²

It took the efforts of the Brazilian Museums Association (IBRAM) to arrange a workshop in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, organised under the auspices of UNESCO, to discuss new approaches to museums as rooted in community and social mobilisation.⁴³ I was invited to participate alongside UWC Museum and Heritage Studies alumnus Nelson Abiti from the Uganda National Museum and Bonita Bennett, then-director of the District Six Museum, as well as then-AFRICOM director-general Rudo Sithole. All through the proceedings, ICOM delegates expressed objections to any approach that didn't focus on the care of collections for future generations. It was in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America that new kinds of museums and museologies had been emerging, under the banner of social museology.⁴⁴ The outcome of all these deliberations was the set of recommendations that were adopted in Paris on 17 November 2015 at a UNESCO General Conference, and discussed at a UNESCO High Level Forum held in Shenzhen, China in November 2016.⁴⁵ These recommendations placed emphasis on people and communities and not on collections. And at the ICOM general assembly held in Prague in 2022, after a failed attempt in Kyoto in 2019, but with ICOM now under some pressure, a new definition was finally adopted as a compromise that took some account of community participation.⁴⁶

41 After Gerard Corsane left RITP to join the University of Leicester, he continued to collaborate with us and colleagues at the Robben Island Museum, and this continued even after he left Leicester to join Newcastle University. See K. ka Mpumlwana, G. Corsane, J. Pastor-Makhurane, and C. Rassool, 'Inclusion and the Power of Representation: South African Museums and the Cultural Politics of Social Transformation' in R. Sandell (ed), *Museums, Society, Inequality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

42 M. Lehmannová, '224 Years of Defining the Museum', icom.museum/uploads/2020/12/2022.

43 UNESCO, 'Rio de Janeiro in 2012) UNESCO Convenes Experts Meeting on Museums and Collections', <https://www.unesco.org/en/node/66312?hub=417>.

44 See C. Bruno, M. Chagas, and M. Moutinho (eds), *Sociomuseology* (Lisbon: Cadernos de Sociomuseologia, Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias, 2007).

45 UNESCO, 'About 2015 Recommendation', <https://www.unesco.org/en/museums/2015-recommendation>; Nao Hayashi (ed.), *UNESCO High-Level Forum on Museums: Keeping Legacy, Celebrating Diversity*, Shenzhen, People's Republic of China, 10–12 November 2016 (Paris: UNESCO, 2017), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260771?posInSet=1&queryId=72836b9e-f354-4a3c-a258-6550188b4440>.

46 ICOM: International Council of Museums, 'ICOM approves a new museum definition', <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>.

In all this time, in our educational work in Museum and Heritage Studies, we were influenced by new approaches to museums as sites in which fields of culture were put on display and where ‘audiences’ were turned into publics, sometimes also referred to as communities.⁴⁷ Attention also began to be given to the relations between museums and ‘source communities’, understood as the communities from which museum collections originated,⁴⁸ even if a current community was connected to a previous community by history and not by blood.⁴⁹ Here we engaged with the ways publics and communities were not ready-made, but instead were conceived and produced through exhibitions and museum work, indeed as domains of ongoing production and contestation. We were also influenced by understandings that had emerged of museums as ‘contact zones’ and sites of reciprocal communication between collections, collectors, and communities, as well as of museums and their objects as being entangled in their meanings and social value between collectors and indigenous communities.⁵⁰ But at the core of our teaching, we were also persuaded by scholarship on how the modern museum had emerged as an institution of governance, ordering, and classification.⁵¹

Later on, especially as some of our research and museum activism became more focused on restitution and restitutionary work, I began to understand how the ideas of museums as contact zones had understated the degree of unevenness of those reciprocal relations. In addition, the idea of collections as entangled had ‘diminished the widespread extractivism that defined [...] Pacific colonial encounters’⁵² and also reproduced another form of anti-repatriation museum politics. Colleagues who produced work along these lines spoke of exhibition-making through co-curatorship, and also argued – with an echo of Neil MacGregor – that their methods of sharing and co-curatorship, and promoting the mobility of collections, had already superseded ideas of return and repatriation.⁵³

Apart from our teaching at UWC, our research in the fields of public history and museum and heritage studies has indeed been wide-ranging. We researched the history of national and imperial festivals as venues for cultural display, marked as they were by a division between people supposedly of culture and those of nature, as well as how tourism was built upon such exhibitionary distinctions and created

47 I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures*; I. Karp, C.M. Kreamer, and S.D. Lavine (eds), *Museums and Communities*.

48 These ideas which emerged from the work of colleagues at Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University and their networks were eventually published in L. Peers and A.K. Brown (eds), *Museums and Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

49 L. Peers, personal communication, Amsterdam 2006.

50 J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), especially Chapter Seven, ‘Museums as Contact Zones’; N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

51 T. Bennett, ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’, *New Formations*, 4 (1988), 73–102; H. Lidchi, ‘The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures’ in S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 151–208.

52 S. Stewart Rose, ‘An Anthropological Theory of Dispossession’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2024), 30.

53 See, for example, P. Schorch, and C. McCarthy (eds), *Curatopia: Museums and the Future of Curatorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); see also the responses to the Sarr-Savoy Report by museum directors, T. Hunt, H. Dörgerloh, and N. Thomas, ‘Restitution Report: museum directors respond’, *The Art Newspaper*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/11/27/restitution-report-museum-directors-respond>, especially the one by the director of the Museum of Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Nicholas Thomas.

specific destination cultures premised upon an identifiable tourist gaze on South Africa.⁵⁴ We examined the discursive premises of old museums, rooted in a ‘fossil complex’, and showed how these came to be transferred to museums of the new nation, notwithstanding their desire to reposition themselves.⁵⁵ We showed how new museums in South Africa had opened different and even alternative museologies, while sometimes reproducing older museum ideas. We also explained how museums, as arenas of citizenizing, became one of the most vital spheres for initiatives and debates on decolonisation and postcoloniality, as they endeavoured to find approaches to citizenship beyond the relationship between the government of objects and persons, beyond stewardship, and outside of public instruction into the order of the world.⁵⁶

Our research also analysed the emergence and development of small, community museums and studied the concepts of museumness that had been deployed for purposes of land restitution, memory work, and remaking community in the wake of successive waves of forced removals and the urban distortions of influx control.⁵⁷ While these initiatives were sometimes understood through the authenticity of the local and through the innocence of community, these museums also provided important instances of critical new museologies, with ‘museum’ employed tactically for a locus of social mobilisation through memory work and the re-inscription of space, and where museums were sites of knowledge transaction and more complex relations of expertise.⁵⁸ It is here where museums made the argument for being spaces of debate and interrogation, not just about empirical matters such as provenance or belonging, but also about epistemic questions such as classification, ordering, restitution, and knowledge appropriation. And in the case of the District Six Museum, it was important to intervene in the field of land restitution with the argument that land was not property but, rather, landscape with social meaning.⁵⁹

These lines of research first emerged out of the embrace by scholars at UWC of the terrain of public history, which had developed as a critique of social history’s radical and recuperative claims of social experience, and of popular history’s efforts

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- 54 C. Rassool and L. Witz, ‘The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: Constructing and Contesting Public National History in South Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 34 (1993); L. Witz, *Apartheid’s Festival: Contesting South Africa’s National Pasts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); L. Witz and C. Rassool, ‘“South Africa: A World in One Country”: Moments in International Tourist Encounters with Wildlife, the Primitive and the Modern’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 143 (1996); C. Rassool and P. Hayes, ‘Science and the Spectacle: /Khanako’s South Africa, 1936–7’ in W. Woodward, P. Hayes, and G. Minkley (eds), *Deep Histories: Gender and Colonialism in Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002). For the concept of ‘destination culture’, see B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
- 55 Witz, Rassool, and Minkley, *Unsettled History*.
- 56 C. Rassool, ‘Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3 (June 2015); C. Rassool, ‘Remaking the Museum after Colonialism’ in L. Emmerling, L. Gupta, L. Proença, and M. Biwa (eds), *Museum Futures* (Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2021), 339–354; C. Rassool with E. Uzer and F. Hammami, ‘The Epistemic Work of Decolonization and Restitution: A Critical Conversation’ in F. Hammami and E. Uzer (eds), *Theorizing Heritage through Non-Violent Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 213–230.
- 57 C. Rassool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* (Cape Town: District Six Museum, 2001); C. Rassool, ‘Community Museums, Memory Politics and Social Transformation in South Africa’, N. Murray and L. Witz, *Hostels, Homes, Museum: Memorialising Migrant Labour Pasts* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2014).
- 58 Rassool, ‘Community Museums, Memory Politics and Social Transformation in South Africa’.
- 59 C. Rassool, ‘Remaking Cape Town: Memory Politics, Land Restitution and Social Cohesion in District Six’ in H. Hino, A. Langer, J. Lonsdale, and F. Stewart (eds), *From Divided Pasts to Cohesive Futures: Reflections on Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 346–374.

of extending the reach of social history's findings through outreach and translation.⁶⁰ This was a critique of ideas of recovery and access for not decentring power and authority away from scholarly hands, and for relegating voice to primary source. Instead, an argument was presented for a more nuanced approach to history as production and contestation, even beyond the idea of 'shared authority'⁶¹ that tended to reproduce knowledge hierarchies. The practice of public history also required an immersion inside of the politics of production, and an openness to an engagement with histories produced through mediums other than writing and voice. This was not merely the popular translation of academic research for the public, through exhibitions and interpretative signage, as was the case in the United States.⁶² These approaches to public history were also influenced by David William Cohen's approach to 'the production of history',⁶³ and found resonance with projects on public scholarship being undertaken by Kratz and Karp at CSPS at Emory University.⁶⁴

While the District Six Museum and the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum were arenas of critical public history, older museum collections that were being reconfigured and reinscribed also became arenas for intervention through the resources of public scholarship. Research conducted at UWC on the history of the ethnological or ethnographic and the dubious record of physical anthropology and racial science in the museum contributed to the impetus that resulted in landmark moments in the reorientation of Iziko Museums of South Africa.⁶⁵ These included the deinstallation of the San diorama at the Iziko South African Museum after it was first boarded up and 'archived', the deaccessioning of unethically collected human remains, mainly from the Northern Cape and Namibia, and the closure of the African Cultures Gallery, which had been founded on the ethnic research of government ethnologist, N.J. van Warmelo. One of the major instances of epistemic development for the museum world that occurred in the reconfiguring by Iziko Museums of South Africa of its collections and knowledge systems was the decommissioning of the division between ethnography and cultural history, and the creation of a new anti-colonial classificatory division of social history.⁶⁶

From the 2000s, one of the major arenas of engaged public scholarship at UWC involved understanding what the significant deaths were of the nation, and what the place was of the dead body in the reconfiguration of the nation. This followed on

60 L. Witz and C. Rassool, 'Making Histories,' *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 34 (Nov. 2008); G. Minkley, C. Rassool, and L. Witz, 'Oral History in South Africa: A Country Report' in Witz, Minkley, and Rassool, *Unsettled History*. But see especially N. Rousseau, 'Popular History in South Africa in the 1980s: The Politics of Production' (unpublished MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 1994).

61 M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

62 See, for example, R. Weible, 'The Blind Man and His Dog: The Public and its Historians,' *Public Historian*, 28, 4 (Fall 2006), 9–17.

63 D.W. Cohen, 'Further Thoughts on the Production of History' in G. Sider and G. Smith (eds), *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

64 I. Karp and C.A. Kratz, 'Reflections on the Fate of Tippoos Tiger: Defining Cultures in Public Display' in E. Hallam and B. Street (eds), *Cultural Encounters: Communicating Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2000); I. Karp, 'Public Scholarship as a Vocation: Museums and Identity,' *South African Museums Association Bulletin*, 26, 2 (2001).

65 M. Legassick and C. Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South African Museums and the Trade in Human Remains, 1907–1917* (Cape Town and Kimberley: South African Museum and McGregor Museum, 2000); L. Witz, 'Museums on the Township Tour' in I. Karp et al. (eds), *Museum Frictions*; Rassool, 'Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire'.

66 Ndhlovu and Rassool, 'Rethinking the National and the Museum at Iziko Museums of South Africa'.

from research conducted on the emergence of a biographic order of commemoration and memorialisation in post-anti-apartheid South Africa,⁶⁷ as well as work on truth-telling, amnesty, and history in the wake of the installation of a discourse on reconciliation through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶⁸ Tracking the demands and dynamics of decommissioning the classification of collections and attempts to transform displays led to an interest in the histories of the acquisition of ancestral remains by South African museums in the first decades of the 20th century. Martin Legassick and I argued that it was the acquisition of the remains of the ‘freshly dead’, which had been stolen from their graves, that had laid the ground for the formation of the modern museum in South Africa. This had been an illegal and seemingly insatiable trade between grave robbers, anthropologists, and museums, marked by competition between museums in Europe and those in the emerging new white nation of the Union of South Africa.⁶⁹

Our research on this history led to policy deliberations in South Africa on the place of ancestral remains in museums in the new democracy, leading to the development of a Human Remains Policy in Iziko Museums, as well as the deaccessioning of ‘unethically collected’ remains. It was accepted that ancestral remains that had been acquired through purchase from grave robbers, or which had been acquired for racial research, fell into the category of the ‘unethical’ and needed to be deaccessioned. It was also our research that led to the return of the remains of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar from the Natural History Museum and the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna and their reburial at Kuruman in 2012. In this case, our practice of public scholarship involved uncovering the history of the trade in corpses and human skeletons, and informing South African authorities about this. It also involved confronting colleagues in museums in Vienna with the gruesome details of the southern African collecting activities of anthropologist Rudolf Pösch, whose career had been the subject of celebration in Austria. And it also involved tracking and assisting with a project of repatriation and restitution through every phase, including negotiations, local consultations, the handover, and the return and reburial, as well as all the ceremonies associated with every stage. One of our main contributions to the process was the argument that returns needed to be understood as constituting processes of ‘rehumanisation’, an approach which came to be widely appreciated as the South African method.⁷⁰

Following investigations by members of the Department of History at UWC on the politics of truth, evidence, and history, an extremely exciting research direction about the question of the ‘missing person’ of apartheid’s violence developed. This occurred in partnership with the post-TRC research and recovery work of the Missing

67 C. Rassool, ‘Patrimônio e Nação no Pós-Apartheid, 1994–2004’. The idea of the post-anti-apartheid was developed in Witz, Minkley, and Rassool, *Unsettled History*.

68 M. Fullard and N. Rousseau, ‘Truth, Evidence and History: A Critical Review of Aspects of the Amnesty Process’ in C. Villavicencio and E. Duxtader (eds), *The Provocations of Amnesty: Memory, Justice and Impunity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003); M. Fullard and N. Rousseau, ‘Truth Telling, Identities, and Power in South Africa and Guatemala’ in P. Arthur (ed.), *Identities in Transition: Challenges for Transitional Justice in Divided Societies* (New York: Cambridge University, 2011).

69 Legassick and Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard*; Rassool, ‘Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire’.

70 Rassool, ‘Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire’; C. Rassool, ‘Restitution and Rehumanisation’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 32, 4 (2026), 504–521.

Persons Task Team of the National Prosecutions Authority. This involved tracking the transition from physical anthropology to forensic anthropology, embracing the concept of ‘missing-ness’ as a significant trope in the ‘postwars’ of the South African dead, and examining the politics of disciplines as they have laid claim to performing the work of identification, recovery, and restitution.⁷¹ Thinking the colonial and the apartheid dead together took shape as a project of forensic history, with the forensic not only referring to the evidentiary, the empirical and the scientific, but also to a sense of belonging to the forum, and a desire to create a space of engaged social enquiry that was multidisciplinary, multidimensional, and fundamentally about the reconstitution of the human.⁷² We were also pleased that the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum contributed to shaping South Africa’s national policy on repatriation and restitution, which refuses to separate the ‘dead’ from heritage ‘objects’, through its conjoinment of the dead bodies of colonial and apartheid violence.⁷³

My museum research also became drawn into projects of rethinking museums on the African continent, still immersed as many African societies were in the contests of the incomplete sovereignty of independence and neo-colonialism, in which African people continued to be rendered as ethnological through old anthropologies, and in which relations of dependency were perpetuated through multilateral museum and heritage structures. My scholarship also got drawn into rethinking museums in Europe. The ethnographic museum had seemingly exceeded its usefulness in African societies as a museum form that had been part of the establishment of colonial governmentality. In Europe, though, ethnographic museums were remaking themselves as world museums, sometimes as a form of rebranding, and also distancing themselves from the stain of colonialism. At other times, they sought a renewal through remaking their relationships with source societies through collaboration, sharing and lending. It became clear just how varied the ethnological and the ethnographic were in museums in different parts of the world, differing, inter alia, between language and colonial history, as well as how enduring colonialism was through knowledge systems and museum classification.⁷⁴

From about the mid- to the late 2010s, attempts at renewal took shape as forms of museum diplomacy, through loans of collections, and placing these into frameworks

71 N. Rousseau, ‘Identification, Politics, Disciplines: Missing Persons and Colonial Skeletons in South Africa’ in E. Anstett and J.M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and ‘Identification’: Mass Violence, Genocide and the ‘Forensic Turn’* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); C. Rassool, ‘The Disciplines of the Dead’; B. van Laun, ‘Bureaucratically Missing: Capital Punishment, Exhumations, and the Afterlives of State Documents and Photographs’, *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 44 (Nov. 2018); R. Moosage, C. Rassool, and N. Rousseau, ‘The Commemorative State, Human Remains and the Question of Missing-ness’, *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion and the Public Sphere*, 26 August 2021, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2021/08/26/the-commemorative-state-human-remains-the-question-of-missingness/>. The concept of ‘postwars’ comes from R. Werbner, ‘Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: Postwars of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe’ in R. Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 71–102.

72 N. Rousseau, C. Rassool, and R. Moosage (eds), *Missing and Missed: Subject, Politics, Memorialisation*, published as a special issue of *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 44 (Nov. 2018), especially the introduction by N. Rousseau, R. Moosage, and C. Rassool, ‘Missing and Missed: Rehumanisation, the Nation and Missing-ness’, 10–32. Here I acknowledge the persistence of Nicky Rousseau in her critique of museums as domains of freedom, while acknowledging important exceptions.

73 ‘National Policy on the Repatriation and Restitution of Human Remains and Heritage Objects’, Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, South Africa, 2021.

74 C. Rassool, ‘Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum’ in C. Greiner, M. Bollig, and S. van Wolputte (eds), *African Futures* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 56–66. I had an ongoing and unfinished conversation with the late Ivan Karp about the value and future of the anthropological museum in different parts of the world.

of shared heritage and co-curatorship. These efforts were also connected to an increasing emphasis on provenance research in Europe, particularly in Germany, in order to establish the circumstances of acquisition, and to enable a more informed and enlightened collections management. Through provenance research, enquiries could also be made into possible contexts of injustice during the acquisition of collections, especially under colonial conditions, and often with the history of Holocaust spoliation and resultant compensation and *Wiedergutmachung* (making good) very much in mind.⁷⁵ This work of provenance and enlightened collections management was also sometimes linked to an understanding of collections having become marked by histories of entanglement and a shared heritage.⁷⁶ Some German ‘world museums’, like Weltkulturen Museum, began to rigorously examine their collections and racist legacies, with research undertaken through research laboratories including artist residencies.⁷⁷

Later, European curators were sometimes joined by colleagues from formerly colonised societies in joint, dialogic projects of exhibition-making, digital inventory production, and the identification and preparation of ‘objects’ to travel back to those societies as temporary loans. One of the earliest projects framed along these lines was ‘Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures’, a collaboration between the Museums Association of Namibia, the National Museum of Namibia and the University of Namibia with the Ethnological Museum of the National Museums in Berlin, which began in 2018, and which culminated in 23 cultural belongings named as ‘artefacts’ being returned to Namibia on loan. This was led by the late director of MAN, Jeremy Silvester, and then-Ethnological Museum curator, Jonathan Fine, with leading German thinker on provenance research, Larissa Förster, as advisor.⁷⁸ Shortly thereafter, Förster went on to lead the German desk on the provenance of objects from colonial contexts that was created in the German Lost Art Foundation.⁷⁹

Another important project along these lines was the Digital Benin Project, which drew together more than 5,200 Benin ‘objects’ from more than 131 institutions in 20 countries into a digital database, linked to documentation, oral histories and research. It envisaged this digital platform to be a means ‘to enable the young generation of Benin/Edo people to learn about the rich historical and cultural heritage of Benin.’⁸⁰

75 German Museums Association, *Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts: Guidelines for German Museums* (Berlin: German Museums Association, 2021).

76 P. Schorch, ‘Sensitive Heritage: Ethnographic Museums, Provenance Research, and the Potentialities of Restitutions’, *Museum & Society*, 18, 1 (2020), 1–5; Schorch and McCarthy, *Curatopia*. In 2019, the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum brought Schorch to UWC to discuss the complexities of ethnographic museums with us.

77 C. Deliss (ed.), *Object Atlas: Fieldwork in the Museum* (Berlin: Kerber, 2012); C. Deliss and Y. Mutumba (eds), *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)* (Berlin: diaphanes, 2014). In 2019, after she had left Weltkulturen Museum, Deliss spent some time with us at UWC discussing her concept of ‘metabolic museum-university’. See C. Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2020).

78 ‘Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures’, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/research/confronting-colonial-pasts-envisioning-creative-futures/>.

79 L. Förster, ‘Zum Umgang Mit Der Kolonialzeit: Provenienz Und Rückgabe’ in I. Edenheiser and L. Förster (eds), *Museumsethnologie: Eine Einführung. Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken* (Berlin: Reimer, 2019), 78–103; L. Förster, J. Hüsken, S. Fründt, and Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste, *Resist, Reclaim, Retrieve: The Long History of the Struggle for the Restitution of Cultural Heritage and Ancestral Remains Taken under Colonial Conditions* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

80 Simon Stephens, ‘Digital Benin project unveils online platform’, *Museums Journal*, 15 November 2022, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/11/digital-benin-project-unveils-online-platform/>.

There were also activist-led curatorial projects that sought to build inventories of African collections held across European museums. An important project was the International Inventories Programme, which ran between 2018 and 2026, and sought to promote ‘dialogue about cultural heritage and restitution’, and for which building inventories was a restitution strategy.⁸¹ In these provenance and inventory projects, African and activist desires for restitution engaged with European attempts at enlightened museum governance and stewardship.

The field of provenance seemingly reached its most radical point with the recognition by some museums and curators of the violence that had accompanied the birth of the colonial ethnographic, with museums having not just been beneficiaries of colonial collecting, but rather having been actively embedded in expeditions of conquest, looting, and mass killing. In addition, the idea of the ‘punitive expedition’, as colonial retaliation against alleged African violence, and as justification for seizing African art, turned out to have been a fabrication and an alibi for unspeakable violence and looting. And the assumptions of humaneness as marking the ethnographic turned out to be substantially misplaced.⁸² Some German museums shifted gear and began recognising the missing-ness of looted African art, calling for frames of mourning for exhibitions about restitution work, as with the farewell exhibition for Benin bronzes at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum.⁸³ This field of the recognition of violence was also stimulated through the landmark publication of the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, which had been commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron, advocating the return of African artworks from French museums.⁸⁴ This recognition of violence also ushered in a new time of return, which saw the framework of loans in the cases of Namibia, and of Edo state, Nigeria being overhauled and transformed by African claimants into a time of restitution.

A Time of Restitution

As we ponder the intellectual histories at UWC and beyond that preceded and coincided with the ‘Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons’ supranational project, we need to acknowledge how we also learnt by working on other collaborative platforms, such as ‘Action for Restitution to Africa’ and ‘Re-connecting “Objects”: Epistemic Plurality and Transformative Practices in and Beyond Museums’, as well as

81 IIP, ‘The International Inventories Programme: Documenting 32,000+ Kenyan objects across institutions worldwide (2018–2022)’, <https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/>; see also IIP, *Invisible Inventories: Questioning Kenyan Collections in Western Museums* (Bayreuth: Iwalewa Books, 2021).

82 D. Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); M. Assilkinga et al, *Atlas of Absence: Cameroon’s Cultural Heritage in Germany* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2023); S.K. Adjei and Y. LeGall (eds), *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2024).

83 P. Layiwola (cur.), ‘I MISS YOU: About missing, giving back and remembering’ (Exhibition), Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum Kulturen der Welt, Cologne, 29 April 2022–ongoing. This exhibition contrasted sharply with ‘Benin: Looted history’, held at the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg, which concentrated on the ‘outstanding artistic quality’ of the works, ‘different perspectives on their original meaning’ and ‘their significance for African art and cultural history’. See <https://markk-hamburg.de/en/ausstellungen/benin-looted-history/>.

84 F. Sarr and B. Savoy, ‘The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics’, report, IALS: Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London, November 2018.

with colleagues in activist NGOs such as Open Restitution Africa.⁸⁵ As an outcome, we have begun to argue for a distinction to be made between projects of repatriation and the work of restitution, which is geared towards projects of social restoration and repair. A restitutionary museology requires an understanding of the museum process of the objectification, artefactualisation and museumisation of belongings, and of ancestral remains, through which they were turned into objects or artefacts, and human remains. It also needs an understanding of the installation and operation of museum classificatory systems and of the ways in which museum disciplines have reinforced coloniality in epistemic terms.⁸⁶ We have also learnt to apply the idea of missing-ness to histories of dispossession of ancestral remains and belongings from colonial times.

Our research now makes an argument for restitution to be understood not as events of return, but as ongoing restitutionary work that also entails the epistemic work of deaccessioning, deobjectification, demuseumisation, and de-ethnologisation. While provenance and repatriation seek to install a more ethical and enlightened approach to museum governance, restitutionary work is also about a radical reimagining of museums beyond the government and stewardship of collections in the service of publics, and about seeking an anti-colonial museum practice rooted in social mobilisation, annunciation and criticism. We need to continue to support colleagues in different parts of Europe conducting provenance research and building platforms for repatriation as we concentrate our efforts on building African agency and solidarity in creating platforms and networks of restitution. We are pleased that the 'Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons' Supranational Forum has played a part in the unfolding of this time of restitution.

85 Here I acknowledge Sophie Schasiepen, Samuel Longford, and Suzana Sousa for all their work across these platforms, and Leslie Witz for also providing leadership in the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum. Open Restitution Africa was started by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa as a women-led, Pan-African NGO project to advance the work of restitution through research, an open data platform and social advocacy. See 'About ORA: "Knowledge for Africans by Africans"', Open Restitution Africa, openrestitution.africa/about-the-project/.

86 C. Rassool, 'Restitution and Rehumanisation'; C. Rassool and V.E. Gibbon, 'Restitution vs Repatriation: Terminology and Concepts Matter', *American Journal of Biological Anthropology*, 184, 1 (2024).