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Ambivalent Futures

On the restitution of objects and white innocence

The legacies of colonialism and imperialism are keeping the European museum scene busy. At first glance, colonial amnesia seems to be overcome and museums to pave the way for postcolonial restorative justice. A second glance, though, might reveal inconsistencies and shortcomings structuring present museum work. The current debate mainly focuses on objects being looted, exchanged, extorted or bought under colonial rule, and considers the restitution of objects to former deprived communities or relevant descendants no longer a taboo subject. This is a development to be welcomed. What is striking, however, is that a sometimes narrow conception of decolonial engagement can be noted. Solely spotlighting the presence of objects, material entities and human remains as colonial legacies, these strategies fall short on challenging power hierarchies in the present. There is no colonialism without racism. But is racism a subject museums consider worth analyzing while discussing the restitution of objects?

By addressing this question, I make no claim to assess what restitution processes mean for those communities persistently fighting for the return of looted objects or entities. Instead, I focus on the side of museums and other institutions holding relevant collections. The first basic point that needs to be addressed here is the bare existence of all these objects and material entities that inhabit the storages of museums. Restitution claims, e.g. concerning the famous Benin bronzes, are older than the current debate might suggest.[1] It is only recently that these demands are heard on a broader level and challenge colonial amnesia. Considering the long-standing stability of this formative amnesia, the hastiness of museums in developing concepts of decolonial engagement these days might appear conspicuous.

The Discourse of 'Fix-it'

Taking one's cue from the findings of educational researchers Kathy Hytten and John T. Warren, one realizes that acting in urgency is, for some people, a widespread strategy when grappling with racism.[2] Hytten and Warren point out that the actions of white students learning about the functioning of racism and their own involvement in it often aim at a quick overcoming of uncomfortable feelings like shame, anger or fear. Thereby, the realization of an own involvement in racism is quickly followed by the question 'What can I do now?'. Hytten and Warren classify these reactions as a 'discourse of fix-it', illustrating specific attempts of white coping with a situation of unease. An all too hasty orientation toward action, though, means losing sight of the complexity of power relations, and, most importantly, neglecting to listen to people who make experiences of discrimination and oppression themselves. It provides moral securities in a process in which the very unease caused by learning about racism allows productive and important reflections. Ultimately, the discourse of 'fix-it' enables already privileged people to define what needs to be done in that it assumes that the expertise of People of Color for understanding racism is dispensable. In this sense, such an attempt to make a change resembles putting the cart before the horse.

In how far do today's museum policies on the restitution of objects constitute such attempts of 'fixing-it'? Or in other words: What allows for avoiding the discourse of 'fix-it'? Following Hytten and Warren, it seems crucial to fully understand the status quo and its formation in order to make a change. Therefore, analyzing the circumstances of acquisition or the options for restitution is not enough. One is also urged to tackle the intergenerational practice of silence and ignorance in hegemonic discourse ensuring the continuing presence of objects in museum depots. Why was the existence of colonial collections not seen as problematic for such a long time in that discourse? Seeing through the structure of colonial amnesia, understanding its very mode of operation in a historical and present sense, proves to be inevitable

here. Furthermore, this implies that such an approach fundamentally relies on the knowledge of those who were not raised and taught to ignore or to dismiss others but who, in contrast, have been ignored and dismissed. Thereby the decolonial engagement of museums needs to touch the field of staff policy.

Challenging structural and epistemic legacies

Restitution processes should also rely on an equal distribution of resources between all parties involved. This entails avoiding a tokenistic engagement of external partners. These policies often serve to shield discriminatory institutions from critique by making symbolic efforts of inclusion. Consequently, committed policies of partnership should include all parties from the very beginning when conceptual decisions have to be made. Committed cooperation should also embrace scrutinizing specific ways of knowledge production and reject the opposition of indigenous subjectivities and academic objectivity. Instead, it has to become clear that knowledge production is fundamentally subjective. The claim for objectivity is nothing more than the result of a powerful epistemic order allowing some individuals to sell their subjectivity as objectivity and to degrade research following different epistemologies as too subjective. In this sense, one needs to challenge the fact that restitutions often rely on the completion of research projects, as if scientific examination will stop once these objects and entities touch non-European ground. Considering questions of law, such collaborations further should pursue the question of why processes of restitution exclusively consider French, German, English or other European law, while disregarding non-European legal systems. Why do the descendants of the formerly deprived have to wait until Europe defines again on its own how and when to translocate objects? Bearing in mind that the theft of objects and the violent oppression of people was not considered a legal violation but was encouraged by European legal systems for a long time, this is a pressing question.

As the discourse of 'fix-it' might bring about anti-racist programs lacking knowledge of People of Color, it needs to be asked if restitution programs continue to pursue European phantasms. Is Europe, for instance, still considered in a homogenizing sense, overlooking the persistent presence of People of Color in Europe? Does the program follow a dichotomy of 'us – here' and 'others – there'? Does it provide points of reference for illustrating the agency of non-white people shaping Europe's existence, which is too often ignored? To put it in a nutshell, restitution processes would need to take a starting point in the fact that colonialism not only affected life in former colonies but also essentially shaped life in Europe. Needless to say that these consequences utterly differ from each other. Regarding museum collections, this means to focus on the historic formation of collections. Is the impact not only of colonizers and collectors but of interlocutors, mediators, guides and local elites on the formation of collections taken into consideration? Is there an awareness of non-European agency, and do adequate methodologies exist to identify them?

To add a last point to that list, a look at the very moments when the debate about colonial collections gained momentum might generate further insight. Without wanting to question the importance of art historian Benedicte Savoy's committed plea for wide-ranging provenance research or the declarations of Emmanuel Macron – why are these the voices heard concerning the issue at stake and not the Oba of Benin or descendants of murdered populations in what is today Namibia, Congo or Tanzania? Who is heard today, and who is not? This question even becomes more urgent when recalling the sincerely racist statements of French president Macron on the G20 summit in summer 2017, preceding his speech of Ouagadougou.[3]

Unintentionally reproducing what ought to be overcome

What becomes clear, I hope, is that restitution policies, which do not fully challenge the complexity of power hierarchies, tend to be based on a reductionist analysis. The rush of acting immediately, thereby focusing solely on the material persistence of colonial relations, sometimes does not result in what was intended first. It neglects

the acknowledgment and understanding of colonial amnesia and European phantasms, the distribution of resources and the appreciation of the expertise of People of Color. Nevertheless, they superficially create the impression of setting up a decolonial future. In the end, contested objects are given back, and the problem is solved.

Looking at the work of the Dutch-Surinamese scholar and activist Gloria Wekker, this perspective not only provokes simplified analyses and solutions but instead might itself reproduce power hierarchies that ought to be overcome. Wekker coined the insightful term 'white innocence' in her telling ethnography of hegemonic white self-representation in the Netherlands.[4] Wekker states a central paradox in her study: The widespread assumption to live in a tolerant society free from racism and discrimination amongst white Dutch, and the concurrent persistence of racist violence, images and emotional economies. According to the author, this paradox originates from the unbroken impact of the 'cultural archive' built up over 400 years of colonial expansion and dominance. This 'cultural archive', in the sense of Edward Said whom Wekker follows here, is insufficiently thematized in a historical sense, and its continuing effects are therefore not adequately acknowledged. As a result, Wekker identifies the claim of innocence to be at the very center of dominant white self-representation. Innocence, in that sense, articulates not-knowing and not wanting to know, the privilege to be in the position to freely choose when to deal with topics like racism and what to ignore.

Conclusion

What Wekker can tell us is that the restitution of objects paradoxically might not only end up in simplistic attempts to 'fix-it' but can lead to a formation of 'white innocence' if the structural and epistemic dimensions of racism that museum collections are embedded in are not adequately examined. Objects and entities are given back, further dimensions of colonial and racist regimes are not acknowledged, depressing white involvements are overcome, 'white innocence' is restored. The

restitution of objects is in principle to be welcomed, and there is no intention in this text to delegitimize it. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that it requires caution and circumspection. To challenge colonial legacies means to align to antiracist struggles, historic and present.

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[1] Opoku, Kwame: „Did Germans Never Hear Directly or Indirectly Nigeria's Demand for Return of Looted Artefacts?. http://www.no-humboldt21.de/information/nigeria_treasures/ (last accessed 2018, July 29).

[2] Hytten, Kathy & Warren, John (2003): Engaging whiteness. How racial power gets reified in education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(1), 65-89.

[3] Anyangwe, Eliza (2017, July 11): Brand new Macron, same old colonialism. The Guardian. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com (last accessed 2018, July 29).

[4] Wekker, Gloria (2016): *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.