KRONOS
southern african histories

MAY 2026 VOLUME 52 http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2026/v52a1

Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons: Restitution, Forum, Museum

SOPHIE SCHASIEPEN
House of Austrian History Vienna and independent scholar
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0872-8912

SAMUEL LONGFORD
Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6905-5374

Abstract

This article reflects on research carried out by members of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons (RSRP) Supranational Forum, which was based at the Department of History (now the Department of Historical Studies), University of the Western Cape (UWC), between 2018 and 2022. In so doing, it seeks to map and trace conceptual and disciplinary questions that guided our collective and individual inquiries into emergent museological practices, forensic history, memory politics, justice, repatriation, and restitution. At the same time, we reflect on the ways in which the RSRP Forum's fellowship programme at UWC, as well as at the University of Ghana (UG), Makerere University and the American University in Cairo (AUC), informed our engagements with what others have described as the 'scramble for restitution' in Europe. Specifically, we aim to reframe the question of restitution in relation to broader economic and geopolitical concerns and suggest that this vantage point allows debates about museological practices to unfold differently. Following in the wake of the Forensic History project at UWC, we also draw from the RSRP Forum's attempts to situate forum (or *forensis*) as a method for approaching debates about the transformation of museological practices and the project of restitution, as well as questions of evidence, justice, history, memory, and memorialisation. Ultimately, we argue that coming to terms with these histories requires a critical interrogation of the institutions and disciplines that produced (and continue to shape) the very ground through which colonial and authoritarian regimes have been justified and maintained.

Keywords

RSRP Forum, method, museum, history, repatriation, restitution

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Introduction: Restitution as Forum

This special issue builds upon the work of the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons (RSRP) Forum, a transnational project that was based in the Department of History (now Historical Studies) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, between 2018 and 2022. The Forum was constituted as a partnership between UWC, the Department of Archaeology and Heritage at the University of Ghana (UG), the Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Makerere University, and the Institute for Gender and Women's Studies at the American University in Cairo (AUC). Over the course of five years the Forum sought to intervene in debates concerned with new museologies, forensic history, memory politics, justice, reparation, restitution, and the return of cultural heritage and the physical remains of people to former colonised countries.[1] It also aimed to enhance the work of heritage practitioners engaged in museums and public institutions across the continent, including the National Museums of Uganda and Ghana which were being redeveloped in order to transform these former colonial museums. The majority of people who contributed to this special issue were part of the Forum at some point, as fellows, researchers, presenters, discussants, convenors. Their articles address a range of subjects and histories that reflect the wide-ranging implications of our collective work and attest to the productivity and importance of these debates in and beyond the museum.[2]

The Forum took place within intensifying African and international debates and contests over museum transformation and decolonisation, especially on questions of restitution and repatriation and what this meant for museums and societies, and the colonial and postcolonial histories that they shared. Over recent years, Europe in particular has seen what could be described as a paradigmatic shift in museum practices and debates, and a much sharper scholarly and, at times, political focus on enduring colonial legacies and violence, and on methodologies of collaboration

1 There are different, sometimes contested, ways to refer to the physical remains of people, particularly in the wake of colonial, extractivist, and dehumanising violence to which people have been subjected to both in life and in death. In this special issue, we use 'the physical remains of people' and 'ancestral remains' interchangeably, to refuse their re-objectification and to reflect different epistemological and ontological frameworks.

2 In total, the Forum directly supported over sixty scholars and fellows (at Honours, Masters, PhD and postdoctoral levels) across its partner institutions, six of whom completed their PhD dissertations during the official lifespan of the project. While we address specific research carried out by the Forum's partner institutions, the main focus of this article is on discussions that unfolded at the RSRP Forum's main location at UWC, where the authors participated in and coordinated the Forum's activities.

and co-curatorship.[3] While widening the scope of dialogue, critique, collaboration, and knowledge production, paradigmatic shifts can also produce new silences and omissions that narrow the frames through which certain questions or problems are conceptualised, understood, practiced, and policed.[4] As we show in this special issue, processes of restitution and return can also produce new power relations that structurally overdetermine what can and cannot be said about the colonial past, the postcolonial present, and the future of African institutions and societies. One of the Forum's central aims has been to challenge these processes and to critically interrogate shifting debates about restitution and reparation, and also about questions of evidence, justice, history, memory, and memorialisation.[5]

Within this framework, the Forum's central aims were to build capacity and research expertise within African heritage institutions, to intervene in museum policies, and to establish and consolidate a continental discussion about how public-facing institutions – including universities, museums and archives – might be transformed in the wake of violent colonial and postcolonial pasts and presents. In light of the disciplinary frames that continue to orient how the human and the more-than-human are treated, represented, and understood, the Forum also attempted to interrogate and rethink notions of personhood, subjectivity, and biography, and to problematise categories inherited through the colonial and 'Enlightenment' projects.[6] In the process, as members of the Forum we sought to understand contested notions of the human and the more-than-human, to critically evaluate and problematise the role of

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3 There have been too many projects to do justice to the full range of initiatives here. Some newly established institutions include the Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts at the German Lost Art Foundation that funds short-term and long-term research projects (https://kulturgutverluste.de/en/contexts/colonial-contexts); the German Contact Point for Cultural Property and Human Remains from Colonial Contexts (https://www.germancontactpoint.org/); and the Colonial Collections Consortium in the Netherlands (https://www.colonialcollections.nl/en/). A number of platforms collect information about restitutions, repatriations, and returns. They include Open Restitution Africa (https://openrestitution.africa/), RM*[restitution matters] (https://restitutionmatters.org/rm-news/), Returning Heritage (https://www.returningheritage.com/); Routes to Return (https://routestoreturn.com/), RRR: Return Reconcile Renew (https://returnreconcilerenew.info). Some projects are notable for working on questions of provenance and transnational museum collaborations. To name a few: [Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times (https://re-entanglements.net); IIP: International Inventories Programme (https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/); MuseumFutures Africa (https://museum-futures.com); Assilkinga et al., *Atlas der Abwesenheit: Kameruns Kulturerbe in Deutschland* [*Atlas of Absence: Cameroon's Cultural Heritage in Germany*] (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2023), open access and available in an AI translation to English via https://www.static.tu.berlin/fileadmin/www/10002011/Forschungsprojekte/Aktuelle_Forschungsprojekte/Umgekehrte_Sammlungen_KAM/ATLAS_DER_ABWESENHEIT_EN_DeepL.pdf; Reconnecting 'objects': epistemic plurality and transformative practices in and beyond the museum (https://reconnecting.art/en/); or the much earlier Artefakte//aktivierung (https://kunsthausdresden.de/veranstaltungen/kuenstliche-tatsachen/?lang=en#dritte_aktivierung_zum_thema_kunst_als_universeller_'problemloeser'_innerhalb_des_projekts_artificial__facts_/_kuenstliche_tatsachen) (all accessed 17 June 2026).

4 As Jacques Depelchin has put it, the 'question is how to move away from the embedded practices of policing knowledge, how to prevent the sterilisation of knowledge (history), and instead allow it to become emancipatory'. See J. Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Dar es Salaam: Mbuki Na Nyoto Publishers, 2005), 1.

5 It is, for example, instructive that in the recent 599–page *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, the African continent was covered in one short chapter. Equally instructive is that the author of this chapter, Duane Jethro, warns against the ways in which southern Africa has often been reduced to another terrain or subfield of, in this case, memory studies or memory activism. See D. Jethro, 'Africa' in Y. Gutman and J. Wüstenberg (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (London: Routledge, 2023).

6 Enlightenment ideals informed the ways in which colonialism and apartheid were administered and maintained. They also shaped ideas about the European as modern and rational, and colonised people as primitive, less-than-human, and disposable. As demonstrated in this special issue, these ideals informed museum practices throughout the colonial period. Because of its enduring legacies both within and beyond the museum, we place 'Enlightenment' in quotation marks in order to question its philosophical, disciplinary, and historical foundations, as well as the assumption that 'the Enlightenment' was located in Europe. For a critique of the persistence and dangers of 'Enlightenment Values' in the postapartheid, see M. van Bever Donker, R. Truscott, G. Minkley and P. Lalu (eds), *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017).

historians and activists (sometimes referred to as activist-historians) in our current conjuncture, to interrogate the categories that continue to frame the discourse of the museum and university (and their disciplines), and to think again about the question of reparation and restitution from a postcolonial vantage point.

If processes of restitution, repatriation, and reparation provided the initial impetus for our collective work, then the idea and method of the Forum itself, drawn from research carried out by the Forensic History project at UWC, provided its constitutive ground. Building on methods associated with UWC's Department of Historical Studies as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its offshoot, the Missing Persons Task Team, the Forensic History project has sought to problematise what was described as a 'forensic turn' at the end of the twentieth century.[7] It did this by engaging histories of violence, questions of evidence, agency, truth, and mediation, as well as notions of the human in so-called post-conflict societies including Argentina, Chile, Spain, and South Africa. As detailed in a 2018 special issue of *Kronos*, titled *Missing and Missed: Subject, Politics, Memorialisation*, the idea of the forum (or *forensis*) had been derived from a 'forgotten meaning' and etymology of forensics.[8] Rather than privileging a positivist evidentiary mode most associated with forensic science, forum as method suggested 'a more contested space of debates, disputes […] questions', and knowledge production.[9] It therefore seemed to offer us the potential to displace the evidentiary paradigms that overdetermined and oriented the 'disciplines of the dead' (see, for example, Moosage and Abrahams in this special issue) and to think processes of historical production and the museum and its debates through multiple configurations (see Rassool this issue).

Following in the wake of this important intervention, we suggest a critical engagement with contested categories (for example Longford and Schasiepen, this issue) and institutional practices (Humphreys, Gavua and Marley; and Shamis, this issue) from this vantage point, allows these debates and approaches to unfold differently. To do so, we think through the ways in which museums have been implicated in the production of certain kinds of subjects and disciplines (Abiti, Khanakwa and Rassool; Bester and Witz; and Mbewe this issue), during the colonial and postcolonial period as well as in postapartheid South Africa. We have also seen the value of connecting the remains of apartheid's violence with the violence of colonial

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7 An important reference for this work was research conducted by Forensic Architecture, based at Goldsmiths College, University of London, who investigate state and corporate violence. As the founding member and director Eyal Weizman stated in the introduction to one of Forensic Architecture's seminal publications, 'while police forensics is a disciplinary project that affirms the power of the states, the direction of the forensic gaze could also be inverted, and used instead to detect and interrupt state violations'. See E. Weizman, 'Introduction: Forensis' in Forensic Architecture, A. Frank, and E. Weizman (eds), *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (London: Sternberg Press and Forensic Architecture, 2014), 9–32.

8 Forensics and forum share a common etymology. *Forensis* is a Latin word that directly translates as forum or public. We, following Rousseau, Rassool and Moosage, suggest that this 'forgotten etymology' offers an alternative approach for understanding and undermining forensic sciences over-reliance on scientific positivism, and to create space for other epistemologies and relationships with the dead. See the special issue, 'Missing and Missed: Subjects, Politics, Memorialisation', N. Rousseau, C. Rassool and R. Moosage (eds), *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 44, 1 (2018). The editors of this 2018 special issue were important members of the RSRP Forum: Rassool was its Principal Investigator, Rousseau served on its Selection Committee and, along with Moosage, organised and led reading groups and supervised RSRP fellows across the five years of the project. Along with Bianca van Laun, Moosage continues to run the Forensic History module at UWC.

9 Ibid., 13.

racism's museum (see Smith and Gwasira, this issue). In doing so we explore the varying ways in which the colonial and its categories have been tied up with processes of restitution, museumisation and memorialisation in the postcolonial present, and trouble the grand narrative of the post-antiapartheid state and 'its seeming triumphs over colonialism and apartheid'.[10]

In as much as forum stresses the relevance of discussion and the central role that universities and heritage institutions inhabit in the (re)making of societies, we intentionally use the term as a reference to forensis (as outlined above) and its subversive, counterhegemonic, and counter-forensic approach to evidentiary regimes. In so doing, we insist that the museum, the university, and their related disciplines have been – and often continue to be – complicit in colonial and postcolonial violence. It is in that space of testing and interrogation that the contributions to this special issue are placed. The Forum was never intended as constituting a directive on how to remake societies and persons. Its rationale and mode of operation were exactly the opposite. It has been a space in which evidence and truth claims have been and continue to be challenged so as to expose their epistemic and ontological bases and to build on the work of previous generations in creating pathways towards more varied, more inclusive, and potentially more democratic futures.

Conversations across the Continent

In practical terms, this work involved convening a series of reading groups, workshops and conferences through which we gathered scholars, curators, activists and artists from across the continent, and from a number of disciplines and fields broadly located within (and sometimes beyond) the humanities, so as to develop shared approaches and understandings. In this regard, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 both restricted the RSRP Forum and provided opportunities to harness emergent, online platforms for continental conversations.[11] Extending care for one another and acknowledging our starkly different situations and circumstances constituted the very basis for our critical engagement with the postcolonial. In this special issue, Leslie Witz uses the term 'ethics of responsibility' to frame and conceptualise what became imminent concerns for us as individuals and as a community of scholars during the course of the project. Under these conditions, our online meetings provided one of the only forms of sociality and academic engagement during lockdown. To hold the meetings online also made it possible for people from different

10 Ibid., 10. See also Bianca van Laun's research on the ways in which the Gallows Memorialisation Project in Pretoria had reclaimed and repurposed images made by the apartheid state: B. van Laun, 'Bureaucratically Missing: Capital Punishment, Exhumations, and the Afterlives of State Documents and Photographs', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 44 (2018), 123–144.

11 Throughout lockdown, Forum members sought to secure critical pathways for students, scholars, and academics, who were, to varying degrees, physically, socially, and institutionally isolated during the most intense periods of the pandemic. South Africa saw some of the strictest measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced extended periods of lockdown. During hard lockdown (later called alert level 5) non-essential workers were only allowed to leave their homes to purchase essential goods. Travel between provinces and any form of gathering was strictly prohibited. On the lowest alert level, the country still maintained a national curfew from midnight until 4 am. See 'Government Gazette', 25 March 2020, https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202003/4314825-3cogta.pdf (accessed 9 May 2026).

participating institutions to come together, despite the long distances separating us. This enabled a much more sustained engagement across the continent. It did, however, also mean that workshops hosted by the University of Ghana, Makerere University, and the majority of those organised by UWC could not be attended in person as originally planned. Instead, these workshops were held either online or in a hybrid format throughout the year 2021.[12]

Although we were able to bring people together in person for a concluding conference in Cape Town, it must be said that these peculiar circumstances shaped the Forum in unexpected and sometimes paralysing ways. Below we provide an account of how our discussions took shape in practice, as we believe sharing these practical aspects provides valuable insights into the work that was conducted.

Re-assessing the different 'R-words': Rehumanisation, Restitution, and the Remaking of National Museums

The transformation of national museums in African postcolonial states was a recurrent theme throughout the duration of the project. One of the first workshops was organised by Makerere University in 2021.[13] It provided an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that the Uganda National Museum had faced in transforming its exhibits and collections in the postcolonial period. Uganda's Commissioner for Monuments and Museums, Rose N. Mwanja, and Uganda Museum curator and RSRP Fellow, Nelson Abiti, outlined how the museum had strived to contribute to reconciliatory processes in the post-Idi Amin era, engaging with contested, traumatic, and previously unspoken histories surrounding Idi Amin's rule.[14] This ongoing wrestling with colonial and postcolonial violence was put into context during a keynote address by George Abungu. As former director of the National Museums of Kenya and Chairperson of the International Standing Committee on the Traffic of Illicit Antiquities, Abungu spoke about the difficulties in reinterpreting and representing colonial-era archives and collections. The workshop also presented an opportunity for Kodzo Gavua, RSRP Principal Investigator at the University of Ghana, to speak about Ghana's experience of reimagining and remaking its national museum and heritage.

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12 It is important to note that our partners at AUC were heavily restricted in their activities during the pandemic and in the wake of what is commonly referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. In Egypt, popular uprisings in 2011 resulted in the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from power. Despite its democratising impulse, the 'Arab Spring' in Egypt was followed by authoritarian rule and the restriction of academic freedoms. For this reason, AUC conducted much of its research in closed forums and reading groups.

13 Department of History, Archaeology and Heritage Studies, Makerere University: Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons Forum (RSRP) Thematic Workshop: Remaking A National Museum in Uganda, Uganda Museum, Kampala, 6–7 May 2021. This workshop was attended by Makerere staff and students, heritage professionals from different institutions in Uganda, and colleagues from UWC and UGL, who attended virtually.

14 In 2019, the museum opened The Unseen Archive of Idi Amin exhibition, which was widely discussed nationally and internationally (https://africasacountry.com/2019/07/the-unseen-archive-of-idi-amin/, accessed 2 April 2026). See D.R. Peterson, R. Vokes, N. Abiti and E.C. Taylor, 'The Unseen Archive of Idi Amin: Making History in a Tight Corner', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 63, 1 (2021), 5–40.

These discussions were continued at a conference held at the University of Ghana in collaboration with the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO later that year.[15] Presentations covered a wide spectrum of themes and disciplines: from communicating heritage, to cinema, art, photography, performance, and folklore, and discussions of different historiographic approaches and narrative strategies in dealing with Ghana's cultural heritage.[16] A guest speaker at this conference was Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum. His book, *The Brutish Museums*,[17] provides a landmark in restitution debates for its detailed reconstruction of the violent theft of the Benin bronzes during the 1897 British Expedition.[18]

Similarly, at the concluding workshop, the RSRP doctoral scholar, Suzana Sousa presented aspects of her work on national museums in Angola today, focusing on the Anthropology Museum in Luanda. Tracing different historical layers of the building, including its implication in the slave trade, Sousa read the presence of these histories in the building itself in tension with absences in both the collections and the displayed narratives. Her careful contemplation offered a form of counter-narrative to streamlined national discourses.[19] In this special issue, Pamela Khanakwa, Makerere University's RSRP Principal Investigator, Nelson Abiti and Ciraj Rassool offer an extensive history of the Uganda National Museum, tracing the disciplinary frames that both shaped museum practice throughout the colonial period and continue to shadow attempts to transform museum practice in this postcolonial conjuncture. We believe that this, and other research carried out by RSRP fellows, goes some way to remedying important observations made by Raymond Silverman, George Abungu, and Peter Probst in their 2022 edited volume, *National Museums in Africa: Identity, History, Politics*: namely that, despite continuously expanding debates about the restitution of cultural heritage, there has been too little discussion about and engagement with national museums in Africa.[20]

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15 In attendance at the workshop 'Re-conceptualizing and Presenting African Heritages: Beyond Popular Narratives' were representatives of UNESCO; the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO; Ghana's Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture; the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board; the Ghana National Commission on Culture; the Ghana National Folklore Board; the Ghana Forestry Commission; Traditional Authorities, Media, Artists and Writers.

16 In this special issue, the RSRP Principle Investigator Kodzo Gavua and RSRP fellow Jacob Nii Marley discuss 'The Politics of Displays and Narratives at Elmina Castle'.

17 D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

18 RSRP reading groups in Accra and Cape Town dedicated significant time to reading and discussing *The Brutish Museums*. The book assisted us in thinking about the museum as a complicit institution that was not merely a beneficiary of colonial violence but was embedded in violent expeditions of conquest itself. Its unwavering call for restitution caused a number of controversies and at times elicited outrage from the museum establishment in Britain, not least because of the strong publicity that accompanied its publication. While these debates certainly constituted an important milestone in shaping negotiations about restitution, these were seemingly most relevant in Britain itself. In Ghana, a subsequent workshop discussed how the construction of narratives like those by Hicks be revised with input from 'egalitarian archival sources' to reflect Ghana's public history. Another outcome was the decision to organise an exhibition on the boxing heritage of Ga Mashie (British Accra) in collaboration with the Imagining Ghanaian Futures project, to illustrate alternative ways by which the African past can be presented in exhibition contexts, involving community participation. See an overview of the activities on the Imagining Futures website: https://imaginingfutures.world/labs/accra-ghana/ (accessed 2 April 2026).

19 S. Sousa, 'The Layered Museum: The National Anthropology Museum in Angola', The Material Remains RSRP Conference, Cape Town, 2–4 December 2022.

20 R. Silverman, G. Abungu, and P. Probst, 'Introduction: Regarding National Museums in Africa' in R. Silverman, G. Abungu, and P. Probst (eds), *National Museums in Africa: Identity, History, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–16.

Throughout the workshops and reading groups we critically engaged the concepts, policies and practices of restitution, repatriation, reparation, repair, redress, and return, which became colloquially known as the Forum's 'R-words'.[21] At UWC, reading groups discussed past and contemporary case studies of demands for restitution and reparation which focused on the African continent and its diaspora.[22] These examples were supplemented by more theoretical and philosophical texts, which traversed questions of personhood, biography, and different forms of writing history, as well as documentary films, newspaper articles and recorded conversations.[23] Invited curators discussed their approaches to the exhibitionary practices in which they were dealing, to varying degrees, with postcolonial and apartheid violence. The different formats and genres diversified our discussions. They allowed for an understanding of the currency of the debates and of the expansiveness of the field, which ranges from past to present and future, across different geographical and sociopolitical settings, through both digital and physical space, and across disciplines.

One 're-discovery' in the very dynamic and expansive field of African cultural heritage and restitution demands that occurred during the lifetime of the Forum seems particularly noteworthy: Nii Kwate Owoo's short film *You Hide Me*, made in London in 1970. Set mainly in the British Museum's storage for African belongings, the film offers an incisive critique of colonisation, of the looting of cultural heritage, and of contemporary claims about who has authority over the interpretation of African art. In just seventeen minutes, it seemed to anticipate current restitution debates. At the same time, the history of the film's reception might demonstrate how the work of African scholars had not only been unappreciated, but also seemed still to require affirmation by Europe or the United States in order to be internationally recognised.[24]

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21 Many of the contributions to this special issue deal – implicitly or explicitly – with questions of restitution. In her book review, Vuyokazi Luthuli adds a discussion of the concept of reparations as suggested by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, in *Reconsidering reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

22 These included demands for reparations for the genocide against Nama and Ovaherero people in Namibia and violence enacted against Mau Mau fighters in Kenya. We also linked broader reparative struggles with interventions in the museum and cultural heritage field, examining subversive interventions such as the 'Other Nefertiti' project: a 3D hack and digital repatriation of the Nefertiti bust still held in Berlin. This intervention was realised by artists Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles (https://alloversky.com/puzzlepieces/the-other-nefertiti (accessed 2 April 2026). Ta-Nehisi Coates's, 'The case for reparations', was read alongside news coverage of the lawsuit by Tamara Lanier against Harvard University, in which she had sued to gain access to and ownership of daguerreotypes of her great-great-great-grandfather that were held in the university's collections. See T. N. Coates, 'The case for reparations', *The Atlantic*, June 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/ (accessed 2 April 2026). Lanier won the case in May 2025 after a six-year-long battle: K.F. Gibbon, 'Lanier v. Harvard Settles: Property Rights to Images of Enslaved People', *Cultural Property News*, 3 June 2025, https://culturalpropertynews.org/lanier-v-harvard-settles-property-rights-ethical-authority-institutional-access-and-historical-reckoning/ (accessed 9 May 2026).

23 Surprisingly generative was an experimental, collective review of the edited volume *Museum Futures*, for which each participant was free to choose a chapter and contribute their critical reading of it to the session. *Museum Futures* covered a broad range of case studies from across the Global South and the ensuing discussion was particularly lively, showing a sense of global connectedness. M. Biwa, L. Emmerling and L. Proença (eds), *Museum Futures* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2021), https://www.turia.at/pdf/Museum_Futures_E-Book.pdf (accessed 2 April 2026).

24 As it was told, Owoo's son insisted on submitting the film to the Black Star International Film Festival in 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd. From there, it went on to be screened internationally. See, for example, this conversation after a screening in Berlin: KuK Tuesdays, 'In Conversation with Nii Kwate Owoo', 26 June 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ddt1_eQDMVM (accessed 3 April 2026). An earlier discussion was hosted by the June Givanni PanAfrican Cinema Archive in London, who also have the film in their collection, https://catalogue.junegivannifilmarchive.org/s/main/item/4754 / (accessed 3 April 2026). In 1978, Owoo founded the Media Research Unit at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, which he headed until 2002. In Ghana, the film is currently being used to teach school children and students about restitution matters.

Among the different 'r-words', rehumanisation was perhaps the Forum's most important. In South Africa, and particularly at UWC, it also constituted a central concept in linking the colonial dead with victims of apartheid and other forms of violence.[25] To think through these relationships also opened a space to reconsider the deeper meaning of the term rehumanisation and its implicit definition of the human.[26] As Moosage outlined in the Forum's 2019 annual report:

> what became apparent was that ascribing and inscribing human-ness as a strategy of rehumanisation further complicates the ways in which personhood and biography are deployed in re-figuring the dead as human. Discussions in our reading groups underscored the difficulty but also the productivity of re-thinking not only why the dead figure so prominently in discourses of making societies and making persons, but also how such figuring challenges many preconceived notions of disciplinary boundedness. This includes the space and place of the research scholar as an ethically charged subject herself implicated in the unravelling of re-making societies and re-making persons.[27]

In one of the interdisciplinary connections that defined our conversations about personhood and rehumanisation, it was the figure of the archaeologist whose role in rewriting African pasts and presents was frequently the subject of our discussions. These engagements have traversed the treatment of the dead and their possessions,[28] the construction of colonial and racist narratives about human evolution, the ongoing plundering of African heritage through illicit trade or ongoing efforts to strengthen and expand Afrocentric archaeological research practices. During the workshops, RSRP fellows from the University of Ghana, Makerere University, and UWC presented their own archaeological research as well as critical assessments of the practices that have defined this discipline. For example, Robin-lea Karating critically assessed how archaeologists articulated their work on enslavement and how it was transcribed and memorialised at sites around the Cape.[29] Goodman Gwasira

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25 In this regard, we read C. Rassool, 'Human Remains, the Disciplines of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex' in D.R. Peterson, K. Gavua and C. Rassool (eds), *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133–156, alongside more recent demands for the burial of the physical remains of people in Philadelphia, who had been killed by police when they bombed a building occupied by the political movement, MOVE, in 1985; see L.D. Monteiro, 'Finding Ceremony for Our Ancestors Held in Penn Museum's "Morton Cranial Collection"', *Medium*, 28 January 2023, https://intersectionist.medium.com/finding-ceremony-for-our-ancestors-held-in-penn-museums-morton-cranial-collection-c7580a98064a (accessed 3 April 2026). The University of Pennsylvania has since developed the 'Penn Museum Human Remains Policy', 20 Sept. 2023, https://www.penn.museum/img/documents/PM-HRP-full-20230920.pdf (accessed 27 March 2026). In both cases, it was found that physical remains of people had been kept in museum and university collections, and studied for scientific purposes unethically, until as recently as 2021 in Philadelphia. These historically and geographically differently situated contestations gave an insight into the wide-reaching, complex relationship between state violence, racial science, and ongoing abusive practices in anatomical and physical anthropology research.

26 On this specific question, see Sophie Schasiepen's contribution to this special issue.

27 R. Moosage, RSRP report to the Mellon Foundation, 2019.

28 To reference the title of a seminal publication in the field: C. Fforde, J. Hubert, P. Turnbull (eds), *The Dead and their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002).

29 R.-l. Karating, 'Unearthing Presence in the Artefacts of Slavery at the Cape: The Production of Archaeological Narratives in Post-Apartheid South Africa' (PhD dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2025).

analysed the discipline's implication in colonial governance and dispossession and made concrete suggestions on how to rethink archaeological research as community-based practice.[30] In this special issue, Gwasira expands this research so as to engage a series of institutional, ethical, and diplomatic concerns surrounding the repatriation of ancestral remains from South Africa's Iziko Museums to Namibia. Another important interlocutor in this regard was the Egyptian archaeologist, Monica Hanna, who delivered a keynote address at a 2021 online workshop. Drawing from years of research experience in Egypt, Hanna offered critical analyses of the gendered, racialised, and extractive ways in which the discipline of archaeology had been operating in Egypt, under the guise of Egyptology. She also drew attention to the ongoing fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage in the present.[31] In 2022, the UWC reading group dedicated half of the year to the study of archaeological meaning-making and bio-anthropological research. Robyn Humphreys, who co-convened that reading group with Leslie Witz, discusses the specific role of contract archaeology in the heritage sector of South Africa in this special issue.[32]

Contributions: The Material Remains

To officially mark the end of the RSRP Forum, UWC hosted colleagues from the University of Ghana, the University of Makerere, and American University in Cairo at a conference in Cape Town, titled 'The Material Remains'. As with previous workshops, students of the project had the opportunity to present their ongoing research. It also offered space for debates between the Forum's varied and sometimes contested themes, and enabled conversations across disciplines and institutions. Coalescing around its central theme, the conference was made up of six panels that focused on returns and restitution, the urban/rural divide, the body and materiality, museums, community, and temporality. Over the course of two days, panelists focused on the return of museum objects and the physical remains of people to previously colonised countries, on issues pertaining to the city, urban life, and dislocation, as well as meanings and representations of biography, burials, forensics and archaeological practices in our postcolonial conjuncture. The conference also provided space to reflect on the remains of disciplinary practices and institutional legacies in museums on the African continent, and difficulties encountered in reimagining and remaking museums in the wake of forms and systems of violence and authoritarianism. Importantly, these practices, histories, and legacies continue to shape the ways in which museums and other institutions' relationships with different publics and communities are understood, engaged with, navigated and reimagined. And finally, our conference theme, and this special issue, referred to the times and work that remain, offering an

30 G. Gwasira, 'A History and Critical Analysis of Namibia's Archaeologies' (PhD dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2020).

31 See Hanna's recent book: M. Hanna, *The Future of Egyptology* (London: Melville House, 2025).

32 See also R. Humphreys, 'Critically Engaged Archaeology: Prestwich Street Burial Grounds as a Case Study' (PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2025).

opportunity to engage with chronological and epistemological questions that come into contact with different temporalities and histories in the contemporary.

The majority of articles reproduced here were developed from, or inspired by, papers presented at the Material Remains conference, and have been organised here under two themes. The first, Museum as Forum, draws together articles and research from across the continent that interrogate the museum as a site of ethnicised and racialised subjectification, governance, and nation-making as well as of contested epistemologies and processes of restitution. The second theme, History as Forum, focuses on questions related to the Forum as method and question both within university disciplines (public, forensic and visual history, archaeology, and archive) and the public domain. These themes are supplemented by two book reviews; one by Bongani Kona on Jacob Dlamini's *Dying for Freedom* (2025), and the other by Vuyakazi Luthuli on Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's *Reconsidering Reparations* (2022). A report on the 2025 Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) UWC Winter School by Lee Walters is also included. Although not directly linked to the Forum, it resonates strongly with many themes discussed in this special issue. [33]

The first theme, Museum as Forum, begins with an article developed from the 'Material Remains' keynote address which was given by the Forum's Principal Investigator, Ciraj Rassool. Detailing the intellectual and institutional history of the Forum and of museum and restitution politics more generally, Rassool offers a programmatic history of the Forum and UWC's African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies (APMHS), and provides a detailed assessment of the scope and terrain of restitution work in southern Africa and beyond. Importantly, this article draws a distinction between restitution and repatriation, arguing that 'the desire to give back should be differentiated from building projects of restitution, claims-making and social restoration'. Thus, Rassool not only maps the conceptual, political, and institutional history of the Forum, but also develops a sense of the work that remains for us after this special issue.

Other contributions under this theme engage debates specific to restitution demands directed towards museum and academic collections. Sophie Schasiepen analyses how different conceptions of the human have structured restitution policies in Germany and South Africa. Using German museum guidelines and South Africa's restitution policy as examples, she traces the ways in which underlying notions of the human, that are often presented as universalist, might in fact reproduce Eurocentric, biocentric and exclusionist understandings of what it means to be human and to be treated as such.

As previously mentioned, Gwasira builds on research conducted at Iziko Museums of South Africa. He gives insights into his ongoing provenance research to find out more about those people from Namibia whose remains are still held in the South African Museum, as well as about the specific contexts in which they entered the collection. As someone who has been extensively involved in shaping

33 The CHR is based at UWC and has had a longstanding relationship and partnership with the Department of Historical Studies.

heritage practices, especially on the treatment of ancestral remains in Namibia, Gwasira makes a strong argument for the necessity of a national restitution policy in Namibia, as a means of ensuring support for national and international processes of return and burial by government structures. Echoing certain currents in Schasiepen's article, he also outlines the institutional and diplomatic pitfalls of complicated repatriation claims between states, particularly when different, potentially contradictory museum policies and conceptions of the human are placed in conversation.

Moving away from debates specific to restitution and repatriation, and toward processes of subjection in colonial museums, Mary Mbewe discusses how the White Fathers, a Catholic Society also known as Missionaries of Africa, shaped and consolidated an ethnographic understanding of identities in what is now northern Zambia. Her analysis lays bare how the labelling, collection, and study of what then became ethnographic heritage re-organised societal relations and conceptions of the self. For her, to historicise the impact of these interventions becomes an important tool for imagining and creating a de-ethnographised future, in which fluid, open, and inclusive concepts of culture, heritage, and identity can untangle the static, homogenising and exclusionist politics of missionaries and colonial governance.

In a similar vein, Michelle Smith shows how specific museum displays in South Africa's Eastern Cape created racialised notions of an urban subject by implicit and explicit juxtaposition to the rural. Like Mbewe's article, colonial ethnography plays an important role in these tensions. Smith discusses the displays in the context of their making and the institutional settings they are embedded in, linking them to broader questions about postapartheid museum practices and, following Premesh Lalu, attempts to trace the ways in which discourses of the urban repress 'the history of the modes of power that have come to define the rural as such'.[34]

This theme also includes important contributions about the Uganda National Museum and Elmina Castle in Ghana. Khanakwa, Abiti and Rassool discuss the history of the Uganda National Museum, interrogating its epistemological foundations and the ways in which the framing of its collections policed people along tribal lines. Focusing on the period between the 1930s and 1960s, they trace the museum's relation to different publics, showing the role it played (or did not play) in people's lives. They highlight the implications of different disciplinary regimes (ethnography, fine art, and ethnomusicology) that were involved in the making of the museum's collections as part of the colonial project, and point towards the ongoing difficulties of remaking a national museum that is marked so intensely by the ethnographic.

Kodzo Gavua and Jacob Nii Marley, on the other hand, end this theme with an analysis of the narratives of official guided tours at Elmina Castle. They argue that the emphasis on the Castle's role in the slave trade, along with emotive forms of storytelling, restrict the meaning of the site and sometimes also distort historical facts. In

34 P. Lalu, 'Leaving the City: Gender, Pastoral Power and the Discourse of Development in the Eastern Cape' in N. Murray, N. Shepherd and M. Hall (eds), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (London: Routledge, 2007), 195–214.

their article, they ask what it would take to integrate past and present local perspectives on the heritage site, but also how one could design more inclusive tours for diverse audiences – especially for visitors from the African continent – that might trouble exceptionalist narratives.

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Rory Bester and Leslie Witz begin our second theme, History as Forum, with an in-depth conversation about the Forum's disciplinary histories.[35] As previously noted, Witz suggests that much of the Forum's work has been grounded by what he calls an 'ethics of responsibility' and the ways in which museums and other institutions shape 'people's lives' as well as 'their associations with spaces and objects'. He frames this approach in terms of a democratic responsibility, not, as he points out, 'in the sense of voting but rather in a questioning of the singular view'. This includes being attentive to more ethical approaches to the treatment of the dead as well as the living, something that has implications for thinking through the conceptual and methodological terrain of public history, which was developed at UWC's Department of Historical Studies in the 1990s. As Witz explains, public history at UWC can be characterised by a critical impulse to consider, and take seriously, the role of historical production beyond the university and academia. For this reason, among others, he sees the Forum as extending the work of public history at UWC.

Samuel Longford's article addresses the discipline of history and certain categorical impulses that remain, stubbornly, in the wake of apartheid. Beginning with Njabulo Ndebele's *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, he places 'seemingly disconnected disciplines and practices [history, literature and memorialisation] into conversation, so as to begin to draw out perspectives that might trouble' what he calls 'the closed epistemological systems that we inherit from and through history'. In so doing, he interrogates 'taken-for-granted' categories within history and continues debates about subjection, narration, and memory that were instituted at UWC in the 1990s, and addressed by Witz and Bester in their conversation. Specifically, he focuses on the distinction between spectacular treatments of violence in South Africa and what is called 'everyday life', which although often seen as an antidote to triumphalist historiography, functions more like a 'blurred speck at the edge of one's vision that disappears when looked at directly'.[36]

In this regard, Longford's approach echoes Moosage's and Abrahams's articles which offer forensic and sometimes micrological readings of histories of violence in South Africa, specifically the brutal murders and disappearances of anti-apartheid activists, Griffiths Mxenge and Sizwe Kondile. But while Longford focuses on historical and contemporary modes of writing and representing violence, Moosage and Abrahams engage with archives of disappearance and political violence during the final years of official apartheid. Indeed, Moosage's and Abrahams's articles might be most closely associated with what Rousseau, Moosage and Rassool have elsewhere

35 Witz was a member of the RSRP Forum's Selection Committee, and served as acting PI during Rassool's sabbatical in 2022.
36 R. Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', *New Formations*, 39 (1999–2000), 15.

called a 'forensic sensibility in which presenting material evidence in various forums acts to persuade and convince, but more so, opens a space to question and challenge the production of such evidence'.[37] The evidence that Moosage interrogates was largely produced through the Harms Commission of Inquiry into Certain Alleged Murders (known as the 'lying commission' or the 'toothless commission'). Rather than asking 'who lied' during the construction of evidence at the Harms Commission, Moosage attempts to 'understand how a certain kind of truth about the disappearance of Sizwe Kondile was constructed'. This, he suggests, offers a 'glimpse at the discursive formations of apartheid power that the Harms Commission gave expression to' and, we suggest, offers a counter-forensic reading of what Adam Sitze has elsewhere called the 'tumult commissions'.[38]

Abrahams, on the other hand, explores how the burnt out car of Griffiths Mxenge might offer alternative modes through which to understand and reconstruct a 'life unaccounted for in public narrations' produced at the initial inquest into Mxenge's death (1982), the Harms Commission (1990), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings (1996). Abrahams explores the ways in which Mxenge's burnt out car, which normatively serves as mere evidence of his violent death, might support a reading that disentangles the dehumanising impulses of our evidentiary paradigms, and the modes through which historical truth is accounted for today. Importantly, Abrahams interprets Mxenge's 'motor vehicle wreckage, deserted in a forested area in rural Transvaal (in present-day Mpumalanga)', as a 'dead car' that 'does not simply evoke memories of him, but was also itself an extension of him, expressing Mxenge's continued agency beyond death'. As he poignantly puts it: 'The enduring remnants [of the "dead car"] are not simply pieces of metal which belonged to an Audi, but they have come to constitute an extension of the dead'.

Robyn Humphreys and Khalid Shamis end this special issue by returning us to debates about restitution, reparation, and return, framing these processes as ongoing, unfinished and highly contested. In her article, Humphreys focuses on the Prestwich Place Burial Ground and the role of archaeologists in 'determining heritage practices in South Africa' and the shape of neoliberal developmental agendas in Cape Town. This leads to important insights into the ways in which heritage practices are always already imbricated with broader economic and geopolitical agendas and processes.

Shamis, on the other hand, places his own family history and work as a filmmaker and archivist alongside histories of exile and return in post-Gaddafi Libya. Centred around Human Rights Watch's 'discovery' and subsequent possession of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's archive, Shamis's article offers a postcolonial example that complicates our understanding and timeline of restitution, return, and colonial theft. He also places the figure of his exiled father alongside, and analogous to, the exile and

37 N. Rousseau, R. Moosage, and C. Rassool (eds), 'Missing and Missed: Rehumanisation, the Nation and Missing-ness', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 44 (2018): 15.

38 A. Sitze, *The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

return of archival objects, suggesting that understanding processes of restitution and return require a much more nuanced reading that places the return of archival and museum objects alongside the movement and exile of people. We believe that this ambiguity and messiness is perfectly reflected in this special issue's front cover, which uses a still from Shamis's documentary film, 'The Colonel's Stray Dogs'.

An Era of Restitution and the Remaking of Postcolonial Societies

Rather than framing restitution as an event that allows former colonial powers to emerge as reconciled with their own violent pasts, the contributions by Shamis and others in this special issue situate processes of restitution in relation to the broader economic and geopolitical milieu. These contributions thereby demonstrate that the recent turn towards repatriation has been coextensive with new erasures and silences, as well as renewed claims to authority and power which are often veiled behind benevolent gestures that form part of the current field of debates about the restitution of cultural heritage.[39] As we noted in this article's abstract, some have described ensuing developments as a 'scramble for restitution' by European countries, often overriding previous demands, negotiations, and intellectual labour. A stark example of this is the frequency with which scholars and media reports have referred to the French president Emmanuel Macron's call for the restitution of African heritage to the continent during a state visit to Burkina Faso in 2017, as the 'beginning' of the debate.[40]

Shortly after his announcement, Macron commissioned Felwin Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy to write a report on the restitution of African cultural heritage held in France. In their findings, Sarr and Savoy included a 'timeline for a program of restitutions'. According to them, the first phase of restitution should have focused on the most urgent pieces to be returned to Benin, Senegal, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, and Cameroon between 2018 and 2019. This would be followed by a second phase (between 2019 and 2022) during which systematic efforts to compile and share inventories through transnational dialogue would be prioritised. The third phase, starting from 2022, emphasised the open-endedness of the process, not to delay further restitutions, but to insist that even after the window of opportunity that Macron's announcement had outlined had closed, African states 'should be assured that their eventual requests for restitutions can also be welcomed'.[41]

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39 Political agendas, sometimes hidden in plain sight, are part of the dynamics of the field. Comfort Mtotha has shown this by analysing the ways in which the restitution of the 'Cox collection' was aligned with reinforcing one-party rule in Malawi. See C. Mtotha, 'Collecting Malawi: Museums, Histories and Politics, 1875 to the Present' (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2025).

40 During a speech at the Université Ouaga 1 Professeur Ki-Zerbo, Macron declared: 'I cannot accept that a large share of several African countries' cultural heritage be kept in France. There are historical explanations for it, but there is no valid, lasting and unconditional justification. African heritage cannot solely exist in private collections and European museums. African heritage must be showcased in Paris but also in Dakar, Lagos and Cotonou; this will be one of my priorities. Within five years I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa'; 'Emmanuel Macron's speech at the University of Ouagadougou', Élysée, 28 November 2017, https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-829-en.pdf (accessed 11 May 2026). The Élysée escalated the point on a Twitter [now X] post: 'African Cultural Heritage Can No Longer Remain a Prisoner of European Museums'; as noted in F. Sarr and B. Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (November 2018), 1. The report's website is accessible via the waybackmachine: https://web.archive.org/web/20190328181703/http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf (accessed 10 May 2026).

41 Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 69.

Several other aspects of the report were significant, particularly for the discursive field in which restitution debates were taking place. Its overall recommendation for the restitution of cultural objects *unless* it could be proven that they were taken *with* consent as well as its differentiated consideration of an extended period of time, *including* acquisitions made in the postcolonial era, were uncommon and provocative. This reversal of the burden of proof was a particularly generative shift. Previous debates about eligibility for restitution had often focused on the impossibility of detailed reconstructions of the methods of appropriation and the lack of legal tools to solve disputes, arguing that without proof of an unrightful 'acquisition', restitution was unwarranted. Importantly, Sarr and Savoy situated the question of restitution of cultural heritage in the wider context of past, present, and future geopolitical and social relations. Describing European museums as 'public archives' for 'a system of appropriation and alienation – the colonial system', they declared that the youth of Africa have a *right* for *all* cultural heritages. Nevertheless, they would:

> begin with those cultural and artistic resources inherited from Africa's past itself, held and stored in museums and countries completely out of reach from the African youth who often are unaware of not only the richness and creativity of this legacy, but often are not even aware of its existence.[42]

Given the extremely broad impact that both Macron's announcement and Sarr and Savoy's report had, it is remarkable how little engagement there has been with its actual content. While the deeper meaning of Sarr and Savoy's call for 'a new relational ethics' was often ignored, the geopolitical context of Macron's speech has been equally underappreciated. Macron's call for restitution was associated explicitly with what he described as a necessary recalibration of the relationships between Europe, especially France, and Africa, especially the former French colonies, so as to avoid a repetition of what has been called the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and 2016.[43] Although Macron's intervention may have broken with the attitudes of previous French presidents' Africa speeches,[44] we still find his open paternalism shocking to read.[45]

Importantly, this speech was delivered amid the normalisation of rhetoric about 'Fortress Europe', and the continued struggles of displaced people for minimum hospitality in an increasingly authoritarian world. This included renewed efforts to close Europe's borders, to increase budgets for immigration control, and to externalise

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42 Ibid., 4.

43 Macron made several concrete references to migration control and restriction, but this quote might better illustrate the overall approach: 'Quite simply, I consider Africa to be the world's central, global and key continent because it is where all of today's challenges intersect. Africa is where the world will be transformed. If we fail to meet these challenges together, Africa will sink into obscurity. This could happen. It will regress, it will decline. But along with it, Europe will have the same hardships because it will enter into a long period of migration, poverty, and routes of necessity and of even greater pain than today'; 'Emmanuel Macron's speech at the University of Ouagadougou'.

44 S. Mitter, 'What France's Macron Really Means When He Says Africa Needs to Look after Itself', *Quartz Africa*, 29 November 2017, https://qz.com/africa/1141401/francafrique-macron-hails-thomas-sankara-preaches-cfa-independence-but-nothings-changed (accessed 14 May 2026).

45 For example, Macron stated: 'I would like to speak to you sincerely, with our deep friendship in mind. Like you, I am from a generation that has never known a colonized Africa. […] Finally, what unites us here today […] is the French language. […] The French language of Burkina Faso, of Senegal, no longer belongs only to France: it is yours, so use it with pride!'; 'Emmanuel Macron's speech at the University of Ouagadougou'.

border controls into Africa.[46] At the time of writing, deaths of migrants trying to reach Europe from Africa were unbearably frequent, with more than 2100 people dying on the Mediterranean route and more than 1200 people dying on the increasingly used West African/Atlantic route in 2025.[47]

Almost ten years after Macron's restitution declaration, it is worth asking what has been achieved since. It is important to note first that Africa still seems to be treated as a geopolitical playground, with China, Russia, Europe, and the United States competing for influence over the continent and its resources.[48] Several African countries have adopted new mining codes, aiming to nationalise resources, but efforts by African leaders to unite within a shared polity, to protect local markets, and redistribute wealth amongst their populations have been far from satisfying.[49] Indeed, in some cases (most recently Zambia and most notably Uganda and South Africa) the human rights of queer, foreign, and other vulnerable or marginalised people have been curtailed and infringed upon, and in Uganda, criminalised and outlawed. Furthermore, the accelerating effects of the climate crisis have added pressure on already existing inequalities around the world, as has an intensifying housing crisis, rising unemployment, militarisation, and war-driven food, fuel, and delivery-chain uncertainties. The Trump administration's decision to dismantle USAID has put crucial social and health infrastructure under even more pressure than before.[50]

In this increasingly strained geopolitical climate, calls for restitution and reparation are becoming even more relevant. Over the past ten years, several crucial interventions have been made, and some returns have been realised.[51] Prominent examples include restitutions of Benin bronzes from several countries to Nigeria,[52] where the opening of the Museum of West African Art in Benin City in November

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46 M. Gkliati and J. Kilpatrick, 'Exporting Borders: Frontex and the Expansion of Fortress Europe in West Africa', Statewatch Transnational Institute, July 2025, https://www.tni.org/files/2025-07/Exporting-Borders-Report-web.pdf (accessed 14 May 2026); C. Barbière, 'EU-Africa summit conclusions blocked over forced return of migrants', *EURACTIV*, 7 December 2017, https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-africa-summit-conclusions-blocked-over-forced-return-of-migrants (accessed 14 May 2026); C. Moser, R. Ferahkaya and L. Märtin, 'Frontex Goes Africa: On Pre-emptive Border Control and Migration Management', *Verfassungsblog*, 6 February 2020, https://verfassungsblog.de/frontex-goes-africa-on-pre-emptive-border-control-and-migration-management/ (accessed 14 May 2026).

47 International Organization for Migration, '21 Migrants Died Every Day in 2025, New IOM Data Reveals', *IOM*, 26 February 2026, https://denmark.iom.int/news/21-migrants-died-every-day-2025-new-iom-data-reveals (accessed 14 May 2026).

48 A. Gnanguênon and M. Kretzschmar, 'From Minerals to Influence: Resource-for-security Deals Reshaping Power Dynamics in Africa', *APRI*, 29 September 2025, https://afripoli.org/from-minerals-to-influence-resource-for-security-deals-reshaping-power-dynamics-in-africa (accessed 17 June 2026).

49 A. Michelino, 'Africa's Sovereign Turn: Mining Codes, Risk, and the Politics of Insurance', LSE International Development, 2 September 2025, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2025/09/02/africas-sovereign-turn-mining-codes-risk-and-the-politics-of-insurance/; E. Phiri, 'Africa's Mining Codes are Changing and so is the Money', *Ghana Mining Review*, 16 March 2026, https://ghanaminingreview.com/2026/03/16/africas-mining-codes-are-changing-and-so-is-the-money/ (accessed 17 June 2026).

50 W. McMakin, 'A Surge in Violence Followed Trump's Cuts to USAID Programs in Africa, a Study Finds', AP, 14 May 2026, https://apnews.com/article/africa-usaid-conflict-crisis-0d49ccd215724e783b920bb5e7e92285 (accessed 14 May 2026); S. Lynn, 'Op-Ed: The Devastating Impacts of the USAID pullout on Africa', *MJE: Michigan Journal of Economics*, 13 May 2025, https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2025/05/13/op-ed-the-devastating-impacts-of-the-usaid-pullout-on-africa/ (accessed 14 May 2026).

51 The initiative Restitution Matters aims to document news and negotiations: see their website, RM: [restitution matters], https://restitutionmatters.org/rm-news/ (accessed 15 May 2026).

52 Countries from where bronzes were restituted include Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States, and Switzerland. A comprehensive compilation of realised restitutions is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#Subsequent_sales,_restitutions_and_repatriations (accessed 15 May 2026). See also: A. Adeyemi, 'Benin Bronzes: Complete History and Returns', *Museum of Modern African Art Gallery & Lifestyle*, 26 January 2026, https://momaa.org/benin-bronzes-complete-history-and-returns/?srsltid=AfmBOoq0XOrT51qPjcFWb9rOSa6lHEu8UbAxtuVnmYKIuMenWsQdM1Ef (accessed 15 May 2026). The platform Digital Benin, which provides vast contextual information and inventories of Benin objects, was also launched in 2022; see https://digitalbenin.org/ (accessed 15 May 2026).

2025 constituted a significant milestone for ongoing restitution negotiations and the strengthening of cultural heritage infrastructure in West Africa.[53] Other examples include the restitution of Royal Treasures of Abomey from France to the Republic of Benin in 2021, where a new museum in the president's palace was built;[54] Germany's return to Namibia in 2019 of the Bible and whip of anti-colonial leader, Hendrik Witbooi (|Gâbemab !Nanseb), one of the leaders resisting German colonialism in today's Namibia;[55] and France's return of the sword of El Hadj anti-colonial leader, Omar Saidou Tall, to Senegal in 2019.[56] The work of returning ancestral remains has also been ongoing. These have included returns to Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Namibia, Hawai'i, Papua New Guinea, Algeria,[57] Madagascar, the United States, India, Palau, South Africa[58] and Zimbabwe.[59] There have also been instances of archival documents being restituted, although the main trend seems to be one of digitisation and access, so as to avoid physical restitutions. Amid these developments, the United Nations, spearheaded by Ghana, declared the transatlantic slave trade the gravest crime against humanity,[60] providing a new basis for reparation claims. Furthermore, ongoing demands for climate reparations and justice have led to the establishment of the 'loss and damage' fund at COP27,[61] and at least begin to address what are unresolved and unequal impacts of climate change. Although the African Union features in these negotiations and continues to bring the restitution of cultural heritage onto the agenda,[62] it has so far proven difficult for the Union to occupy a more central

53 Museum of West African Art, https://wearemowaa.org/ (accessed 15 May 2026).

54 'Restitution of 26 Works to the Republic of Benin', Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris, https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/collections/living-collections/news/restitution-of-26-works-to-the-republic-of-benin/ (accessed 16 May 2026); Calixte Biah interviewed by Bénédicte Savoy, 'In Conversation: Museum Work and Experiences of Restitution', Museum Worlds, 13,1 (2025), 145–153, https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/museum-worlds/13/1/armw130113.xml (accessed 16 May 2026); Mati Diop's film Dahomey (2024), which both covers the restitution process and fictionalises it, became an international success; *Dahomey*, directed by M. Diop, Les Films Du Bal/ Fanta Sy (France: Les Films du Losange).

55 K.H. Vigne, 'Hendrik Witbooi Bible and Whip Repatriation Case', Open Restitution Africa, website, https://dataplatform.openrestitution.africa/case-study/13/#chronology (accessed 16 May 2026).

56 'France returns El Hadj Omar Tall's sword to Senegal', *This is Africa*, 18 November 2019, https://thisisafrica.me/arts-and-culture/france-returns-el-hadj-omar-talls-sword-to-senegal/ (accessed 16 May 2026).

57 France's return of the remains of Algerian resistance fighters was met with heavy criticism as it turned out that France was only 'lending' the remains to Algeria. See J.J. Zogby, 'Algeria and France: adding insult to injury', *The Arab Weekly*, 26 October 2022, https://thearabweekly.com/algeria-and-france-adding-insult-injury (accessed 16 May 2026).

58 In March 2026, the remains of sixty-three people that had been held at the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow in Scotland and at the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town were (re)buried in Steinkopf in Namaqualand; see 'South Africa Reburies Khoisan Remains Returned from Europe and South Africa', RM: [restitution matters], 25 March 2026, https://restitutionmatters.org/news-item/south-africa-reburies-khoisan-remains-returned-from-europe-and-south-africa/ (accessed 16 May 2026).

59 In April 2026, South Africa restituted ancestral remains and the Zimbabwe Soapstone Bird to Zimbabwe; see 'Address by Minister Gayton McKenzie on the occasion of the handover ceremony of the Zimbabwe Soapstone Bird and Ancestral Human Remains at Iziko South African Museum', Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, 14 April 2026, https://www.dsac.gov.za/Address%20by%C2%A0%20Minister%20Gayton%20McKenzie%20-%20handover%20ceremony%20of%20Zimbabwe%20Soapstone%20Bird%20and%20Ancestral%20Human%20Remains (accessed 16 May 2026). For a comprehensive list of restitutions realised in 2025 see E. Burack, 'A Timeline of Art and Artifacts Repatriated in 2025', *Town & Country*, 8 December 2025, https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a64131540/repatriated-art-artifacts-timeline-2025/ (accessed 16 May 2026). The Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme documents international repatriations on the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum's website: https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/about/repatriation/international-repatriation (accessed 16 May 2026).

60 United Nations, 'UN/Transatlantic Slave Trade', UNifeed, 25 March 2026, https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d354/d3548557; and 'UN Resolution Urges Reparations for Slavery's "historical wrongs"', UN News, 25 March 2026, https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/03/1167199 (accessed 16 May 2026).

61 United Nations Climate Change, 'Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage', https://unfccc.int/fund-for-responding-to-loss-and-damage (accessed 16 May 2026).

62 'High-Level Panel Side Event under the Theme: Reparations, Memory and Sovereignty: Common African Position on the Restitution of Heritage Resources', African Union, website, 13 February 2026, https://au.int/fr/node/45965 (accessed 16 May 2026) and the 2025 AUECHO issue, focusing on Justice for Africans & People of African Descent Through Reparations, au.int/sites/default/files/documents/46041-doc-AUEcho_Master_2025_Final.pdf (accessed 16 May 2026).

position capable of negotiating a more just, equitable, and satisfying process for its constituencies. Furthermore, despite the expansion of the field of cultural heritage restitution, education and publication infrastructures have seen degrees, project employments, and citation indexes growing more for people hailing from (or working in) the Global North, at the same time as postcolonial, Black, gender and queer studies have come under increasing pressure in Europe, and especially in the United States. This further limits attempts to diversify knowledge production as well as to create more democratic access to it.

In closing, it is important to stress that negotiating the restitution of cultural heritage and the remains of people cannot be separated from these broader structural inequalities, including ongoing restrictive visa and passport regimes that allow some to move freely and deny others the right to do so. In doing so, we reiterate that rethinking the museum and restitution as forum provides a conceptual framework that is capable of opening the space of the museum to the broader field of postcolonial negotiations about past and present violence, and potential pathways for restitution, redress, and repair.



Live digital illustration of the Launch of the Education Justice and Memory Network (https://edjam.network) by Laura Sorvala (https://www.laurasorvala.com). Used with kind permission of EdJAM and the artist. The discussion featured two contributors to this special issue, Ciraj Rassool and Nelson Abiti; Pablo de Greiff's work was a reference for our RSRP reading groups. It echoes our thinking about the museum as forum.