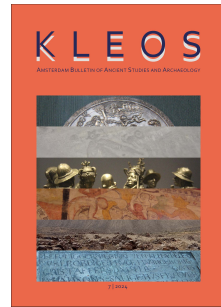




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Holocaust, Colonialism, Slavery: Entangled Histories of a Benin Bronze from a Jewish Collection

Leah Niederhausen

ABSTRACT

In 2018, a German auction house sold a Benin Bronze from the collection of German-Jewish publisher Rudolf Mosse. It had been forcefully auctioned off by the National Socialist regime in 1934, making the Bronze a Nazi-looted object. Therefore, prior to the sale, the auction house came to a financial agreement with Mosse's heirs. Since 2018, debates on restitution and the Benin Bronzes have developed tremendously. On the one hand, the Benin Bronzes—a group of cultural objects from the Royal Kingdom of Benin in today's Nigeria that were violently looted by British soldiers in 1897—have become emblematic for a new rise of urgency concerning colonial restitution, and multiple museums and national government have returned Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. On the other hand, in 2022 the US-based *Restitution Study Group* opposed these returns and claimed that the Bronzes should be made accessible to descendants of enslaved people in the US. They claim that the Kingdom of Benin had created the Bronzes from brass that the Kingdom had received for its active role in the transatlantic slave trade.

This article dives into the object history of this Benin Bronze from Mosse's collection, situating it within the intersecting violent contexts of the Holocaust, colonialism and slavery. Therefore, this article connects the case of the Benin Bronze to an influx of relational approaches in transitional justice, the study field that explores the long-term effects of mass violence as well as the specific judicial and non-judicial processes that have been developed to confront these episodes of mass violence. The aim is to showcase the potential and limits of material culture approaches and provenance research for transitional justice, as well as to critically reflect on mechanisms of restitution that in

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themselves are influenced by processes of meaning-making, prioritization and selection.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2018, the German auction house *Zemanek-Münster* auctioned a Benin Bronze, part of the infamous group of cultural objects from the Royal Kingdom of Benin that were violently looted by British soldiers in 1897. The auction caused quite a stir when it became public that the Bronze had been part of the collection of Rudolf Mosse (1843–1920), a German-Jewish publisher whose extensive art collection had been forcefully auctioned off by the National Socialist regime in 1934, making the Bronze a Nazi-looted object. Based on the Washington Principles—international soft-law guidelines for the restitution of Nazi-looted art—the auction house consequently came to a financial agreement with Mosse’s heirs and the Bronze’s sale could proceed as planned.¹

Since 2018, much has happened in the discussions around loot and restitution, in academic, policy and public spheres. Amongst others, F. Sarr and B. Savoy in late 2018 published a fundamental report on the restitution of African cultural heritage which contributed to a “hype about the question of [colonial] restitution”.² The Benin Bronzes have become emblematic for this hype and multiple national governments and museums in the Global North have returned collections of Benin Bronzes to the national government of Nigeria.³ The German national government as well officially transferred ownership of more than 1,100 Benin Bronzes from public German collections to Nigeria in 2022.⁴ The Benin Bronzes have become subject to countless studies and projects, resulting, for instance, in digital infrastructures, such as Digital Benin, which aims at making Benin Bronzes in museum collections in the Global North more accessible.⁵

In 2022, the US-based *Restitution Study Group* (RSG) criticised the restitution of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria due to the Bronzes’ entanglements with the transatlantic slave trade. The *Restitution Study Group* is a not-for-profit institute which advocates for reparations and restitution to descendants of enslaved Africans. The group published a call to action that Benin Bronzes located in the US should not be returned to Nigeria but should remain in the US.⁶ The group claims that the Bronzes were made of melted

¹ Zemanek-Münster 2018.

² Sarr/Savoy 2018; Sarr cited in Storm 2019.

³ Sandkühler/Epple/Zimmerer 2021, 12.

⁴ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2022.

⁵ Luther 2022.

⁶ Restitution Study Group 2022.



Figure 1.
*The Benin Bronze from
Rudolf Mosse's Collection
sold in 2018
(Kunstsammlung Rudolf
Mosse, Berlin, Rudolph
Lepke's auction house
(Catalogue nr. 2075, board
nr. 21), 29 & 30/05/1934,
Berlin).*

down manillas, brass bracelets introduced as a form of currency by Portuguese traders, which were also used to pay slave traders in, for instance, Lagos.

This article connects these three violent contexts of the Holocaust, colonialism and slavery by exploring the Benin Bronze that was auctioned in Germany in 2018 as a material interrelation of structural violence. It does so by connecting the Bronze to recent developments in the field of transitional justice towards more relational approaches that highlight the interconnections between different contexts of violence. The goal is to reflect on the potential of material culture approaches for transitional justice, as well as contributing to a more differentiated understanding of restitution as a concept that in itself is influenced by notions of selection and meaning-making.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, RESTITUTION AND THE HISTORIKERSTREIT

2.0

Restitution is part of the larger field of transitional justice. The study terrain of transitional justice, “the hegemonic, or dominant discourse of our time for redressing historical injustice”, explores the long-term effects of mass violence as well as the specific judicial and non-judicial processes that have been developed to confront these episodes of mass violence, such as international criminal tribunals, reparations, restitution, truth commissions, commemorations or public apologies.⁷ The practice of transitional

⁷ Immler 2018, 2, 150; Teitel 2003, 69.

justice as seeking to deal with past violence can be traced back to Antiquity and as J. Elster rightly states “democratic transitional justice is almost as old as democracy itself.”⁸ Transitional justice as a study field, however, mainly developed in the direct aftermath of the Second World War and in the 1980s and 1990s, when the transition of societies such as South Africa and Argentina from apartheid states and dictatorships to democracies called for new instruments and mechanisms to facilitate and guide a societal transition.⁹

While transitional justice developed from context-specific approaches that differentiated between different contexts of violence and how to respond to them, recent approaches call for a more relational understanding of transitional justice. As K. Neumann and J. Thompson have stated, the field of transitional justice is moving out of its own compartmentalisation with an increase of interdisciplinary and cross-contextual approaches to dealing with violent pasts in the present.¹⁰ More relational approaches to transitional justice foreground various aspects: ‘Holistic approaches’ focus on the relation between specific mechanisms of transitional justices and broader notions of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.¹¹ ‘Dialogical approaches’ focus on the social dimension of justice, on the dialogues between victims, perpetrators, individuals and their families, communities and institutions.¹² ‘Historical approaches’ underline continuities and similarities between different violence contexts. For instance, they reflect on the Holocaust as a continuation and culmination of colonial violence, or on transatlantic slavery as inherent to colonial socio-economic exploitation which endures into the present.¹³ Overall, as N. Immler illustrates, relational approaches to transitional justice are about recognising the deeply entrenched and systemic patterns of injustice inherent to society at large.¹⁴

That relating different contexts of mass violence to one another is far from uncontested became evident in a particularly public way in the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0* in Germany. Calling back to the first *Historikerstreit*—an open dispute among German historians determining the singularity of the Holocaust in contrast to Stalinism in the 1980s—the *Historikerstreit 2.0* evolved around the question whether the Holocaust may or may not be compared

8 Elster 2004, 3–4; Yusuf 2022, 8.

9 Bevernage 2012, 6–11; Leebaw 2009, 266–270; Teitel 2003, 70.

10 Neumann/Thompson 2015, 10.

11 Boraie 2006; Laplante 2018.

12 Barkan 2000; Immler 2020.

13 Evans/Wilkins 2019; Zimmerer 2

14 Immler 2022, 6.

to colonial violence.¹⁵ The discussion began in early 2020 when German politician Lorenz Deutsch and German commissioner against antisemitism Felix Klein rejected the invitation of Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe as keynote speaker to the *Ruhrtriennale* cultural festival.¹⁶ A major figure in postcolonial theory, Mbembe has published extensively on African history and politics, whereby he focuses on questions of power, subjectivity and what he has called the “postcolony” in contemporary Africa.¹⁷ In this context, he has also compared the state of Israel to the apartheid system in South Africa.¹⁸ This interconnection of apartheid and the state of Israel prompted Deutsch and Klein in 2020 to accuse Mbembe of “antisemitic Israel-critique, Holocaust relativisation, and extremist disinformation.”¹⁹ Following this, numerous historians and memory scholars, including J. Habermas, J. Zimmerer, M. Rothberg, A. Assmann, and D. Moses entered the public debate.²⁰ Essentially, the debate developed between opposing understandings of the Holocaust as a unique *sui generis* event on one side, and the continuation and culmination of colonial violence on the other.

Restitution occupies a central place within these discussions on the comparability of the Holocaust and colonial violence, as illustrated by several publications and conferences.²¹ Furthermore, German policymakers apparently feel a need to underline that a rise of colonial restitution does not contest the singularity of the Holocaust. For instance, on the opening of the controversial ethnographic museum *Humboldt Forum* in 2021, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasised a German responsibility towards colonial restitution as a means to enter into dialogue about colonial violence.²² Yet, shortly after he added that “the memory of the civilizational rupture of the Shoah is and remains unique in our national memory. It is part of our identity.”²³ This connection between colonial collections and the Shoah’s uniqueness characterises the close entanglements of restitution and memory in contexts of the Nazi and colonial past that have developed in Germany over the past decades.

In short, restitution is tightly connected to broader frameworks

15 Frei 2001, 8; Rothberg 2022, 1317.

16 Deutsch 2020; Sznajder 2022, 9–13

17 Mbembe 2001.

18 Mbembe 2015, vii–viii; Mbembe 2016, 23–26.

19 Deutsch 2020; Deutschlandfunk 2020.

20 Habermas 2021; Zimmerer/Rothberg 2021; Assmann 2021; Moses 2021.

21 See for example Marengo 2022 and Sandkühler/Epple/Zimmerer 2022.

22 Der Bundespräsident 2021, 6–7.

23 Ibid., 8.

of transitional justice, memory and meaning-making, whereby questions of interrelations and cross-references between different contexts of (historical) injustice become more and more pressing. This article intends to build on these growing interrelations by reflecting on the potential of a more multilayered understanding of material objects that can serve to make tangible some of the interrelations that transitional justice is grappling with.

ONE OBJECT, THREE CONTEXTS OF VIOLENCE

The Benin Bronze auctioned off in 2018 was created in the mid-19th century in the Kingdom of Benin and is made mostly of brass. As mentioned above, the *Restitution Study Group* argues that the materials used for the creation of the Benin Bronzes stem from the transatlantic slave trade. The transatlantic slave trade entailed the capture, sale, and purchase of what is estimated to have been 12.5 million enslaved people from the African continent across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas between the 16th and the 19th century.²⁴ The tremendous violence of the slave trade as well as its contribution to deeply entrenched socio-economic injustices today cannot be overstated.²⁵

In rising scholarship on the backgrounds and effects of the slave trade, A. Ryder, F. Fuglestad and others have also investigated the involvement of African slave traders and in particular the involvement of the Kingdom of Benin.²⁶ Ryder describes how the Kingdom of Benin traded enslaved people for brass manillas (the price for an enslaved man in the early 16th century was 57 manillas).²⁷ Indeed, a recent geochemical analysis into the materials used for the Benin Bronzes concluded that manillas served as the principal metal source for the making of the Bronzes.²⁸ However, as both A. Ryder and F. Fuglestad showcase, the Kingdom of Benin played more of a minor role in slave trade and the sale of male (although not female) enslaved people was even prohibited in the Kingdom between the mid-16th and 18th century.²⁹ Even after the ban was lifted, the Kingdom's involvement remained comparatively small and instead a limited trade of commodities was carried out.³⁰

The *Restitution Study Group* brings forward the involvement of the Kingdom of Benin in transatlantic slave trade as an argument as to why Benin Bronzes located in the US should stay in the US,

24 Fuglestad 2018, 1.

25 Evans/Wilkins 2019, 141.

26 Ryder 1969; Fuglestad 2018.

27 Ryder 1969, 40.

28 Skowronek et al. 2023, 12.

29 Fuglestad 2018, 10, 15.

30 Ryder 1969, 45, 198; Fuglestad 2018, 91–92.



Figure 2.
Portuguese Brass Manilla
(*Museu da Abolição, Recife,*
inv. nr. 2.016.276).

where they would be accessible to descendants of enslaved people.³¹ When the *Smithsonian Institution* in Washington D.C. announced in October 2022 the intention to transfer ownership of 29 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, the *Restitution Study Group* sued the museum to prevent the return. Even though the case was dismissed in July 2023 due to a lack of subject-matter, the group continues to fight for access to the Benin Bronzes, and in May 2024 submitted a new petition to the US Supreme Court.³² The *Restitution Study Group's* claims are contested and scholars such as J. Zimmerer warn against playing off (descendants of) victims of slavery and colonialism against each other.³³ Nevertheless, the group's claims evidently show both the urgency for slavery reparations and the everlasting entanglements between colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

The Benin Bronzes are materialisations of these entanglements. Created as royal court objects, representing the wealth, power and history of the Benin Kingdom, they are of the highest historical and cultural importance.³⁴ In 1897, British forces violently sacked Benin City and subjugated the Kingdom of Benin to colonial rule.³⁵ They destroyed the city and its surroundings, killed countless Edo people and looted 3,000–5,000 cultural objects.³⁶ As F. Sarr and B. Savoy describe, colonial loot was at the very heart of the colonial enterprise.³⁷ Large-scale looting of cultural objects often aimed at the undermining of collective identities, for instance during the destruction of the palace in Lombok by Dutch troops in 1894 or the suppression of the Maji Maji Rebellion in today's Tanzania by German troops from 1905–1907. Many of these cultural objects held ancestral, spiritual, religious, and political significance. To quote A.-M. M'Bow "the peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory that would doubtless

³¹ Restitution Study Group 2022.

³² Osazuwa 2024; Restitution Study Group 2024.

³³ Zimmerer cited in zur Lage 2023.

³⁴ Pugh 2022, 147.

³⁵ Osadolor 2021, 208.

³⁶ Hicks 2021, 111, 113, 137.

³⁷ Sarr/Savoy 2018, 13.

have helped them to greater self-knowledge [...]”.³⁸ After their loot, many of these cultural objects became objects on high demand on the international art market. The Benin Bronzes specifically were highly prized, equated to the Greek Parthenon Marbles, and were bought by collectors all over the world.³⁹ Because of their comparatively well-documented looting history, the Benin Bronzes make a special case of colonial looting, and should, as O. B. Osadolor argues, be seen as a collective category of colonial-looted objects rather than being dealt with on individual merit.⁴⁰

Like thousands of other Benin Bronzes, the Bronze that was auctioned off in 2018 made its way to Europe where it was bought at an unknown point in time by Rudolf Mosse, a Berlin-based German-Jewish publisher. In the 1880s, Mosse had started to amass a collection of fine and applied art, antiquities and ethnographic objects. In 1912, art historian M. Osborn praised Mosse’s collection as one of the “greatest and richest collections of modern art” of its time.⁴¹ Rudolf Mosse died in 1920. Consequently, his art collection, along with his other properties, was inherited by his son-in-law Hans Lachmann-Mosse (1885–1944). It remained in his possession until May 1934, when the collection, including the Benin Bronze, was seized and sold by the German National Socialist government in Berlin.⁴² Subsequently, Lachmann-Mosse managed to emigrate to the US. The forced sale was part of an extensive looting campaign that formed an integral part of National Socialist ideology to glorify German cultural heritage and dehumanise marginalised groups.⁴³ Before and during the war, the National Socialist government seized an estimated three million works of art.⁴⁴ Looting in this context aimed at destroying not only individual identities and property but the complete cultural existence of Jewry in Europe.⁴⁵ As J. Kemperman and H. Piersma state “to rob someone of their belongings constitutes not only a material loss, but also a loss of social status, connectedness, security and identity, and in a sense the partial loss of self.”⁴⁶

After the Second World War, the Bronze was in a private collection before the Berlin art dealer family Bassenge bought it in

38 M’Bow 1978, 4.

39 Osadolor 2021, 213; Savoy 2022, 19; Thebele 2018, 9.

40 Osadolor 2021, 218.

41 Osborn 1912, 282.

42 Pucks 2015, 47.

43 Lubina 2009, 30, 70.

44 Ibid., 30.

45 Bajohr 2007, 42–45.

46 Kemperman/Piersma 2022, 185; Niederhausen/Stutje 2024, 25.

1966. The Bronze stayed in the family's possession until the *Zemanek-Münster* auction in 2018 where, after a financial agreement with Mosse's heirs, it was offered for €40,000–80,000.⁴⁷ The whereabouts of the piece today are unknown.⁴⁸

Hence, it becomes evident that the Benin Bronze that was auctioned off in 2018 is in the center of three highly complex and—although different—highly interrelated contexts of mass violence whose legacies endure into the present and future.

CHANGING MEANINGS OF MATERIAL OBJECTS

Much has been written on the changing meanings of material objects across time and space. While material objects were often perceived as “independent entities with defined boundaries”, from the 1980s on, scholars such as B. Latour or I. Kopytoff brought forward an understanding of material objects not as stable property but as engaging actors in social relations.⁴⁹ By decentring human agents from social relations and memories, mnemonic agency is ascribed to material objects as well.⁵⁰ Instead of attributing material objects one fixed meaning, their changing meaning in changing contexts is highlighted.⁵¹ Consequently, I. Gaskell and S. A. Carter argue that “properly interpreted, any material culture can be a source of information about the past”.⁵² When material objects can incorporate changing meanings based on social interactions with humans, it follows that material objects can also uncover present narratives human agents construct around those objects. Therefore, material objects do not only offer information about the past but about their present contexts as well. This insight of material objects as narrators of different pasts and presents is the core of the methodological approach of object biographies.⁵³ First introduced by I. Kopytoff in 1986 and further developed by for instance C. Humphries and A. C. T. Smith, object biographies are based on the idea that not only humans, but objects can have lives that reveal their entanglements with people and other objects over time. Thereby, object biographies provide “a strategy to map the connections and transitions that occur over the life-course of an object, which can, in turn, unravel a changing web of organizational relations.”⁵⁴ Central hereby stands the

⁴⁷ Zemanek-Münster 2018; Barlovic 2018.

⁴⁸ Zemanek-Münster 2018.

⁴⁹ Humphries/Smith 2014, 482.

⁵⁰ Steel 2013, 192.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gaskell/Carter 2020, 4.

⁵³ Kopytoff 1986, 64.

⁵⁴ Humphries/Smith 2014, 477.

realisation that material objects are not independent and static entities by themselves but that they are entrenched in (post-)social structures; thus, object and humans are entwined in constant processes of meaning-making.⁵⁵

Recently, these notions of object lives that interact with different entities in different times and spaces have been foregrounded also in provenance research. Whereas provenance research often focuses on the history of an object's ownership, an emerging approach of social provenance research underlines a non-linear conceptualisation of objects' provenance that is influenced by and influences a variety of social, cultural and financial actors.⁵⁶ Drawing on the concept of "the social life of things" put forward by A. Appadurai, social provenance research seeks to move beyond viewing cultural objects solely in terms of their owners, their looting and restitution.⁵⁷ Instead, it focuses on the broader social entities and material cultures associated with these objects. While traditional provenance research typically emphasises ownership history, social provenance research aims to explore the social contexts and structures surrounding material objects that have shaped their historical paths beyond notions of ownership. Among others, a social provenance foregrounds class, gender and race in a field that often focuses on national heritage and private property.⁵⁸ Furthermore, social provenance research opens the possibility of multiple provenance histories that can co-exist and influence each other.

To give an example, the newly opened National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam exhibits a large number of personal objects that once belonged to victims of the Holocaust that were deported from the Netherlands. Among these objects are a leather toolbox and diamond cutting instruments that belonged to Elias Spitz (1874–1945), a diamond cutter from Amsterdam who was deported to Bergen-Belsen in 1944. In the context of the museum exhibition, the toolbox and the instruments are displayed as symbols for the persecution and murder of Jews, and to commemorate the life of Elias Spitz. In another context, it could also tell the story of the diamond trade in the Netherlands, of the development of diamond cutting tools, or of the labor exploitation in diamond mines in the Global South and its lasting ecological damages.

In essence, material objects may be associated with a certain person or group, but they can also be connected to other

55 *Ibid.*, 482, 489.

56 Mooren/Stutje/van Vree 2022, 16–17; Niederhausen/Stutje 2024, 27–28.

57 Appadurai 1986.

58 Niederhausen/Stutje 2024, 27–28.

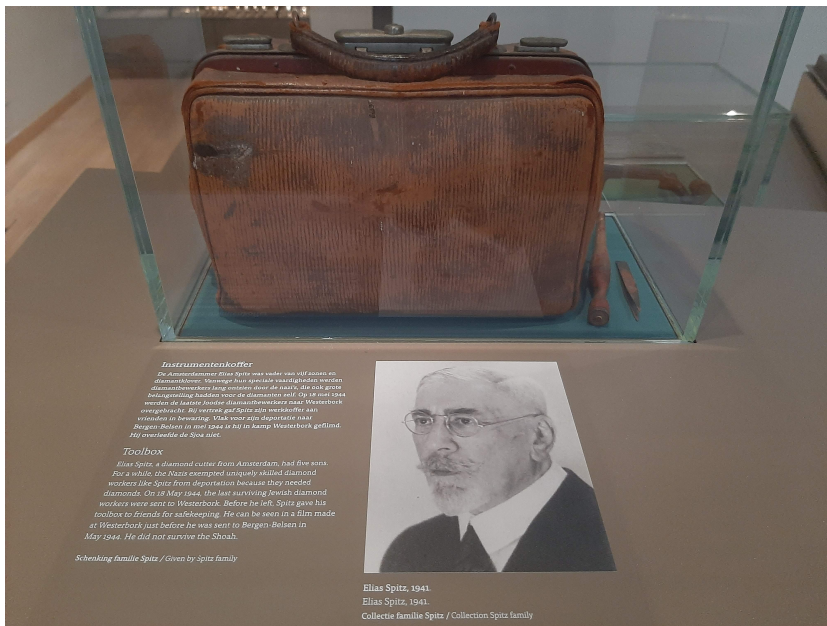


Image 3.
Toolbox and diamond cutting instruments of Elias Spitz (National Holocaust Museum Amsterdam), photograph by the author.

individuals, families or social categories, such as religious communities, professions, gender identities or political groups. For each of these groups, the same material object can hold different meanings.

RESTITUTION AND MEANING-MAKING

To conclude, what is the connection between all these different possible meanings of material objects and transitional justice and how does this, in turn, relate to the sale of a Benin Bronze from Rudolf Mosse’s collection in 2018?

As mentioned above, the field of transitional justice is experiencing an influx of relational approaches to dealing with past injustices in the present. Restitution is taking a central position in transitional justice as a tangible and material engagement with past looting and violence. Within restitution contexts, the material objects themselves are often defined by their moment of loot and return. However, as approaches such as object biographies or social provenance research illustrate, a narrow scope on ownership falls short of recognising the various social and cultural meanings that material objects take across time and space. In contrast to what an ownership-centered approach to material objects suggests, their meaning is far from static and defined; rather, material objects’ meanings change constantly depending on their context and interconnections with other agents. The Benin Bronze that was auctioned in 2018 is a prime example for these changing meanings; it is both a Nazi- and colonial-looted object and is part of ongoing efforts for the recognition and addressing of transatlantic slavery. Beyond these contexts of violence, the Bronze also holds significance as a

cultural object telling the history of a people, as a family heirloom, as a symbol for ongoing socio-economic injustices, and much more.

When engaging with these various layers of meaning that material objects incorporate, they materialise an interconnectedness between different contexts and agents. Therefore, they make tangible a more complex and relational approach towards the past—and past injustices—which is developing in the transitional justice field. Rather than seeing material objects mainly as objects of transitional justice mechanisms—such as restitution—, they can also become instruments or mediums of transitional justice by mapping structural violence within a confined material space.

Nevertheless, while these various layers of material objects might challenge an ownership-centered approach to provenance and restitution and even though it might be possible to acknowledge multiple contexts of violence, a material object can still only be physically present in one place. Thus, when dealing with material objects that materialise different contexts of loot and violence, the moment of restitution creates an insight into societal value-making at the time of the return. What is considered the one most important context of violence that needs to be addressed via restitution? In the case of the Benin Bronze from the auction in 2018, the auction house came to a financial agreement with the heirs of Rudolf Mosse and therefore confirmed the Bronze's legitimacy as a Nazi-looted object. Whereas the Bronze's colonial backgrounds were discussed in the media, a possible return to Nigeria was merely a point of discussion, and a connection of this particular Benin Bronze to the transatlantic slave trade was even less likely. However, the last six years have seen numerous developments that give reason to at least consider a different outcome today or in the future. Benin Bronzes have become symbols of large-scale colonial loot. Multiple restitutions of Benin Bronzes in recent years underline their public and political importance in engaging with colonial pasts and presents. Its rise in public attention raises the question of whether today the sale of a Benin Bronze could happen without at least causing a larger public discussion. The argument by the *Restitution Study Group* that Benin Bronzes in the US should not be returned to Nigeria because of the Kingdom of Benin's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade underline not only rising claims for slavery reparations, they also emphasise an important aspect of materiality of cultural objects. Whereas provenance research and restitution discourses often focus on the importance that objects gain by being part of specific collections or groups, the claims by the *Restitution Study Group* shift attention

towards questions of how material objects are made and where their materials come from. Further, in the light of rising questions regarding environmental destruction as part of colonial exploitation and its ongoing effects on human and more-than-human livelihoods today, it is possible that this question of materiality and the material's origins will receive more attention in restitution contexts as well.

Therefore, this article wants to stress that restitution is and remains a question of selection and prioritisation, foregrounding the question of 'Who decides?'. Restitution is far from self-evident: it is the result and catalyst of ongoing discussions around ethics, meaning-making and memory. Reflecting on various entangled histories of material objects can help to uncover and better understand these discussions and to imagine alternative outcomes based on different readings of the objects' histories. Therefore, the past that restitution aims to address is never only one past – it is but one of the many pasts that live in, around and beyond material objects.

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