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John Warne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2019. xvi + 368 pp. Maps, notes, index, gallery. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1501736353.

Response by John Warne Monroe, Iowa State University.

First off, I would like to thank Professor Apotsos for writing such a thoughtful and generous review. Because *Metropolitan Fetish* focuses not on a specific African object or object-type, but on the broader genesis of a historically-contingent way of seeing, the book covers a lot of ground, and it is gratifying to know that a colleague has found it worthwhile to map that territory for readers of H-France with such patience and care. It is even better to see that engagement with the text has inspired her to ask excellent questions—questions I of course will not be able to settle definitively here, but can at least respond to in a way that I hope clarifies how the argument I make in the book might be of help to scholars thinking about restitution.

Fifteen years ago, I began research on this topic because, as a social and cultural historian of France, I noticed a large and intriguing lacuna in the existing scholarly literatures on historical African art and on the Western reception of so-called primitive art more broadly. By the early 2000s, two conflicting approaches to these subjects had grown especially entrenched: what for the purposes of my argument here I will call the celebratory and the critical.[1] From my disciplinary perch, it seemed clear to me that while both of these had considerable rhetorical and argumentative force, neither took full account of the complex historical reality of the colonizing nation-state as seen from the metropole—an understandable oversight, given their geographical focus on Africa and their disciplinary roots in art history and anthropology, both of which frame their objects of study in ways very different from those familiar to social and cultural historians.

Metropolitan Fetish, I decided, would start to fill this gap by adopting the vision of a “transnational France” developed by practitioners of the new French colonial history, who have ranged freely across the domains of political, social, and cultural history in productively innovative ways.[2] Crucially, these scholars have demonstrated the interpretive power of an approach that foregrounds ambivalence. The example of their nuanced attention to paradox and contradiction opened a new path for me: rather than selecting celebration or criticism and following the ensuing argumentative script in my analysis of the French reception of African art, I made the ongoing, stubborn coexistence of those two approaches the phenomenon to be understood historically. As I endeavored to show, that stubborn coexistence tellingly recapitulated a broader tension between universalism and particularism characteristic of the French colonial situation after World War I. To make this argument effectively, I had to cast a wide evidentiary net, looking not only at modernist artists, critics, dealers, and collectors, but also at a whole array of historical

actors normally considered beyond the pale in studies of artistic modernism before 1940: politicians, academics, colonial bureaucrats, conservative pundits, and so on. Perhaps recognizing the pervasive tension entailed by the surprisingly durable idea of primitive art in these diverse yet imbricated fields, and viewing it in relation to the modern nation-state, could also prove helpful in working through the various aporias around the question of object restitution that my conclusion left unresolved, and that Apotsos so astutely points out in the closing paragraph of her review.

To explain how, I should start by fleshing out my terms more fully. The celebratory approach, in its scholarly form, is familiar from many well-conceived and informative exhibition catalogues devoted to the historical arts of various African ethnic groups or regions published in English and French since the early 1960s.^[3] These texts blend essays based on ethnographic fieldwork and historical-archival research with an emphasis on the cross-cultural aesthetic appeal of the objects on show. Here, the capacity of select African objects to seem intensely beautiful to non-African observers becomes a means of crossing cultural boundaries, counteracting racism with mutual understanding, and validating the rich heritage of historically marginalized communities. The critical approach, as formulated in the work of anthropologists and critical theorists beginning in the mid-1980s, treats the temptation to aestheticize with much greater suspicion.^[4] In practice, exponents of this approach contend, the very act of selecting an object for appreciation as “art” is a power-play based on a logic that is both culturally-contingent and fundamentally discriminatory. For an outside gatekeeper to unilaterally impose such a logic on the material culture of a given ethnic group or region is therefore to engage in a type of invidious distinction-drawing that is at best neo-colonial, and at worst perilously close to outright racism.

Intellectually, the critical approach is extraordinarily powerful. Its power, however, has not rendered the celebratory approach obsolete. This is obviously true in the non-academic discourse of what the market now calls tribal art, where financial incentives keep (very) old ways alive. More tellingly, though, it is also true in the museum world. Even as curators grow more self-aware in their approaches, they retain a strong, and in my view laudable, desire to aestheticize and tell affirmative stories about select historical African objects as a means of combatting racism and enlarging their viewing public’s understanding of the human condition. For an art museum visitor versed in the codes of the Western aesthetic disposition, there is also the simple fact that under conventional gallery display conditions these objects retain their power to provoke a strong beauty response. This, then, is what I mean by “stubborn coexistence”: despite all the devastating insights brought to bear in the critical literature, the impulse to aestheticize persists for reasons both cultural-political and auratic. What is playing out here, I would suggest, is a specific instance of a broader structural contradiction—one between a historical reality profoundly shaped by the unequal exercise of state power and an ahistorical conception of ideal human universality imagined as a way of overcoming that reality.^[5]

The questions Apotsos poses at the conclusion of her review make me think of how this double-bind could also be seen to play out in the debate over restitution. Because of the way in which heritage and museums have come to be tied to the idea and structure of the nation-state, restitution implicates a similar set of complex choices about which aspects of historical reality to emphasize and which to obscure. On one hand, it entails an acknowledgement of exactly the traumatic historical reality that exponents of the critical approach seek to expose in their analyses. The now-famous 2018 report written by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, for example, frankly recognizes the various ways in which the coercive power dynamics of colonial

domination have compromised French acquisitions of African objects, and uses that recognition to make the case for a far-reaching effort to return those objects to their places of origin in the service of “une démarche plus générale de la libération de la parole mémorielle” (or “an emancipation of memory,” in the pithier official English translation).^[6] On the other hand, however, there is the question of what, exactly, “returning” will mean in practice: who will have the power to make restitution claims capable of being heard and recognized as valid? While Sarr and Savoy allow the theoretical possibility of individual communities asking for objects back for religious or other purposes, thus far it has been more common for national museums to make those requests, with an eye to incorporating the objects into their collections. In practice, in other words, restitution has been above all a matter of nation-states and of institutions that serve the “museum-function” for those states. For a multitude of potential reasons—economic inequality, bureaucratic power structures, governmental hostility to rights-claims by minorities, unequal access to expertise in international law and to the forums where legal restitution claims can be made—one can suppose that this situation will remain the norm going forward.

Restitution, then, will very likely continue to be far more a matter of nation-states than of individual communities within those states. As such, it is inevitably implicated in the geopolitical reconfiguration that accompanied decolonization after World War II—a process that Frederick Cooper has usefully framed as a transition from an old global order of empires to a new one of independent nation-states that are nominally sovereign, but also highly unequal in relative development and capacity to exert global influence.^[7] Apotsos is right to ask whether this new order is not simply “a new set of clothes” for what used to be called empire. There are unmistakable homologies and continuities that have to be acknowledged. Restitution, viewed from this perspective, does indeed take on an ambivalent quality. Thanks to the institutional and cultural-political realities of the nation-state, the “emancipation of memory” restitution promises in theory can seem in practice to be more like a domestication of memory—one that reifies and legitimates externally imposed state power. Seen from this perspective, returning plundered objects to strategically-chosen national institutions in former colonies looks anything but counter-hegemonic.

Does this ambivalent reality mean that restitution should not occur, or should only be undertaken if the receiving community is not a state actor? In my opinion, no. I support the project of restitution as currently construed. It is, however, very important to recognize that this is a position taken out of historical pragmatism. The nation-state form, for better or worse, is the political framework within which we are currently constrained to operate. The institution of the museum in recipient nation-states, in turn, has emerged as part of this framework, and indeed is often also a structure born of colonization: the national museums of Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal, for example, all have roots in the late-colonial Institut Français d’Afrique Noire, even though they have subsequently grown in very different directions. Given these political realities, allowing various nation-states in former colonies to possess and display the heritage objects their national museums consider to be most significant is a useful symbolic gesture in the face of the pervasive *de facto* inequality between global north and south that European colonization has left behind.

Of course, Apotsos is right to point out that restitution is a symbolic gesture, “a type of soft power play” that, like the annual gift of a Christmas goose from the local lord, could be seen to reinforce rather than diminish an underlying structure of inequality. In my view, it is therefore crucial not to assume that a single act of reparation could be sufficient to discharge the entire

moral debt European states owe to their former colonies. That debt is, in fact, un-repayable. Sending plundered objects back to their places of origin should be construed as an acknowledgement of that reality: part of the ongoing work of atonement rather than a way of settling accounts.

It is also true that after their return, restituted objects will inevitably mean something very different from what they meant before their expropriation. In part, that is because the program of celebratory aestheticization undertaken by Western museums has given them a new kind of significance figured as universal. Indeed, that added allure is an important reason why commentators, both African and non-African, note the potential of these objects to become international tourist attractions for the receiving countries. There is another key factor at work as well, however, which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere: the cultural process of nation-making inevitably requires the construction of an understanding of history suited to that purpose.[8] Among other things, this construction can involve inventing traditions, refiguring old practices for new contexts, omitting inconvenient past realities, or (preferably) acknowledging those realities in ways that condemn them while articulating unifying ideals. In this sense, restitution is only the beginning of a new process of historical meaning-making, which will bring with it a new set of contradictions.

In the conclusion of *Metropolitan Fetish*, I aimed less for definitive statement than for poetic evocation, with the room such evocation leaves for ambivalence. My reason for doing so had mostly to do with space. An effective analysis of the complex historical and political circumstances behind the Republic of Benin's restitution claims—and restitution claims more broadly—calls for a book of its own, one that gives far more attention than I do to the crucial period after 1940. That said, Apotsos' astute questions have made it clear that I ought to have made my metaphor more precise: should the objects speak again, it is important to bear in mind that they will do so in a language very different from the one they used before General Dodds and his invading army sent them to France.

NOTES

[1] In order to keep my argument focused on the issue at hand, I am leaving out a third significant approach: the Western art-historical, focused on works of European and American art and the artists who made them. Books and articles addressing the reception of primitive art using this approach have also been highly attuned to the complex ways in which the fact of empire influenced metropolitan perceptions. The disciplinary rules of engagement that shape their arguments, however, have tended to lead them to treat socio-political context as background to a foreground dominated by specific artworks, artists, and figures in the modernist art world. My hope is that *Metropolitan Fetish*, by looking at the subject from a different angle, will serve scholars contributing to this literature as a useful complement to their work.

[2] I borrow the term "transnational France" from Tyler Stovall's useful survey text, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2015). For additional examples of this approach that helped me frame the argument developed in *Metropolitan Fetish*, see Brett A. Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology,*

and Empire in France, 1850-1950 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Daniel J. Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[3] Robert Farris Thompson is perhaps the archetypal practitioner of this approach. For examples, see *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Catherine Coryton White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); and *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981).

[4] For classic examples of this approach, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," in *October* 34 (Autumn, 1985): 45-70; and Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[5] Étienne Balibar describes this as the "insurrectional" potential of universality as conceived in Enlightenment terms, when it is articulated in the legal framework of a nation-state. See Balibar, "Ambiguous Universality," in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 7/1 (Spring 1995): 48-74.

[6] Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle* (Paris: Ministère de la culture, 2018), 1; *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, translated by Drew S. Burk (Paris: Ministère de la culture, 2018), p. 1.

[7] Frederick Cooper, "States, Empires, and Political Imagination," in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 153-203.

[8] John Warne Monroe, "First Word: Restitution and the Logic of the Postcolonial Nation-State," in *African Arts* 52/3 (Autumn, 2019): 6-8.

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