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Mario Laarmann, Clément Ndé Fongang, Carla Seeman, and Laura Vordermayer, eds., *Reparation, Restitution, and the Politics of Memory / Réparation, restitutions et les politiques de la mémoire*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023, ix + 300 pp. Notes, references, illustrations, and index. \$126.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9783110799507. \$0.00 U.S. (eb). ISGN 9783110799514.

Review by Henrietta Lidchi, Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.

*Reparation, Restitution, and the Politics of Memory* is a bilingual (French-English), multi-authored, edited collection of essays in five parts that pivots around the fertile debate in internationally-connected European circles regarding questions of civil society and justice, which it processes through the capacious concept of repair. In the introduction, the editors map out the scope for the volume. Their jumping off point is the work of Berlin-based Algerian French multi-disciplinary artist and thinker Kader Attia's shown at the Berlin Biennale in 2022: "Attia's notion of repair is neither an exception nor a coincidence, but rather...a consequence of contemporary political and cultural debates" (p. 2). The editors, by consciously choosing Attia as a launch pad, accord voice and presence to his restlessly smart thinking and creative ability, which functions as a particularly eloquent distillation of the swirl and axis points of European debates and concerns. Attia embodies a fertile crossover. His counter-curatorial thinking [1] combines critical theory and artistic practice, a disposition that the volume aims to evoke in the interlacing of creative writing with that which sits more firmly within academic formats. In consequence, Attia's work is relatively evenly distributed throughout, and this reflects the giddy excitement elicited by his decolonial thinking across the fields of art, literature, and museums. Attia's *The Objects Interlacing* (2020) is extracted in Part II and reproduces the voices of those luminaries who lead European debate and to whom this volume is in many ways indebted. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Achille Mbembe, Felwine Sarr, and Bénédicte Savoy percolate European debate at all levels and correspondingly in this book. They are at the forefront of the discussion about the ethics of retention and the potentialities of relations that emerge from discussing African cultural patrimony: why it came to be continuously held by European institutions, and how it can be returned. Their words are part of Attia's piece, but they are cited by others. They join Aimé Césaire, Paul Gilroy, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Donna Haraway, Pierre Nora, Michael Rothberg, Laura Ann Stoler, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot as well as Assia Djebar and Chinua Achebe. All belong to the roster of those influencing the thinking, and informing the writing, in this collection.

The conventional definition of repair signifies the need to treat, mend, fix, and put right. Here repair draws from a broad literature. In its capaciousness, repair stands for reparation, as a material and symbolic gesture and requirement that symbolizes attention to, and reckoning with,

colonial histories, as well as the engine in conversations about restitution and the basis for the urgent invitation to address resource extraction and ecological collapse. As the editors address in the introduction, European nations continue to process colonial culpability through a lens bestowed by the Second World War. Debates and policies about restitution and return remain indebted to, and guided by, the concessions made for Nazi-era spoliated material (see also Rausch's contribution). This continues to inform perceptions of what in Germany is known as *Wiedergutmachung* (making good again, redress or reparation) or what I heard of in the Netherlands during this period as *Schoon schip maken* (to put order into past actions, to let go and move forward). That these two expressions are akin, rather than the same, reflects the kind of differences present across Europe, as a legacy of colonial history and current composition of civil society, as well as different senses of implicatedness.<sup>[2]</sup> All of this determines what processes are put in train to repair. Rausch's essay is a detailed reading of how Germany came to name the crimes against the OvaHerero and Nama in the early twentieth century through the concept of genocide and how this shifted the politics of national memory during a period of fierce discussion of colonial collections. This is equally addressed by Sene when considering literary forms of reparation. Making good is a utopian ideal and at times, possibly, a self-serving rhetoric. It may never fully address the needs or desires of those carrying historic wounds, but the practice of seeking to do so may ultimately be crucial to playing a role in a more "cosmo-optimistic" future <sup>[3]</sup> or a necessity to ensure the productive possibilities of co-existence or relational ethics.<sup>[4]</sup> That such wounds may remain open, fertile, and potentially beyond repair we witness again and again, most recently as the world wrestles with the implications of, and the conflicted viewpoints and state policies on, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and thus the legacies of the Balfour Declaration and the Second World War. Such skepticism is not ultimately the perspective of this volume, although the questions of disrepair, disappearance, refusal, and rupture are present in different essays throughout the volume on African cultural heritage wherever located. Its intellectual and literary trajectory is an argument in favor of polyvocality, for contestation, for openness, for addressing historical lacunae and investing in ethico-aesthetic practices.

The volume is divided into five, not entirely equal, parts, each a cogitation on the capacity of repair as an idea or an invitation, be it restitution (part one), museums and entanglements (part two), memory (part three), the role of literature (part four), or ecology (part five). The coherence of the volume lies in the mutual intelligibility between the concepts and registers deployed by the authors, their scholarly and literary concerns, and their connectedness. The chapters link France, Germany, and Italy with Somalia, Ethiopia, Senegal, Cameroon, Namibia, and Algeria (and in the case of Grimmer, Argentina) in personal and institutional terms. These are circuits of indebtedness and connectedness.

The fulcrum of part one is Italian-Somalian writer Igiaba Scego's short story *L'Icona*. Translated into French from the original Italian, this cogitation on colonialism, post-colonial political negotiations and ultimately repair is especially rich and deserving of the attention of the chapter that follows (Messling and Solte-Gresser). Igiaba conjures the meetings between Aldo Moro and Haile Selassie (1960s and 1970s) to negotiate the return of the Obelisk of Axum through Selassie's inner thoughts and her own present access to historical events: the circumnavigation of the Obelisk during Selassie's visit to Rome, his and Moro's violent and premature deaths. As Messling and Solte-Gresser highlight, this speculative microhistory speaks to wider concerns, allowing a symbolic and fictional explanation of the lacunae and those traces that exist in archives in a manner that lingers in the mind. The story concludes with the reparative gesture, the return of the painted icon (not the Obelisk), which seems to speak to a wider truth evident in recent

years, namely the return of family heirlooms or souvenirs to former colonized nations as private acts. The immediacy and sentiment underlying these personal gestures contrast with the cumbersome and lengthy processes that are part of state-to-state diplomacy which may, or may not, result in return.[5] In a manner that is recalled later in the volume, this is the power of the instance, or anecdote, to encapsulate a wider truth, or to represent complexity of the relations that questions of repair draw together (see Tinius and Pesarini's contribution). Igiaba's essay links, like Attia's, with parts two and three, where the chapters alight on more conventional museological topics, the role of public sculpture (Oster), the recovery of memory and materialization (Grimmer), and museums as an indicator of the post-colonial relations between Cameroon and European countries (Fongang).

One of the book's key aims is that of translation: quite literally, to render accessible work published in German or Italian through French and English, and to attend to national specifics (Rausch, Fongang, Grimmer). This is an important service to the field, given the way in which European intellectual debate on African cultural heritage operates in a multi-directional manner. It ensures this work is accessible to a wider pool of readers and scholars. In dividing up the book into parts there is seemingly another intention: to announce each part with a work of creative writing (with the exception of part three), maybe as a punctuation that is then followed by scholarly essays that might particularly respond (as in part one) or take a lead from this voice.

In the way that Attia's work is the touchstone of the introduction, the work of Igiaba Scego (part one), Kader Attia (part two), hn. lyonga (part four), and Olivier Remaud (part five) launch other parts of the volume. The literary and creative interventions in the volume are a key element of its strength and the source of energy that drives it. The downside is that it can mean that at times moving from one chapter to another, one part to another, there is an unevenness in tone, purpose, and eloquence. This does beg the question: is (was) evenness the goal? On balance this would seem to be antithetical to what is being attempted. Plurality and conjunction here, I believe, are key objectives, intervention another. The volume is unified, in the way that collage is unified. Coexisting realities, thoughts, and energies are framed and orchestrated, creating a dynamic tension, firing off associations, and potentially pivoting around a central question. If the aim is to speak to the absences in history and to speculate on the futurities of repair work, then the logic of construction of this volume answers this call. It is not a steady processing of a particular issue or a regular set of chapters, one following the other. Rather the volume itself feels like a form of storytelling, a type of making sense of a complex issue--repair--with many definitions. It is, in addition, published at a key moment, a historical juncture, when critical intent and artistic practice are preoccupied by ideas of repair and are mutually referential, a fact evidenced in the range of essays and voices this volume contains. If a collage, also a polaroid, a creative gesture and time-based exploration and expression of the ferment in this field, with the feeling of immediacy and possibility.

As a totality, the chapters convey the benefit of laying out the routes that spring from a concern about the need to repair, to map possibilities for future trajectories of connection, justice, and solidarity, thus thinking, acting, and writing. The idea of solidarity comes to the volume from Michael Rothberg, whose argument about multi-directional memory and implicatedness beyond discourses of perpetrators and victims seems newly raw. What emerges from the volume is the potential of literature. Storytelling here, not critique, has the upper hand as concerns the amplification of agency and the compelling examination of complexity. It uniquely has the potential to exemplify polyglot realities, to develop a grounded imagination as a means to

safeguard plurality and to re-actualize and confront the complex realities emerging from “les traces et les débris des cultures assassinés” (the postcolonial condition) (p. 212). This is not a scholarly mode of giving recognition or agency, but of showing, speculating, and expressing what the potentialities are and how they have been expressed in the past. The reclamation of an Afro-centric symbolic imagination as a mode of repair is the task of artists, while scholars work on the contested matter of return of material possessions. When Diop states “les pensées africaine et afro-diasporiques furent dès leurs naissance des réflexions sur soi et l’entre-soi. Ils sont dans ce sens des oeuvres inter et transculturelles,” he is arguing that the role of Afro-centric thinking is to point the way, to allow the potential to heal at a human level and for humanity overall (p. 212-213).

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## NOTES

[1] Mirjam Shatanawi, *Making and Unmaking Indonesian Islam. Legacies of Colonialism in Museums* (Amsterdam: Ipskamp Printing, 2022).

[2] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

[3] Sharon MacDonald, Henrietta Lidchi, Margareta van Oswald, “Introduction: The Burdens and Potentials of the Past—Engaging Anthropological Legacies toward Cosmo-optimistic Futures?,” *Museum Worlds* 5 (2017): 97-109.

[4] Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, Report commissioned by the President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron (Paris, Novembre 29, 2018). [[http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_fr.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_fr.pdf)]. This report was published in 2019 by Seuil.

[5] For examples of state returns, see Sarah van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015); Bénédicte Savoy, *Le Long Combat de L’Afrique pour son art. Histoire d’une défaite postcoloniale* (Paris: Seuil, 2023); Alicia Schrikker and Doreen van den Boogaart, eds., *Weapons of Persuasion: The Global Wanderings of Six Kandyen Objects* (Colombo: Tambapanni Academic Publishers, 2023).

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