

THE MOON SAYS – ARTISTS, DECOLONIZE THE FORMAT!
ADDRESSING REPATRIATION WITH GESTURE,
SOUND AND IMAGE

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Adéwolé Faladé,
Samson Ogiamien, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt,
Julian Reinisch, Bronwyn Lace

I ask for Oluyenyetuye bronze of Ife
I ask for Ogidigbonyingboyin mask of Benin
I ask for Dinkowawa stool of Ashanti
I ask for Togongorewa bust of Zimbabwe
I ask I ask I ask for the memory of Africa

The moon says it is in Bonn
The moon says it is in London
The moon says it is in Paris
The moon says it is in New York
The seasons say it is blowing in the wind
The hunchback cannot hide his burden
– Niyi Osundare

... I ask for Uhun Ila bronze head of Benin

The moon says it is in Vienna ...
– Samson Ogiamien

INTRODUCTION TO FORMATS WITH WHICH
TO DECOLONIZE KNOWLEDGE
Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

How is it possible to remain within the confines of the published book and at the same time try to move out into realms in which ancestral, familial knowledge is given a respectful space? For the spirits of the ocean did not rest between the covers of a book, and when those plants that became ancient stores of knowledge transferred that to humans, they did not do it by peeling their bark and writing abstract signs. Our language differences are part of the problem of the translation of knowledge into certain formats. How the wind and the sun and the moon related and carried bodies across the water had no use for ink and its small dry droplets on parchment. The stillness of mountains and the temporality of their shape-shifting has an eternity that makes the claims of longevity that the written word presides over seem ridiculous. The hustle and bustle of commercial publishing is an ant farm in comparison to the organization of birds that navigate the whole earth. The way humans hold onto little books, to recite some knowledge of others like a prayer, is desperate compared to the devotion of the sun to the earth that makes fertile every day anew. Every surface it touches is without need for a script or a sorcerer.

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll et al.: The Moon Says—Artists, Decolonize the Format! Address-sing Repatriation with Gesture, Sound and Image, in: Amalia Barboza, Mariel Rodriguez (Hrsg.), Umwege / Detour. Künstlerische Wissenspraktiken als dekoloniale Strategien / Artistic Knowledge Practices as Decolonial Strategies, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2025, S. 193-205, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1588.c22923>

Thus, the question of format seems key when we think of a change in the framing genre in which we create and experience knowledge, as format is what allows us also to be with knowledge in a certain way. Knowledge exists in all things but manifests itself in such different ways in the world. As humans from a particular culture, we tend to recreate knowledge in the formats that we know and have learned. But we also have the capacity to imagine at least the outer contours of those formats beyond our own. That is where the potential is also to liberate our imagination, which is another way of saying to decolonize knowledge, because colonization implies a territorialization and demarcation of ownership and control. Whereas these modes in themselves are contra to the creative interest in that which is beyond what we know. There is nothing time- or site-specific about a decolonization of knowledge, it is a constant necessity. We are endlessly liberating ourselves from the limitations of the self, it is thus an internal liberation struggle that should define the decolonization- and repatriation process. In turn we gathered to discuss our work and I invited Bronwyn Lace to moderate our discussion¹.

PART I

Bronwyn Lace, Adéwolé Faladé, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Julian Reinisch

BRONWYN LACE:

The series of performative films by yourselves as contemporary artists strongly communicates a collaborative journey, a common venture in which we are able to travel from Nigeria to Austria, from Namibia to Germany, from South Africa to Benin, from Tsenacommacah (modern-day Virginia, USA) to Germany, and whilst these varying geographic locations come with unique cultural, social and historical starting points we are delighted to discover that we are able to meet each other along the road. We find ourselves looking collectively, seeing another and the context of our histories and through performance a myriad of sounds, gestures, and materials become tools for layering, agitating, rescripting and expanding upon the people, places, landscapes, rituals and knowledge systems represented in the archive. With this in mind, please give us some context to your films.

ADÉWOLÉ FALADÉ:

The video *Again and a gain* depicts parts of an experimental work produced during a workshop in Johannesburg at the Center for the Less Good Idea, founded by the artists William Kentridge and Bronwyn Lace. We were working with archival material, silent movies and autochromes, provided by a French museum, the Musée Albert Kahn. These films were made by Father Francis Aupiais in 1930, in the Republic of Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), a former French colony. Father Aupiais was a Catholic missionary, working in French colonial missions in West Africa. However, he decided to collect, document, and present the cultural practices of the people there and show it to a French audience. He aimed to demonstrate that the populations France had colonized had an organized and structured life. The Musée Albert Kahn wishes to

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That is, works as part of the project www.repatriates.org. This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 101001407 – REPATRIATES).

→ Fig. 1:
Adéwolé Faladé and Thulani Chauke in the Pepper's Ghost at the Center of the Less Good Idea, workshop curated by Bronwyn Lace and Anna Seiderer, 2022. Photo: Zivanai Matangi.

→ Fig. 2:
Christine Barthe, Angelo Moustapha and Julien Faure-Conorton in the Pepper's Ghost at the Center of the Less Good Idea, workshop curated by Bronwyn Lace and Anna Seiderer, 2022. Photo: Zivanai Matangi.

→ Fig. 3:
Again and a gain, still of a video and performance by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Adéwolé Faladé with Pelagie Guaguidi, Thabo Rapoo, Angelo Moustapha and Vusi Mdoyi in the Pepper's Ghost at the Center of the Less Good Idea, workshop curated by Bronwyn Lace and Anna Seiderer, 2022. Photo: Zivanai Matangi.

give access to this material to the Republic of Benin. We came together and tried to experiment with this material. How can this history be understood? How do we give back sound and voice to something that may seem and feel still and dead? Because when one gives objects back, one does not just give back mere objects, one also gives back the memories and the stories that accompany those objects. (Fig. 1-4)





→ Fig. 4:
Again and a gain, still of a video and performance by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Adéwolé Faladé with Pelagie Guaguidi, Thabo Rapoo, Angelo Moustapha and Vusi Mdoyi in the *Pepper's Ghost at the Center of the Less Good Idea*, performance elaborated within a workshop curated by Bronwyn Lace and Anna Seiderer, 2022. Photo: Zivanai Matangi.

VERENA MELGAREJO WEINANDT:

The video *Connection in Darkness. Invoking Pocahunter (Part I)* shows Pocahunter, my alter ego which exists since 2015. She is a fictional hybrid based on the violent imaginaries of indigenous women in the German-speaking context.

One of them is based on the historical person Matoaka, whose story and role was used under the name of Pocahontas, a woman of the Powhatan people who was 10 years old when the British arrived in today's Virginia, USA. She was kidnapped, married to the British tobacco farmer John Rolfe and brought to England where she died at the age of twenty-two. Apart from this there is little information about her real story and the violence she had to endure. John Smith documented a story about her saving him from death which is very unlikely to be true. This invented story and a fictional version of Matoaka, her endless imaginations, sexualizations, representations are what have shaped and continue to shape the violent colonial stereotypes about indigenous women, including Disney's colonial pop cultural version of Pocahontas. In my version, Matoaka is resurrected as a warrior who has returned from the grave to seek revenge for the violence she had suffered. Her battle was taking place in peoples' dreams and imaginaries, where she would fight with colonial desires and projections about indigenous people.

There is a strong presence of colonial, racist and sexist imaginaries of indigenous people in the German-speaking context. As a child growing up in Berlin, Germany, in the 1990s I have experienced all these directly. The appearance of the Disney figure Pocahontas at that time reinforced stereotypes which were projected onto me in my everyday life. Germany has a past of self-identifying with indigenous stereotypes, mostly through fictional characters of indigenous people from today's US-territory. Enactments and identifications through the fictional character Winnetou from the children's book author Karl May (1842–1912) are currently highly debated in German society, but there is little critical contextualization and a lack of awareness concerning the role of those images as part of the construction of German culture. *Connection in Darkness* is the first of a cycle of short performance-videos which will include different moments of battle, self-expression and healing.

→ Fig. 5:
Uatunua, Khadija von Zinnenburg
Carroll, filmstill, 2023.

JULIAN REINISCH:

The film *Uatunua* describes the journey of a doll which ended up in a museum in Germany. It was collected by a missionary during the colonization of Namibia and was later given to the museum by the owner before he died. After years of being kept in darkness, stuck in a box, the doll finally saw the light of the day. Cynthia Schimming not only shed light on the doll's story, she also brought it back to its home in Namibia, together with twenty-two other belongings. There, these artefacts can finally rest and begin the process of healing and restitution.

KHADIJA VON ZINNENBURG CARROLL:

Indeed, and for me, the film *Uatunua* that we made together is about a wound, made at a moment in time in which I felt acutely aware of the wounds I inherited ancestrally and those that haunt and irritate the place I was in. In most of my works I find myself telling a story that resonates with much older and deeper stories for me and for others who have experienced generational violence, especially upon our bodies as women, in the course of a patriarchal grab for power. After we finished making the film, and I had no idea why I was making a film about rape, I remembered. This very act of recognition in turn healed something in the memories passed down through women in my family. The miniature index of childhood in a doll resonated with lost childhood, with innocence lost. (Fig. 5)



BRONWYN LACE:

What kind of knowledge and understanding do we activate through performance and film and the use of voice and body when addressing issues of repatriation? How did it feel to make your film?

KHADIJA VON ZINNENBURG CARROLL:

The limbs of the book that I began this text with when I was talking about format are the body that the book intrinsically lacks, the body in which we all store our memories and experiences, that can perform, and in formats like performance, can show its wounds.

Healing happens on-site, in the self, it doesn't happen in theory or discourse. It happens to be something embodied and through this embodiment it seeks a different relationship to its wounds. The wound can be a scar, a disfigurement, something

characteristic. I've had scars on my face my whole life. A normative, medicalized thought would encourage me repeatedly to try to erase these through surgery, but it struck me that I wanted to live my relationship to my scars, not to live with the desire to remove a part of myself, which is not to accept what is already there. In acceptance there is liberation, and in liberation there is a new relationship to the wound.

ADÉWOLÉ FALADÉ:

Knowledge is acquired and passed on through various channels; it takes different forms and shapes. Whether it is songs, poems, tales, or objects such as pieces of clothing, musical instruments, knowledge can be gleaned from the elements surrounding us. As we touch, hold, and use the artefacts, as we utter the words and re-tell the tales, not only do we interact with the items themselves, but we also connect with their inner essence, and undoubtedly a little with the people who conceived them. The transference is mediated somewhere in that space between us and the item, among the scattered bits and pieces we always carry along, the messages make their way through and reach us. In the instance of experimenting with the Musée Albert Kahn's archival material, the memory of the past has been captured in still and moving images, in black and white and silent images. It was captured and remained in that form. The memory has journeyed through the camera lens, from one side to the other. It traveled from one temporal space to another, ours. Performing with our voices, our bodies, inventing gestures, and sounds based on old ones may be construed as an attempt to repossess and live again that past, that memory. Building on silence, building on black and white, adding sound and color drags the past into the present, and strengthens its roots for the transference to the future.

VERENA MELGAREJO WEINANDT:

To create a video with my performance character Pocahunter allows me to activate a relation with my alter ego, to express a part of myself that otherwise has no expression in my everyday life. There is a strange sense of her realness and her being artificial at the same time. When I embody her, I get the sense that reality and fiction shift, as if she was fictional and real, as if her work and presence could communicate through her videos and through myself. I feel that this space allows me to unfold and express things that words and rational thinking cannot express fully. My body, voice and sound become actors themselves, able to express search rather than answers. They open up questions for me. This performance-video raises the question of where Pocahunter exists, what space she belongs to. The in-between space which she is located and moving into, is creating a realm, connecting me to different realities and existences to which I cannot talk to in reality. It relates to a time that has passed, to my own history, as well as to a history before I existed. It connects to the past as well as to the future, to which I hope my Pocahunter can relate and create change.

JULIAN REINISCH:

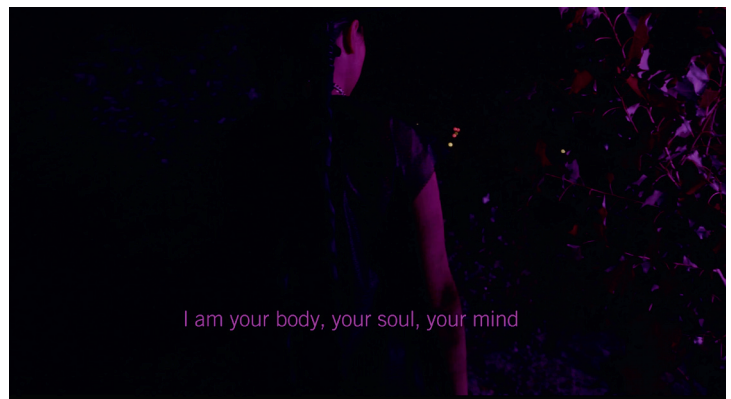
The sharing and preservation of knowledge can take many forms, much like our perception of reality is shaped by our five senses.

→ Fig. 6:
*Connection in Darkness. Invoking
Pocahunter (Part I)*, Verena Melgarejo
Weinandt, filmstill, 2022.

Film, which engages three of these senses, is a compelling medium, but does it truly bring us closer to reality? While it may offer one perspective, that of the filmmaker, it is no different than other mediums insofar as it is the author who shapes the narrative.

In the case of repatriation, where objects hold spiritual and cultural significance for their original communities, they offer a rare opportunity to access a past that is otherwise unchangeable. These objects represent more than mere artefacts, they are the last remaining carriers of a history that has largely gone unheard, particularly in the case of the Herero.

It is upon us to research and transcribe their stories and wisdom, as we strive to comprehend their unique perspective. In doing so, we not only honor their legacy, but also recognize the limitations of our own perceptions. While the author or filmmaker certainly plays a role, it is ultimately the viewer or audience who interprets and creates the reality that they experience. (Fig. 6)



BRONWYN LACE:

How does your work change how we see, address, express and understand the topic, material, involved actors etc.? What kind of different perspective and new ways of understanding is suggested by your artistic approaches or how did it change your own approach?

ADÉWOLÉ FALADÉ:

I engaged with historical material in such a profound manner that it was as if I were reaching for the keys to enter a lost world. Imaginatively inhabiting the life of people in the autochrome, forced me to go beyond what my eyes were seeing, call on other sensory elements, and contextualize the autochrome. I attempted to reminisce and imagine the sounds, the smells, the feeling of the warm breezes, and most importantly, discard any scientific preconceptions, guiding how to address and interpret archival images. Taking such a trip back not only in time, but also in space entails letting oneself switch perspectives, incorporating and blending what was and what is. The use of the camera bridges a spatial-temporal gap, providing an area where the bonding between space and time, between then and now, gives birth to endless inspiration, and countless artistic creations. Furthermore, engaging more freely with historical and archival elements both furthers our under-

standing and allows us to trace back the genesis of particular behaviors, social interactions, and religious beliefs.

VERENA MELGAREJO WEINANDT:

The work itself is a way to address issues that are not very present, issues which are marked by powerful and partly violent silence. To express and investigate this silence is what feels important to me because I realize that it is not a silence. Through the performances I acquire forms of knowledge that are made silent, for example, the connections between my investigation and the reaction and transformation of my body alongside this investigation. How does this, literally, transform and affect me? How does the story of Matoaka's violent history unfold and reappear in my experiences? We are made to learn that there is a hierarchical division and constructions of binaries between the mind and the body, rationality and emotions, the body as an insignificant holder of the capable brain. I can then speak into that silence, but it doesn't have to be a language, it doesn't have to be words, I can explore whatever sound or language may look and sound like. In this case, I create a dialogue with myself, I am whispering to myself. Adding sounds of fire, of my breath, a flute I created, are part of the whispering. It is a sound that is meant to travel between time and space, as Poca-hunter does, a sound that is internal and helps the audience feel the dialogue inside too. Sound is a very direct and much more unfiltered medium of communication than spoken word. So, through the first video, I invite the audience to explore and sense the silence and sound, the spiritual and interconnectedness, the darkness and the in-between space, the presence, and the lack of presence of people, besides every form of existence.

JULIAN REINISCH:

In the discourse of repatriation artefacts are often viewed as objects of the past that are being brought back to their country of origin as symbols of restitution. However, for those well-versed in this topic, there is an understanding that these objects often carry their own story of spirituality and meaning within their original community. In this film, the protagonist is one of these objects itself. Rather than offering a detached account of the pain caused by colonization, we use a first-person perspective to give it a closer and more personal touch. For instance, the "I" in the film, the doll, wore several petticoats like the Herero women to avoid being raped during the genocide.

The "I" in this film fulfills stolen goods with the gravitas they rightly deserve. These objects represent far more than just material possessions, they stand testament to stolen lives, cultures and time—irreparable losses that cannot be returned. This film underscores the importance of acknowledging the cultural and historical significance of these objects and the imperative for their repatriation.

BRONWYN LACE:

What kind of relief/healing/transformation (if at all) can happen here?

ADÉWOLÉ FALADÉ:

Depending on how one chooses to engage and interact with repatriation and the way it unfolds, it can either heal or alleviate. How-

ever, I believe that artistically addressing repatriation mainly entails partaking in an endeavor of renewal. As a matter of fact, nothing is static, things and people come and go, losses are replaced, absence leaves space for newcomers, nothing is immutable. Creation, invention, and new productions happen constantly. Novelty invariably stems from what exists, newness calls for a metamorphosis of what has been or perhaps rather, its absence. Returning objects, artefacts, images to the source populations means bringing together dispersed parts of knowledge, and identities, created by and for those specific populations. So much time has elapsed between the departure and the return that when an artist works with archival elements, these will constitute the main source of inspiration.

As artefacts which held major roles and purposes in source societies were abruptly removed, triggering loss and disturbances, their return can initiate a healing process. Reconnecting with such pieces and their auras, especially if they had been considered long lost and possibly gone forever, re-establishes an interrupted conversation and allows for new narratives, weaving old and new voices together, to occur.

KHADIJA VON ZINNENBURG CARROLL:

Sometimes the wound heals only in so far as we no longer experience the wounding in the same way. We learn that violence is constant, that the wound is not something we erase but something we can name and share. Thereby healing happens, but in the sense of a relationship to the wound that cannot heal. This is a process.

When I recently was in a conversation with Krista Pikkat, director of UNESCO's culture and emergencies sector, about repatriates, she asked me whether we found repatriation and contemporary art to be a way of healing? This would be a new finding that lacked research and could be valuable to areas in the world in which the UN, for instance, is asked to advise, Pikkat said.

VERENA MELGAREJO WEINANDT:

I lack words when I try to explain how exactly the use of my body as a language and as a channel works. Relief, healing, and transformation cannot be planned within a performance, they just happen. My own performances have created deep transformations and healing to me personally, but always in unexpected ways. Sometimes I understand immediately how they have transformed me and I can feel their effects, or it can take me years to even realize that I am fully aware of all the changes. Sometimes they are immediate because I am working in a collective setting, and we all experience the changes together. It can be quiet and feel like an experience. We happen to talk about how we have changed. But this is not something I plan, I only have intentions, I create aesthetics, communications, doors, languages which I hope can resonate and create relief. Creativity itself is a form of healing because it provides different perspectives to reflect on, individually and collectively.

JULIAN REINISCH:

There is always a chance for relief, healing, and transformation in how we deal with the past if the means are available and there is a willingness to do so.

Forgiving should not be done on behalf of the aggressor, but for the means of emotional liberation for the victim. However, for forgiveness to take place, it is necessary for the victim's perspective to be acknowledged and heard. This requires a genuine investment in understanding their experiences and history, thereby establishing a shared narrative as a basis for meaningful dialogue.

For ultimately, it is consensus that dictates our reality.

PART 2

Bronwyn Lace, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll,
Samson Ogiamien

BRONWYN LACE:

Remediation, reanalysis, reformulation, reenactment, restoration, repatriation —these are catalyzers of action and artistic forms, they occupy us in relation to the controversial historical contexts from which we come. The prefix “re” meaning “again” or “again and again”, a motion both forward and backward seems to be giving us a necessary momentum and resonance where there was otherwise stagnancy and silence. What does the process of seeking repatriation feel like to you?

KHADIJA VON ZINNENBURG CARROLL:

Repatriation, as I experience it, is a process. Many have noted that the one-time, nation-state guilt-gift is a completely unsatisfying format of repair. Artists like Kader Attia have dedicated vast bodies of work to processes of repair. Similarly, repatriation is a related process that does not imply arriving at a reparation or arriving at a homeland, a-*patria*. For there can be no such arrival and thus it would always be disappointing to see repair in such a gesture. Rather, the world as it is today is populated in large part by people who are in processes of repatriating themselves. These are cultural projections from a rupture with homelands, homelands. To bring repatriation back to the self, to the human body, to people rather than inanimate materials and abstract currencies is a way to better connect with it. For even when it is through a material object, the actual desires that are unlocked in this process are about bringing the self back into contact with a particular ground, a particular familiarity of cultural knowledge or ancestral belief. This is what we are exploring in *Iyagbon's Mirror*.

SAMSON OGIAMIEN:

I was born and raised in Benin City, Nigeria, residing at the moment in Austria. Through my family lineage, I belong to the dynasty of the Ogiamiens and also to the guild of royal bronze casters that are still practicing their tradition in Benin City today.

I am impressed with the unique way of handling and preserving our artefacts in the European museums. I am also happy that our artefacts in the ethnographic museums represent my culture and tradition.

→ Fig. 7:
Ukhure, part of ancestral family collection from Samson Ogiamien, 2021. Photo: Nikola Milatovic.

→ Fig. 8:
First Iyagbon's Mask, 2021. Photo: Nikola Milatovic.



However, there are some ritual objects that are not meant to be in the museums, i.e., Uhun Elao, the commemorative head of a king, Ukhure, the ancestral staff, to mention just a few. They symbolize our ancestors who we pray to and are usually placed in the shrine. (Fig. 7)



Whether we like it or not, the topic of repatriation awakens pain and wounds on both sides, as we are all in the same boat; in other words, we are all heirs to this past. Iyagbon, the Mother Earth, is a goddess within the Edo Pantheon in Nigeria. This goddess protects and watches over all living creatures, culture and its artefacts. This bronze mask of Iyagbon is both a traditional and a contemporary artwork. It represents a new generation of African art travelling to Europe to reconnect to their ancestor's art in the diaspora thus creating awareness for the topic of provenance and the restitution of artefacts. The mask of Iyagbon is cast in bronze, a material traditionally used to immortalize a subject, to perpetuate it in the memory for the posterity. (Fig. 8)



→ Fig. 9:
Edo Cultural Art Forum, 2021. Photo:
Nikola Milatovic.

→ Fig. 10
Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Film
still from *Iyagbon's mirror*, 2021.

Through our project and the performance *Iyagbon* we, particularly the Edo Cultural Art Forum, however, paid the deserved respect to them since we can't take them home. Furthermore, this project gives us the opportunity to pay homage to the unknown, the invisible, the forgotten, the activists of yesterday and today who fight for change. (Fig. 9, 10)



PART 3
Smashing Vitrines: the Gesture of Dissolving Imperial
Display Architectures, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

The act of breaking the glass case that has so long tried to encapsulate the museum object, as a mummy in a coffin does, is like the undead returning to life. The opening, whether through shattering or the quiet release thereafter represents a liberation, which has long been sought for certain ancestral belongings that ended up in the museum and thereby seem to will themselves free again. The following scene is taken from the play *Iyagbon's Mirror* and slows down what is an imperceptibly fast act of shattering into something that can almost be apprehended as a gradual fall from the moment the glass is hit to the ways it slowly crumbles to the floor, releasing the mask of Iyagbon, sculpted by Samson Ogiamien (see above). (Fig. 11-14)

→ Figs. II-14:
Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll,
vitrine melts, series of frozen moments
from the breaking of glass cases in
Iyagbon's Mirror, 2024.

