Museums of Non-Natural History

Kathryn Yusoff

In the ledger of colonial geology there are missing earths: Earths that only appear as negative inscription, undergrounded, beneath the image of colonial earth (that we now call the Anthropocene). Indigenous earths. Black earths. Brown earths. Blood red earth. In the ledger of public culture there are missing museums: Museums that only appear as negative inscription of artefacts that speak to whole worlds trampled, objects of the erased that signal broken architectures of the oppressed and colonized. Theft is only a partially visible process.

Museums chart histories that have been structurally disappeared only to return in artefactual form, as relics or totems, in some anthropological dream of colonialism. As established by Césaire, those 'who have invented neither gunpowder nor compass…Those whose voyages have been uprootings…' are disappeared by the museum. 'Those who have become flexible to kneeling… Those who were domesticated and christianized' are overdetermined by objectified remains and residues of geotrauma. The object replaces actual worlds, becoming a phobic object that bridges loss and is hurtful. So, what of the 'returns' that museums are currently negotiating? What of the toxic afterlife of these deadened objects of forgotten geographies? Objects that are literally infused with toxicity from the pesticides and insecticides of museum preservation processes. The historical use of pesticides – DDT, arsenic, and mercury – in order to protect collections from living histories means objects are contaminated not only by colonial heritage but also by the practices of museum maintenance of that heritage as stasis.

The Central African Rhodes Centenary Exhibition 1953 in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), for example, set up to celebrate the legacy of the white supremacist Cecil Rhodes, billed itself as a vast show of the peoples and cultures of Africa.[1] The Africa imagined, in its continental appearance by the indifferent colonial powers of Britain, France, Belgian, and Portuguese 'territories', was one of raw materials and 'exotic' cultural performances. On the occasion of the 1953 world tour of Her Majesty the

1 The research on Cecil Rhodes and African Futures is part of a collaborative practice by Planetary Portals (Kerry Holden, Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Micheal Salu) on the 'diabolic architectures of colonialism'.

Queen Mother, the pavilions exhibited industry and raw materials, including gold, iron, coal, diamonds, copper, and people. As the colonial script narrated the chorus of natural resources, newspapers delightedly reported on the exhibition of 'native' huts 'showing how the native lives' (headline for The Chronicle, 17 June 1953).

The 'African Village is unique'. It was. 'If you travelled from the Cape to the Belgium Congo and visited all African villages in between, you would not find one like the African village at the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition. For there is not one like it in existence,' said Dr. E.H. Ashton, Bulawayo Municipality's Director of Native Administration, addressing the National Affairs Association. There was not one like it, because it was a fantastical village of the colonial imagination, an invention of museological desire that sought to archive a people. The article recounts how the 'Matabele were approached and a leading organisation of Africans in Bulawayo was given what was thought to be the privilege of building huts. The African replied that they thought the time was more one of mourning, than celebration, and refused.' This, Dr. E.H. Ashton said, 'gave an interesting sight of African opinion, often unknown and mostly unheeded in the Colony. But the Matabele huts were built.' The show went on, with or without 'those without whom the earth would not be earth'. The connection that I want to make here is that the colonial imagination requires those that make the earth what it is, those that labour in the mud and mire alongside the gold and the diamonds, must be made to culturally perform in the categorization of 'The African', 'The native' so that valuation can be controlled by the colonizer. This carceral categorization organizes the field in which the cultural operation of devaluation can be exercised. They, the wretched of the earth, as Fanon tenderly calls them, need to be there for the colonialist as objectified and solidified in an imagined past, and thus in a foreclosed futurity. The spatiality of the classification of race – as native, primitive, extinction, or mystification – is both a distance from the earth and a dehumanization of subjectivity. The repetition of alienation is made to travel across 'raw matter' to imagine both subjects and earth as a one-way axis of transformation (i.e., the earth is not imagined as transforming the colonial subject, only as being subjected to his will, the same is true of indigenous cultures). The anti-colonial will is the reversal of this subjugation, the recognition of geography and geology as an intimate, shared, and powerful subjectivity. Colonial logics proceed through a dehumanizing, necrotizing relation that dismantles the possibility of certain kinds of relations while prioritizing others. First, it prioritizes the action of containment, which is the severing of relations that bring into being the 'thing' exhibited. This is as true for diamonds as it is for the 'native' huts, which is why racialized persons and commercial products can exist (and still exist) in the colonial imagination in the same ledger. Visceral subjection and the vicissitudes of colonial dreams of racialized others as a resource to be exploited are one in the same. It is reported that the Matabele said they would not participate because the era that Rhodes represented was a time of mourning. Mourning for the massacre Rhodes enacted on the Nde-

bele (Matabele) people in 1893–94, and the subsequent repression and formation of the territory officially known as Rhodesia. Today, we still debate the merits of letting Rhodes occupy public space in England and South Africa. The conservative government of Britain has included his statue on the heritage list, a protected history in the history of the protected. This refusal to redress the public culture of harm of colonialism raises a dual question: What kind of museums need to be built to both repatriate a dynamic relationality with earths (not the earth) and respond to the afterlives of geotrauma enacted by colonialism?

The Martinique poet and politician Aimé Césaire called for the creation of museums of 'non-natural history' for all the histories that were made outside of colonial historicizing, white historicity, and its pronouncements of a singular universal history of 'man' (which designated Europe and the West as the apex and museums as the narrative police of that historicizing). He saw colonial culture as a museum culture, obsessed with cataloguing and categorizing to make artefacts of a dead world, an unnatural world. Edouard Glissant advocated that 'we would inhabit Museums of Natural Non-History' which 're-activate an aesthetics of the earth'. These museums of non-natural history would gather all the erased and discarded histories left in the earth and use them to tell the stories of the forgotten and erased. Césaire argued in his *Discourse on Colonialism* that colonists used museums to replace reality and to manufacture myths about the colonizers and the colonized that justified and reified colonialism. Colonialism through the appropriation of objects and narratives about the colonized was presented as a natural or anthropological outcome of history, through the disciplines of ethnography and science. That is, museums were the accomplishment of the 'naturalized' superiority of white supremacy. Anthropology was the interpretative grid that gave legitimacy to the European gaze, stolen geography and its infliction of geotrauma were its institutionalized practice.

Fig. 1: Small bottle containing asphalt, manufactured by the Colonial Museum Haarlem, 1896–1909. Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. 7161–64.
Fig. 2: Drawer of the school collection box containing tropical products from Indonesia and Suriname, such as an edible bird's nest, arrowroot, and mushrooms. The box was a gift to Dutch Crown-Princess Juliana by the Colonial Institute Amsterdam, 1915. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. TM-4108-815.

Césaire suggested that we need museums of non-natural history that are the result of sympathy for, rather than power over, the colonised. Museums that might be curated around redress and reparation of the irreparable. Museums that might put the space of loss at their centre. The Nairobi-based architectural practice Cave_bureau suggest a parallel imagined institution, 'The Benevolent Reparations Institute' (BRIT), that will provide a new 'Imagination Fund' for Africa, which will attract the return of stolen wealth to the global south for the use of arts and funding of new forms of architecture that re-engage the past lives of ancestors, human and non-human, to enable their future. One example is their proposal for the Maasai Cow Corridor that would see cows and their Masai herders return to the city in architectures built around their existence and renewal. The fund, the Cave_bureau suggest, will not rely on Western guilt but will draw back extracted wealth through a reversed pull of what they call 'remedial acts of Reverse Futurism'. A critical aspect of this architectural practice is the return of imagination and the foregrounding of resistant acts to counter colonial geotrauma. The geologic, the earth and its architectures of shelter and provision are included as partners in the healing process. De-coupling the segregations between human and inhuman life is one of the first steps in this redress.

The universal or planetary as a world culture (or futurity not defined by race and racism) is only possible once such accommodations have been made for the histories of colonial geotrauma and its forward shock that continues to configure colonial afterlives. The future or forward shock is a way to conceptualize the space that geo-

trauma takes, as an absent presence and a physic space that must be borne. While objects might be returned, there is a more subtle geography of geotrauma that is the result of what grows around what is taken (as subjectivity or symbolic worlds anchored in cultural artefacts); relations left behind have to adapt to loss, which in turn changes the psychic experience of time and the material organization of the future. It is necessary to notice not just what is taken but how what is taken impacts on how survival is experienced in the legacy of colonial afterlives. Such anti-colonial methodologies in the museum might privilege the mis-reading of archives towards a summoning of its erasures. Redirecting forms of disruption requires attention to both the effects and the emotions of geotrauma, and an apprehension of uncertainty and unknowing in how those losses might need to be regarded, witnessed, and by whom.

Jermain Ostiana, a writer and poet from Curaçao, writing in *The Guardian* about the formal apology given by the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte about the Netherlands' historic role in colonialism suggests that, 'One of the most important tenets of reparatory justice for colonial violence under international law is cessation and the guarantee of non-repetition; to this day, it remains a principle they have never lived up to.' While Rutte's apology, delivered in the institutional space of the national archives in The Hague, acknowledged that the past 'cannot be erased, only faced up to', it failed to address the question of renewal in institutional relations that maintain the power to choose the dimensions and demands of representation, and thus it failed to structurally organise against repetition. Part of the challenge of working with historical geotraumas – or unnatural history – is to see its present and to practise the reactivation of archives against the will and power of colonial institutions. Radical thought around geotrauma – understood in the fullness of the earth-based, place-based, relation-based dimensions of colonial theft – defies the comfort of repatriation as a possibility of simple exchange, and asks instead for redress that re-substantiates the terms of engagement and power. Such redress must be scripted by those that live in the future shock of colonial afterlives and it must speak to the on-going degradation of the earth outside of the museum walls as the basis of on-going indignities.

Bibliography

Césaire 1995 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. Trans. and Ed. by Mireille Rosello, with Annie Pritchard (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1995), 110–114

Césaire 2000 [1955] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, 2020 [1955])

Glissant 1997 [1990] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsey Wing (Ann Arbour, 1997 [1990])

Glissant 2020 Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*. Trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool, 2020)

Ostiana 2023 Jermain Ostiana: 'Why the Dutch apology for slavery leaves a bitter taste in my mouth'. The Guardian (14 Jan 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/14/dutch-apology-slavery-reparation-caribbean> accessed 28 Feb 2023

Yusoff 2018 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018)

Yusoff et al. 2021 Kathryn Yusoff, Kerry Holden an Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, 'Planetary Portals: 'Dreaming in Continents' from East London to the Cape in the Colonial Praxis of Emergence and Extraction' (2021) <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropiusbau/programm/journal/2021/kathryn-yusoff-planetary-portals.html> accessed 28 Feb 2023