

A “Safe Space” to Debate Colonial Legacy?

The University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Campaign to Return a Looted Benin Altarpiece to Nigeria

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Abstract: In February 2016, students at Jesus College, Cambridge voted unanimously to repatriate to Nigeria a bronze cockerel looted during the violent British expedition into Benin City in 1897. The college, however, decided to temporarily relocate Okukor to the University’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. This article outlines the discussions that occurred during this process, exploring how the Museum was positioned as a safe space in which uncomfortable colonial legacies, including institutionalized racism and cultural patrimony rights, could be debated. We explore how a stated commitment to postcolonial dialogue ultimately worked to circumvent a call for postcolonial action. Drawing on Ann Stoler’s and Elizabeth Edwards’s discussions of colonial aphasia, this article argues that anthropology museums risk enabling such circumvention despite confronting their own institutional colonial legacies.

Keywords: aphasia, Benin, colonial legacy, decolonization, museum, racism, repatriation, restitution

On 18 February 2016, following a debate of nearly two hours, members of the Jesus College Student Union (JCSU) at the University of Cambridge voted unanimously to support the repatriation to Nigeria of a bronze cockerel, known as Okukor, which at that time stood in the

college dining hall (Figure 1). Cambridge's 31 colleges are self-governing institutions that are formally independent of the central university, and they are responsible for the admission and tuition of undergraduate students as well as for the provision of accommodation and food. Okukor was presented to Jesus College in 1905 by George William Neville (1852–1929) while his son was studying there. Neville had accompanied the violent 1897 campaign to Benin City, returning with a considerable quantity of items looted from the royal palace, presumably including the cockerel. According to its own records, the college “agreed gratefully to accept” the “gift of the bronze figure of a cock which formed part of the spoil captured at Benin, West Africa and to thank Mr Neville for making this appropriate gift to the College” (Jesus College Archives 1905). Founded in 1496 on the site of a former Benedictine convent by John Alcock, then Bishop of Ely, the college's coat of arms features the heads of three cockerels, a reference to the surname of the college founder. It is presumably for this reason that Neville chose to present the cockerel, which is likely to have remained installed as a mascot in the dining hall ever since.

Figure 1

The student vote, which came in the immediate aftermath of the #RhodesMustFall¹ debate at the University of Oxford, highlighted how Okukor's status as a college mascot sat in tension with the colonial violence that brought the altarpiece to Cambridge. The vote was picked up by opinion pieces in both *The Telegraph* (Clarke-Billings 2016) and *The Guardian* (Jones 2016), Britain's mainstream right- and left-wing newspapers, respectively. However, it was only after the College Council—the governing body of college fellows—voted on 7 March to remove the cockerel from the dining hall that the real media outpour began. A university press release on 8 March unleashed a barrage of criticism from elements of the national press concerned that this

was yet another overreaction to the demands of hypersensitive students. Alumni threatened to withdraw funding, and some members of the academic community expressed concern over an attempt by the students to “eradicate the past” in order to express their “moral superiority in the present” (Harding 2016).

The press release acknowledged “the contribution made by students in raising the important but complex question of the rightful location of its Benin Bronze,” outlining a commitment “to discuss and determine the best future” for the altarpiece and to work with “museum authorities to discuss and determine the best future for the Okukor, including the question of repatriation.” It concluded by establishing that “the College strongly endorses the inclusion of students from all relevant communities in such discussion” (Harding 2016). What this press release did not mention was that the debate in Cambridge had become about more than the relocation of the altarpiece, but rather what its former location said about inadequate institutional recognition of historical injustice and the structural racism that underlined this. Any future discussion would therefore need to engage with colonial and racial tensions at the University.

This article engages with the college’s proposed relocation of Okukor to the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), where we were both employed at the time.² The willingness of the College to send the altarpiece to an institution well-rehearsed in engaging in dialogue with its own complex colonial history and the museum’s preparedness to receive it were not unexpected. Such transference of responsibility over postcolonial archives to ethnographic institutions is discussed by Elizabeth Edwards (2016) in relation to colonial photographic archives. She highlights how anthropology, “as a discipline or category of museum collecting,” has become a space “in which problematic categories of action and objects”

associated with difficult colonial pasts “can safely be sequestered” (2016: 59). Arguably, in this instance, the MAA offered a safe space in which the college’s commitment to “discuss and determine” Okukor’s future could be met. As it transpired, however, despite a series of discussions initiated by the student vote to return Okukor, not one of these engaged with the campaign directly. Okukor has quietly and uncontroversially been returned to Jesus College, where it is no longer on display. Its future, and the accusations of institutional racism that brought this into question, remain unresolved.

In what follows, we use the campaign to return Okukor as a case study to explore how a stated commitment to postcolonial dialogue can work to circumvent a call for postcolonial action. Writing in 2019, following the publication of President Emmanuel Macron’s commissioned report on repatriation by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018), it is increasingly clear that it is action, rather than words, that is demanded of Europe’s museums in response to their colonial pasts and presents. We are interested in how statements of intent concerning the desire to resolve a moment of postcolonial reckoning through serious discussion and debate ultimately led to inaction. We seek to understand what this says about the difficulties that institutions encounter in facing up to their colonial pasts, in particular in recognizing that these pasts create and frame experiences of racism in the present. We are also interested in the moments where these difficulties are circumvented, renamed, or disregarded. The idea of ethnographic museums as “safe spaces” within the field of postcolonial tension is key—both in terms of how such safety is perceived and enacted and in terms of the ways in which this role can disable effective engagement with tensions that ultimately overflow these spaces.³

Public Dialogue Begins: The Student Campaign

Bequeathed to the college in 1905, Okukor was presumably one of the items looted from the royal compound in Benin City by Neville in early 1897. An article in the *Lagos Weekly Record*, published on 20 March of that year, included an interview with Neville, who had returned in advance of the main body of troops. As well as noting the commercial opportunities offered by the forest “abounding in rubber, gum and magnificent timber” surrounding Benin City, the newspaper noted that Neville had returned with “some valuable specimens of antique carvings and bronze sculptures” (Anon. 1897). Indeed, it noted that when Neville left Benin he was given a guard of 20 men by the commandant, Colonel Hamilton, who advised him to “push off as quickly as possible, as the fact of so many ancient heirlooms leaving the city may attract attention and possibly lead to molestation” (Anon. 1897). Neville’s extensive collection was displayed at the Royal Colonial Institute in London later in 1897. This was one of the first exhibitions of Benin material outside of Africa, arguably prompting the wider interest subsequently shown by other collectors and institutions. A photograph donated to the MAA appears to show the fireplace in Neville’s home in Weybridge, Surrey, surrounded by a number of identifiable examples of Benin bronzes (Figure 2). Following Neville’s death, much of his remaining collection was sold at the J. C. Stevens Auction house in May 1930, where it was purchased by both private and public collectors (Coombes 1994: 31).

Figure 2

Sitting on a plinth in the main hall of Jesus College, looking down upon the long wooden dining tables toward a grand portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, Okukor was engaged in a very different set of rituals to those it was initially created to serve. As was highlighted by the campaign for its return, neither Okukor’s religious and cultural significance for the Benin Royal Court, nor the violence that resulted in its location at Jesus College were revealed by its display.

Rather, a Latin inscription on a metal plaque attached to the wooden plinth memorialized Neville through his gift to the college, referring to Okukor's "capture" by the "British Army" from the "Ancient town of Benin." In this context, the bronze was framed as a valuable college mascot; a reference to the generously plumed rooster that sits on the college's coat of arms, and an addition to the college's extensive collection of similar emblems displayed around its grounds. The college rooster is said to be that which in the Bible brought Peter to his knees, the rooster's crow reminding him of the truth of Jesus Christ, turning denial into repentance. This transformation of a non-Christian altarpiece into a mascot has a symbolic resonance beyond the display of stolen goods, a feature only heightened by the relative obliviousness to its presence in the dining hall before it became embroiled in the debate over its rightful place.

The silences that surrounded Okukor were not lost on the undergraduate students who initially raised the question of repatriation through the establishment of the Benin Bronze Appreciation Committee (BBAC) in late 2015. An 11-page draft proposal was created by the Committee and circulated to the Nigerian Minister of Culture and Information, Alhaji Lai Mohammed; the Cambridge Black, Minority, and Ethnic (BME) campaign; and the JCSU for comment. The document focused on the "moral case" for repatriation, outlining the history of its seizure and arguing that a return was considered to be "both intrinsically and instrumentally good" (Robinson 2016). Crucial to the proposal, and its subsequent debate, was the attempt to make a "positive case for repatriation" to encourage action by the college. The document highlighted how repatriation would position the college as a forerunner in wider debates surrounding "colonialism and social justice," fostering a mutually productive relationship with Nigerian cultural institutions and contributing to a university-wide global agenda.

Figure 3

Underlying this politically careful proposal was a broader agenda targeting the public memory of Britain's colonial past. As the JCSU congregated in February 2016 to debate the proposed vote to return Okukor, a number of students from both within and outside of the college raised concerns about the neocolonial language of the proposal (Figure 3). In particular, they addressed how statements of moral duty placed an emphasis on the ethical standing of the college and university, rather than on the unequivocal cultural rights to postcolonial reparation for Nigeria. The proposed return was understood in this context as a decolonial act for both Nigeria and Cambridge, the success of which depended on the adoption of a decolonial rhetoric. Establishing consensus over what amounted to such rhetoric was, however, also contested with regard to who had the legitimacy to speak on behalf of the proposed return. While the BBAC had sought legitimacy through Ministerial channels in Nigeria, other students felt this was an issue to be sanctioned through the wider BME community at the university, while others foregrounded voices of people with Nigerian or Edo descent (JCSU 2016; Robinson 2016). The BBAC was accused of silencing some Black British voices by failing to consult effectively on both the act of repatriation and the way in which it was represented.

Concerns over representation, erasure, and legitimacy have been taken up through a well-established student campaign seeking to voice and challenge experiences of institutional racism and to support people of color at the university. This provided a platform that situated the campaign for the return of Okukor to Nigeria within wider activism targeting the decolonization of university spaces, recruitment strategies, and the curriculum. In particular, the campaign was linked by both the university and the national press to the #RhodesMustFall campaign at the University of Oxford a year earlier. As highlighted by Amit Chaudhuri, while most of the media

attention generated by the movement focused on Rhodes himself, at issue was the broader “ethos that gives space and even pre-eminence to such a figure” (Chaudhuri 2016). For supporters of the #RhodesMustFall campaign, the continued monumentalization of Rhodes, and others like him, was an indication of the wider institutional embeddedness of this ethos. Likewise, the continued retention and display of Okukor became emblematic of both the college and the university’s failure to acknowledge institutional engagement in, and support for, colonial violence. As the campaign gained traction, discussions over Okukor’s fate absorbed existing frustration and anger about the university’s inability to face up to, let alone recognize, a history of racism and its contemporary manifestations. As articulated by one student in the university press:

Erasure is situating the Benin Bronze Okukor in Jesus College’s hall with an irrelevant Latin inscription and no identification that it was raided in the Benin Expedition of 1897, which resulted in the murder of thousands of my ancestors and the exile of Oba Ovonramwen. Erasure is African diaspora studying in a college that has a ‘Rustat Conference Room,’ with scarce public information to identify that Tobias Rustat was a slaver, and eating in a hall with a portrait of Jan Smuts with no recognition that he oppressed Africans with skin like theirs. (Okundaye 2016)

The response by the Jesus College Council, the college’s governing body of academics, was to permanently remove Okukor from the dining hall in March 2016. A subsequent press release noted their commitment to “strongly [endorsing] the inclusion of students from all relevant communities” in the process of moving forward on this “important and complex question,” pledging “resources to new initiatives with Nigerian heritage and museum authorities” and

committing to “discuss and determine the best future for the Okukor” (Harding 2016; Weale 2016). Despite the conciliatory language of this statement, the removal received criticism in both the press and academic circles. This criticism included a debate over the legitimacy of accusations of structural racism levied at the university, as well as over whether Okukor’s future had a role to play in confronting such accusations. Alumni threatened to withdraw donations should Okukor be repatriated as a result of a campaign led by a group of “silly undergraduates” (Bown 2016). Public outrage found a home in the right-wing press, where the removal was associated with oversensitive political correctness at both the financial and moral expense of a well-respected institution.

It is worth noting the direct racism published in the online comment sections beneath these critical articles. Zoe O’Brien (2016), writing for the *Express*, noted how students had “forced a Cambridge University College to remove a statue of cockerel . . . because they claim it’s racist.” Beneath it, Cheryl from London is “sickened” by the decision and asks: “How many white British students were not given places so that this lot could be given places?” Gez51 suggests a student leading the campaign, a “guest,” should be “put on a plane, at his own expense” and “sent home,” adding that “his lik [sic] make me a racist due to their attitudes towards us, their host country.” *Breitbart* (Hallet 2016) provided a platform for abusive and violent language that in any other public context would amount to incitement of racial hatred. While the internet at large provides an open forum for racist hate speech, the media interest in the JSCU vote created a focus for personal attacks on those students leading the campaign.

Public Dialogue Is Shifted: Okukor Becomes a University Issue

Aware that removing Okukor from the dining hall had not resolved the issue, and sensitive to negative portrayal in the press, the central university stepped in and established a working group on 23 March 2016. The group was chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Institutional and International Relations and included representatives from Jesus College, University of Cambridge Museums, the University Communications Office, and the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. It did not include the students who had initiated the campaign.

From the outset, the specific case of Okukor was linked in the remit of what became known as the Benin Bronze Working Group to “general questions that were expected to arise around repatriation.” With this in mind, representatives of Jesus College emphasized that while officially open-minded about the future of the cockerel, they felt that there was a strong argument for public display and engagement, which they suggested would be difficult within the institutional setting of the college. It was in this context that the MAA was brought into the discussion as the possible location of such engagement, with the initial meeting of the group concluding that the “MAA was a clear home for continuing dialogue around the issue.” The MAA ultimately agreed to the temporary display of the cockerel with an agreed aim that this would foster further debate.

Although the college did not officially dismiss repatriation as a potential outcome of anticipated dialogue, it is worth emphasizing that by nominating the MAA as the appropriate location for display and potentially long-term loan, the college was keen to situate Okukor within the more established debates around the return of objects from public collections. It was argued within this broader context that any decision on Okukor was dependent upon decisions made by other institutions with Benin collections, notably the British Museum, with a concern expressed that there was a potential for the college’s decision to have an impact on these other entities. In

light of this concern, an existing international museum-led working group, the Benin Dialogue Group (BDG),⁴ was foregrounded as the relevant decision-making body, and the college agreed to host a future meeting at Cambridge.

While students were not invited to meetings of the Benin Bronze Working Group, the pro-vice-chancellor organized a series of separate meetings with one of the initiators of the campaign, who had subsequently been elected as president of the Cambridge University Student Union. It should be noted that during these meetings the importance of consulting the students involved in the campaign was repeatedly stressed, as was the need to address the broader discussion about the decolonization of British academia and its implications for contemporary racism. The students raised concerns about the increasing reliance on museums and the BDG as providing an appropriate forum for responding to the vote, recognizing that such institutions may have entrenched positions on repatriation, and that the University should aspire to challenge these positions and lead an intellectual debate. Despite these concerns, Okukor was collected in early December 2016 for conservation treatment prior to its proposed display at the MAA, a position defended by the Pro-Vice Chancellor as associated with the museum's "particular expertise" on issues of repatriation.

Difficulties in Comprehension? Searching for a Safe Space to Talk about Colonial Legacy

The movement of Okukor from dining hall to museum space was not without tensions of its own. There was a sense at the MAA that this act of sequestration was an attempt by the college to shift responsibility for an uncomfortable and unpredictable problem and an acknowledgment that the museum would have to tread extremely carefully when intervening in what was ultimately a conversation between the college and its students. The fact that the MAA provisionally accepted

Okukor on loan and planned a series of events to coincide with its display, however, suggests that there was a degree of optimism that the MAA had a role to play in resolving the tensions now surrounding it. The concept of the museum as “safe space” was, arguably, a position implicitly assumed by both the college and the museum. We will explore further the disciplinary engagements that have enabled this institutional optimism surrounding the confrontation of postcolonial tensions within ethnographic museums, but we begin by exploring why such “making-safe” was thought necessary. Jesus College is a large and wealthy institution that is perfectly capable of taking a position on the return or of engaging in open and transparent debate, as it publicly claimed it was committed to doing, despite threats from a small number of alumni. Rather than doing so, however, what transpired during the moment of proposed transfer and in its aftermath was ultimately an avoidance of discussion. While it was acknowledged that ongoing debate about both Okukor’s future and the wider claims of the campaign was required, actual engagement in discussion was limited.

Given the violent context of Okukor’s acquisition and the rhetoric of colonial erasure and structural racism that underscored the campaign for its return, it is worth considering academic writing that has sought to understand difficulties that can arise around engagements with colonial histories and their legacies in the present. Ann Stoler’s (2011) use of “aphasia” is important here as a concept used to describe the difficulties faced by European academic and political spheres in articulating the issues that surround colonial pasts and presents. Borrowed from clinical psychology, aphasia refers to an impairment of language that affects the comprehension and production of speech: a recognition that something exists but an inability to generate “a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (Stoler 2011: 125), resulting ultimately in a form of circumvention. The term, Stoler notes, “describes a

difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken” (2011: 125). As a concept centered on the difficulty of responding directly to something that is evidently present, aphasia maps well onto engagements with material archives. Edwards (2016) has applied the concept to photographic archives in British colonial contexts. The fact that such archives exist is not something unknown or denied by institutions that hold them; rather, the difficulty lies in knowing how to discuss them and in finding the right terms or narratives with which to interpret and display them. Edwards’s central premise is that “the ethnographic” is perceived of as a more appropriate or adept space within which the colonial can be discussed, due in part to its evocation of distance: events occurring “elsewhere,” a long time ago, and best addressed from a different disciplinary perspective.

Edwards’s (2016) use of aphasia focuses far more on the difficulties of articulation than the inability “to comprehend what is spoken” (Stoler 2011: 125), which is central to Stoler’s use of the term. With it, Stoler acknowledges that, just as politicians and academics struggle to address colonial pasts in appropriate ways, those who continue to be marginalized and oppressed as a result of these legacies repeatedly speak, or make known, their own recognition of a colonial present. Of concern is the way in which this speaking of the colonial present is sidelined: how such “knowing is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed, and disregard is revived and sustained” (Stoler 2011: 153).

This lack of comprehension of the colonial present seems central to the tensions surrounding Okukor. Not only was the college unable to engage openly in a conversation about this, as suggested by its stated intention to but subsequent decision not to, but this inability also arguably stemmed from a difficulty in publicly acknowledging what was being said. The campaign to return Okukor began as an acknowledgment of the Nigerian claim to an unspoken

object of past colonial dispossession, but it was transformed through student action and public response into a debate about the far less comfortable issue of continuing structural racism at the university, representing a wider legacy of such unspeaking. The removal of Okukor from the dining hall singularly failed to address this issue and in many ways symbolized an inability to comprehend and recognize forms of structural racism as a reality in which the college itself continues to be implicated. Difficulty of comprehension in this context was not about direct understanding—it was privately understood that this predicament had become a debate about racism—but rather highlighted an inability to articulate a direct response that terms such as inclusion, discussion, and debate suggested should be possible.

Journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge's (2017) now widely read book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, is centered on these failures of comprehension and recognition. The work explores how liberal anxieties surrounding self-implication in contemporary British racism (being labeled a "racist") emerge as a form of denial, a claim to "color-blindness" that fails to recognize the presence of race as a force of "power and privilege" in society (2017: 83; see also DiAngelo 2018; and Wekker 2016). "Not talking about race," a provocative response to this paradox, highlights Eddo-Lodge's experience that "talking" rarely involves listening but instead represents a preoccupation with a form of "post-racist" self-preservation that disables any real dialogue. This imagining of a post-racist society also emerges in work by Paul Gilroy (2004), although here it is more directly associated with the difficulties present in grappling with the colonial pasts and presents that concern both Edwards (2016) and Stoler (2011): "Questions about 'race,' identity, and differentiation," he argues, "sometimes feel anachronistic" because they "return contemporary discussion to a moral ground that we feel we should have left behind long ago" (Gilroy 2004: 15).

By this, Gilroy refers in particular to the fixed biopolitics that framed colonial legitimization—for example, the kind that provided public justification for the expedition to Benin City in 1897. Gilroy highlights how the therapeutic crystallization of Britain’s twentieth-century history within the moral certainties of the end of World War II enabled the continuation of racial violence to be overlooked both in the colonies and at home. He explores this as a form of rupture: an ethical void in the public memory of the end of empire, which is situated between the moral safety of a heroic antiracist past—the defeat of Nazism—and the liberal certainties of the present (see also Gilmour and Schwarz 2011; and Schwarz 2005, 2011). It is arguably this search for safety in moral certainty that underlies what Eddo-Lodge describes as “color-blindness”: an impatience for absolution that transpires as denial in a context where embedded forms of White privilege continue to operate in contemporary Britain.

At a national level, Gilroy highlights the need to disrupt imaginings of an ethical nationalism by exposing “fragments of brutal colonial history” in order to “unsettle the remembrance of the imperial project by undermining its moral legitimacy and damaging the national self-esteem” (2004: 100). The refocusing of ethnographic museum work over the last 30 years through increasingly reflexive and critical confrontation of colonial pasts arguably contributes precisely to such public “unsettling.” Ruth Phillips (2005) has optimistically referred to this as the “second museum age,” a comprehensive shift in the priorities of Western museums that care for culturally and spiritually significant objects acquired under contexts of inequality or coercion. Focusing on the Canadian settler context, Phillips highlights the rising commitment to forms of collaborative and multivocal research, rethinking museum spaces as “repositories” of cultural artifacts for First Nations communities. Her article highlights two key foci of this work, the first being a focus on archival research in order to better understand the historical nuances of

collections, and the second being a drive to contextualize this research within postimperial or settler contexts of the present.

Phillips does not focus explicitly on uncovering “brutal colonial histories,” referring to a much softer process of “traditional techniques of connoisseurship and archival research” (2005: 94). This accords well with a sense of historical and archival integrity that centers scholarly collections research and focuses on an “archive-out” approach to establishing provenance within largely nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ethnographic collections. Nicholas Thomas’s *Entangled Objects* (1991) and *Colonialism’s Culture* (1994) may be understood as foundational texts in this regard, cautioning against making sweeping statements about colonial brutality and instead focusing on an approach that draws out smaller everyday encounters or “entanglements” between people to bring nuance to broader imperial processes (see also Henare 2005; Jacobs et al. 2015; Schildkrout and Keim 1998; and Thomas et al. 2016). An important arm of this work has been to critically reflect on the discords between the nuances of the field and the regimes of ordering placed upon objects following their deposition in public collections. It is perhaps within this context of ordering that colonial violence has been most clearly engaged with through collections-based research. While archival research has highlighted the importance of recognizing indigenous agency in the making, trading, or gifting of objects that ended up in museum collections, work focusing on the systems of knowledge these objects subsequently became absorbed into demonstrates how such agency was disregarded. This perspective has focused on the imposition of often overtly racist organizational principles developed along evolutionary lines, constituting a scholarly and public legitimization of the imperial project (e.g., Bennett et al. 2017; Gosden and Larson 2007).

Phillips’s (2005) notion of the museum as “repository” draws on work in response to this

history, seeking the restitution of indigenous agency through collaborative work in the present (see also McCarthy 2011; and Peers and Brown 2003). Responding to the idea that ethnographic museums bear an ethical responsibility toward communities with contemporary claims to cultural patrimony is now common practice across former colonial nations. Cambridge's MAA has been active in pursuing this agenda through its Pacific and North American collections since the mid-1990s (e.g., Herle 2008; Raymond and Salmond 2008). This practice has underpinned recent research through Pacific Presences, a substantial cross-European collections research grant based at the MAA running from 2013 to 2018, which has involved collaborative work with elders and community members in the Pacific Islands, as well as with contemporary artists, to provide new perspectives on historical collections (Carreau et al. 2018; Thomas et al. 2016). Underlying these projects is a commitment to a form of dialogue, often spoken about as a desire to “decenter” the authority traditionally held by curators, by recentering previously excluded voices from communities that have ancestral or historical claims over collections. Opening up archives and their histories in this way exposes museums to critique, contestation, and debate, which has increasingly been celebrated as fundamental to the new role emerging for ethnographic museums in a messy postcolonial climate of continued inequality (Clifford 1997, 2013). Phillips explores this approach as “museum-as-theatre,” posing a microcosm in which “real political dynamics” (2005: 104) are played out offering “valuable opportunities for research into these performative and public dimensions of professional practice” (2005: 88). Phillips optimistically suggests that the public nature of museums means that such contestation has wider ramifications, inspiring moments of activism that over time may cause “shifts in public opinion and changes in institutions, laws, and professional practices” (2005: 88).

Returning to Okukor's temporary sequestration at the MAA, it is arguably the

combination of archival integrity and apparent openness to critical exposure and debate, emerging from existing collaborative work, that encouraged confidence in the institution's ability to navigate the complex postcolonial terrain that surrounded the Benin altarpiece. It is worth highlighting the centrality of conversational terms such as dialogue, discussion, and debate to this approach, acknowledging how they mirror both statements of intent concerning the resolution of postcolonial tensions by institutions, such as Jesus College, and areas of inadequacy highlighted by those seeking to understand these tensions.

Institutionalizing Dialogue: Okukor and the Benin Plan for Action

In her discussion of the tensions that surrounded the #RhodesMustFall campaign at Oxford University, Eddo-Lodge draws attention to what she terms the “hypocrisy of free speech” (2017: 130–134). She questions the dynamics at play where a campaign to bring attention to and debate around the overt celebration of a man deeply implicated in South African racial segregation was closed down through institutional accusations of undemocratic action. She rightly highlights how the campaign was characterized as historical erasure and the suppression of debate by a White liberal opposition, yet the direct result of this moral outrage transpired as its own form of silence, “the kind of strained peace that simmers with resentment, the kind that requires some to suffer so that others are comfortable” (2017: 131). Her analysis highlights how calls for debate can play a role in circumventing difficult action: the monument to Rhodes remains, yet the public debate around his monumentalization has lost its steam. It is worth bearing this in mind when considering the paramountcy of ongoing “dialogue” and “discussion” to both the college's public commitment to resolving Okukor's fate and the events that surrounded the altarpiece once it arrived at the MAA. As with Rhodes, an emphasis on the importance of debate did not determine

the terms of that debate.

By January 2017, the MAA had consolidated its plans for furthering the debate around Okukor. These included hosting a meeting of the international Benin Dialogue Group (BDG), which included inviting the Nigerian delegates to Cambridge through funds pledged by the university with support from Jesus College. The meeting was planned to coincide with a separate European Commission (EC) funded workshop at which the majority of European museum members of the BDG would already be present. The EC workshop was one of a series within a cross-institutional network of European museums with ethnographic collections called “Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage” (SWICH). The SWICH research agenda may be understood within the context of the historically reflexive museum work outlined above, but it was specifically tailored toward refining the vocabularies for this kind of work in a postimperial European context, rather than in the Northern American and Pacific settler contexts in which it developed. The March 2017 workshop at the MAA had the title “Historic Collections, Contemporary Lives” and focused on the excavation of colonial histories through collections and archives and their exposure through contemporary exhibition and collaboration. The Nigerian delegates included the Director of NCMM, Abdullah Yusef Usman; the Director of Museums for NCMM, Peter Odey; the uncle of the recently crowned Oba Ewuare II, Prince Gregory Iduorobo Akenzua; and Folarin Shyllon (1998, 2000), a Professor of Law from the University of Ibadan, who has worked on the looting of Nigerian art. It is important to note that both the SWICH workshop and the BDG meeting were closed events. The planned MAA exhibition around Okukor offered the possibility of a more public intervention, with the intention that the exhibition would extend the conversation through interpretation specifically referring to the student campaign.

As plans for events in March 2017 advanced and despite initial enthusiasm, expressed publicly, to engage in open debate around Okukor's future, there were signs of a significant shift in the college's position. It was not clear whether this came as a result primarily of the museum declaring that a temporary loan could not become a long-term solution, a realization that the piece was worth a considerable amount of money (prompted by a seven-figure insurance valuation undertaken as part of the proposed loan), or by a sense that the heat had gone out of the student campaign. Whatever the reason, at a meeting of the Benin Bronze Working Group on 2 February 2017, it quickly became apparent that there was no longer any enthusiasm from the college either to host or participate in the formal discussions planned to take place in March. While earlier discussions had recognized the need to respond to the student campaign, it was now suggested that student engagement with the Nigerian delegates should take place separately to the planned discussions of the BDG. When asked about the proposed MAA exhibition, college representatives made it clear that they no longer felt it appropriate for the cockerel to be displayed at all.

Ultimately, a compromise enabled the Nigerian delegation to briefly see the cockerel in the MAA's conservation laboratory on the condition that a representative from Jesus College and the university's Director of Communications were in attendance. The University Communications Office continued to play a role in containing the "rhetoric over the repatriation of objects," expressing a desire to refocus discussion on capacity-building and the digitization of Benin collections in Europe, projects that were both included in the wider Plan of Action developed by the BDG. Furthermore, the university's Benin Working Group February meeting emphasized that public communication around the BDG meeting should be handled through an agreed-upon statement drafted by the University Communications Office. Indeed, prior to the

BDG March meeting an email was sent to members of staff at the MAA underlining expectations that “should discussion turn to the specific matter of the Jesus College bronze,” in either the BDG meeting itself or more generally over the course of the visit, that they would reinforce the agreed-upon position of the university working group. The statement, prepared in consultation with the University Communications Office, now consolidated earlier attempts to engage the debate around Okukor within the broader question of the repatriation of Benin material in public collections:

We believe that the best way of addressing disputes over cultural collections such as the Benin Bronzes is at international levels. Given the scale of the collection worldwide, we believe that collective discussion and engagement will achieve more than independent action. Any future decisions on the display of the Bronze will await further progress with the international Benin Plan of Action.

The email concluded that it was “particularly important that any suggestion that the Jesus bronze should be treated as a separate case should be countered firmly on this basis.” Okukor’s planned sequestration within the MAA thus enmeshed an existing request for postcolonial recognition, led by the student BME campaign, within three other forms of postcolonial dialogue: a public exhibition, a much wider Nigerian repatriation campaign, and a curatorially driven research agenda through SWICH. Although each of these strategies involved conversations that related to the student campaign in some form, a series of restrictions on open dialogue put in place by the university and the college meant that none of them engaged directly with it.

Without permission to display the cockerel, the modest MAA exhibit titled *Benin: Metals*

in Africa drew on collections research, bringing together archival excavation and X-ray fluorescence analysis to shed light on the material composition and provenance of a relatively unknown collection of Royal Court bronzes. While it presented a university collection, much of which shares its provenance with Okukor in the looting of Benin City in 1897, the exhibit did not address the specific question of Okukor's repatriation.⁵ Nor did it comment on the campaign's association of Okukor's violent provenance with the college's failure to recognize this provenance and the implications of this for the way in which the college, and by extension the university, failed to address the brutal colonial histories in which they are implicated. Although the exhibit featured other university holdings of looted material, Okukor's absence meant that public debate about repatriation and racism was ultimately circumvented. Despite Okukor's absence in the display, Okukor was presented to the Nigerian delegates as pristine and well-cared-for, in the conservation lab where its treatment had been funded by Jesus College (Figure 4), despite a conservation report that outlined evidence of rather less-respectful historical treatment in the college dining hall.⁶

Figure 4

It is worth focusing briefly on the meeting of the BDG itself, which occurred on the final day of the Nigerian delegation's visit, by which time it had become clear that staff at the MAA did not hold authority over Okukor and that the opportunity to discuss the issue directly with representatives of Jesus College would not present itself. The meeting focused on reigniting attempts to resolve broader tensions surrounding requests from the Royal Court and the NCMM for the return of material looted in 1897 and on the difficulties that European curators faced in convincing their institutions to respond positively to these requests. By the end of the meeting, a desire to reach a resolution that might lead to action favored a suggestion of a rotating loan in

Benin City, which was put forward by a senior fellow of the university's Department of Archaeology. This arrangement, which has now been ratified by the BDG,⁷ would involve working toward a permanent display at Benin City featuring rotating loans of material from European museums. This compromise, which was not uncontentious, has not resolved the underlying issues surrounding long-term ownership.

Dialogue Contained and Redirected: Saying the Right Things while Doing Very Little

The students who led the initial campaign to repatriate Okukor were reunited with what had by then become a much broader institutional issue at a public reception following the SWICH workshop and the BDG meeting, expecting to hear the outcome of their campaign. Here, Prince Akenzua presented the conclusions of the BDG, reading from a document that had been officially sanctioned by the group. Given the campaign's focus on the return of Okukor as a decolonial act for the university, foregrounding both the physical return and the vocal recognition of historical wrongdoing that should frame that return, the student reaction was understandably one of frustration and disappointment. That reaction was picked up in the student press; one article, for example, argued that the "MAA's conduct is transparent and insulting to Nigerians and Cambridge students of the African diaspora." The author concluded that:

A refusal to treat this issue as seriously and respectfully as returning Nazi-stolen paintings is only a testament to the systemic racism still rife within Britain and at institutions such as Cambridge. As a student of color, however, this narrative is only reflective of Cambridge's treatment of racial issues within the University, and how the solutions provided are either insulting or insufficient. (Okundaye 2017)

The student reaction, now directed at the MAA, is a reminder that, while the museum was prepared to take on the postcolonial tensions that surrounded Okukor, the terms in which it was able to address these tensions meant that it was ultimately unable to resolve them. Okukor was eventually returned to Jesus College, where it is now locked away in a cupboard.

The MAA was presumably approached by the college as an institution that defines itself through its willingness to recognize and engage with the contested colonial legacies surrounding its collections through public discussion, debate, and dialogue. The temporary sequestration of Okukor at the MAA may be understood, then, as expressing a desire by the college to resituate a discussion in which its representatives found it impossible to engage. This was partly due to the volatility of public responses that were apparent in reactions by the press (Brian 2016; Clarke-Billings 2016; Hallet 2016; Jones 2016) and college alumni (Harding 2016), which emerged in relation to an association that was made by the campaign between the silencing of colonial histories and the ongoing impacts of structural racism. Arguably, the college's actions should also be understood in relation to the wider political challenge of aligning a rejection of historical racism with the reality that race continues to mediate the distribution of power and privilege in society today (Eddo-Lodge 2017; Gilroy 2004; Schwarz 2005, 2011).

Openly addressing ongoing structural racism and the question of Okukor's future in the same conversation would acknowledge that the two issues were connected, thus implying that the college had failed to address both its colonial past and its colonial present, a charge we suggest college representatives were unprepared to recognize. Because ideas of colonial "silence" occupy such a central place in discussions of contemporary colonial legacies (Edwards 2016; Edwards and Mead 2013; Stoler 2011), including within the Okukor campaign itself, the

need for open and public dialogue has become a fairly routine operational response.

Paradoxically, we argue that although the MAA was chosen as the appropriate space in which such discussions could unfold, the museum was not only unable to engage in the conversation directly but also played a role in ensuring that the conversation that had begun was “disabled,” attention “redirected,” things “renamed,” and disregard “revived and sustained” (Stoler 2011: 153). Indeed, a dialogue did happen, but not the one that the student campaign had asked for.

It is important to recognize that this outcome was partially a result of institutional politics at the University of Cambridge. As a public institution, the MAA was selected as an appropriate space, distant enough for the college to excuse itself from the conversation yet institutionally close enough to host a discussion. Having agreed to enable debate about an independently owned object that rested on two seemingly straightforward outcomes—to concede to the student vote or not—the MAA was ultimately not given the power to enable a conversation that proceeded in these terms. This compromised position enabled Okukor’s fate to become buried within the much wider and far more complex question of historical restitution to Nigeria of Benin material held in European museums. As a result, an issue of present significance, not least because the students involved would soon move on, became enmeshed within a long-term debate beset with deep institutional particularities that overlap with but also diverge from the issues raised by the student campaign.

Two years on, the public conversation around restitution has shifted considerably, in particular with regard to African colonial-era collections in European museums. This may partially be attributed to the initiation of the first BDG meeting in four years at Cambridge in 2017, which fostered debates about long term-loans in response to repatriation claims in both museum circles and the wider media. Of particular significance has been the report compiled by

Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018), commissioned by French President Macron and published in November 2018, which has demanded a colonial reckoning in relation to France's collections from Africa. The report's recommendation that all colonial-era collections be considered for restitution, and the wider public activism that has been given a platform as a result, has been met by a wave of anxiety within European museums.⁸ This has resulted in a series of statements and opinion pieces on repatriation authored by museum directors published in the European press.⁹ These statements, including from the MAA's Nicholas Thomas and the Victoria and Albert Museum's Tristram Hunt, have crafted a united response to the 2018 report's call for fundamental changes in understandings of ethical ownership and professional practice. Rather than reflecting on what individual institutional changes might be made, these responses have overwhelmingly reasserted embedded and existing cross-institutional values of shared access, cross-cultural appreciation and exchange, and the integrity of research. It is important to note that while these values aspire toward an equitable cosmopolitanism based on mutual recognition and respect, who has access to collections, who directs flows of exchange, and who creates knowledge through research remain deeply structured by forms of privilege, including race, that means reaching true equity remains a very distant goal.

The 2018 report must be understood in the context of international diplomacy, as it was commissioned as France sought to reimagine its postcolonial relationship with its former African territories. The case of Okukor reminds us, however, that issues around restorative justice reverberate within former colonial nations as much as they do between such nations and their former territories. While the report has intensified the gaze upon Europe's ethnographic museums as possible agents of global repair, they are also places that can become a focus for articulations of postcolonial tensions at home. We argue that, despite acknowledging this,

museums like the MAA have only partially recovered from their colonial aphasia, in that they are less proficient in adequately “comprehending what is spoken” (Stoler 2011: 125) than they are in initiating or welcoming debate. This is partly associated with the deep reliance upon models of archival excavation and authoritative decentering. While such work seeks to address the colonial politics of the present, it often does so from a privileged academic space that relies heavily on the historical archive for its vocabularies of postcolonial unsettling or subversion (See Boast 2011 for a similar discussion). This archival integrity brings historical accuracy and evidential authority that are important within calls for more informed public recognition of colonial pasts. Nevertheless, as this case underscores, this mode of engagement can also overlook wider tensions that attach themselves to archives without necessarily emerging from them. It is interesting to note that a central thread in the positions taken by European museum directors has been to highlight the 2018 report’s inadequate representation of the deeply complex field of colonial engagements that resulted in the dispersal of objects across former empires. While in the past such archival work has been regarded as a critical ally of decolonial activism, it has been deployed here to more conservative ends. By centering the broader ethical possibilities afforded by collections through scholarly research, the positions adopted by museum directors have deflected specific calls for action by embedding them in a wider framework that simultaneously acknowledges a history of colonial violence while avoiding an obligation to engage in reparative repatriation.

It is perhaps this condition that underlies the real assumption of “safe space” in the ethnographic museum: a safety that emerges from saying the right things while being able to do very little. This is partly to do with the restrictive organizational structures in which museums are located, such as the MAA’s relationship to the University of Cambridge, but it is also associated

with embedded institutional practices. Arguably by focusing on the integrity of archival research within museums, directors, curators, and scholars have been seeking to rebuild the illusion of safety that has offered increasing direction and purpose in a climate of uncertainty around what it is that ethnographic museums are and have the capacity to do. However, in a context where action, instead of words, is demanded by contemporary political realities, modes of archival engagement with colonial pasts that have dominated in ethnographic museums are no longer a sufficient response.

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Figures

Figure 1: Okukor shortly after being removed from the Jesus College dining hall in March 2016.

Courtesy Chris Wingfield.

Figure 2. Photograph of a fireplace in George William Neville's home in Weybridge, Surrey, surrounded by a number of identifiable examples of Benin bronzes. Courtesy Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

Figure 3: The Jesus College Student Union, February 2016, where students voted unanimously in favor of a proposal to repatriate Okukor to Nigeria. The vote took place after a debate about the language of this proposal and a series of changes were made. Courtesy *Varsity Newspaper*.

Figure 4. The Okukor after conservation treatment, including the removal of the wooden plinth, a surface clean, and the removal of wax and a note from its cavity. Courtesy Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

Notes

1 #RhodesMustFall was the social media tag established in connection with the 2015 student-led campaign to remove a memorial statue of white supremacist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, which later spread to Oriel College at Oxford University. Both campaigns became synonymous with moves to decolonize the university curriculum and to acknowledge institutional colonial histories and their legacies, including structural racism.

2 At the time of the events described, both of us were members of the staff at the museum and participated in many of the meetings described herein—Wingfield as a curator and Zetterstrom-Sharp as a postdoctoral research fellow.

3 “Safe space” has become politicized in the context of “culture wars.” In 2015, for example, the then British prime minister criticized UK universities for implementing “safe space” policies that stifle free speech. In the context of museums, the idea that museums can be safe spaces for the discussion of unsafe ideas, associated with the work of Elaine Gurian (1995), has been widespread since the 1990s. See Andrea Witcomb (2006).

4 The BDG was first formed in 2007, consisting of representatives of European museums with significant Benin collections, colleagues from the Nigerian Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM), and representatives of the Benin Royal Court and the University of Ibadan. It had its roots in a major touring exhibition of Benin material, *Benin: Kings and Rituals*, curated by Barbara Plankensteiner (2007). *Benin* brought together material from some of the world’s most significant ethnographic collections, including those in Vienna’s Museum für Völkerkunde, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, and the British Museum in London. Crucially, it also collaborated with the NCMM and gathered support from the reigning king, Omo N’Oba Erediauwa, who granted loans from the royal palace. The focus of the group is the development of a “Benin Plan of Action” that will pave the way toward a permanent relocation of Benin material in public collections to Nigeria.

5 In relation to Benin, the MAA has 415 database records relating to objects associated with Benin City and its immediate environs. Some 254 are associated with Northcote Thomas, who was appointed as a government anthropologist in Nigeria in 1909, and these objects postdate the sacking of Benin City by British forces in 1897. Of the remainder, 49 records are associated with

objects acquired from the dealer W. D. Webster between 1900 and 1905, including a carved tusk and two royal heads, and these were almost certainly looted from the palace. A further 22 objects were purchased from a sale at the auction house Stevens in June 1902, at which 500 pieces deriving from the 1897 expedition were sold. Other material arrived at the museum in smaller numbers throughout the twentieth century by way of a number of private collections.

6 The conservation report noted the removal of glitter during a surface clean, but also recorded the discovery of a note dating from the mid-1990s, written on the Master's place card and bearing the college crest, which had been inserted into the casting cavity of the bronze, no doubt as a student prank. On the morning of the delegation's visit, the note, which had been put out alongside Okukor by conservation staff, was removed from sight.

7 The BDG met in Leiden in October 2018 and in Benin City in July 2019, where members agreed to move forward with plans for a series of long-term loans. This agreement runs in tandem with plans to support the development of a new museum in Benin City under management of the Royal Court of Benin by some of the BDG members, including the British Museum.

8 At least part of the wider public engagement around these issues was arguably crystallized as a consequence of the 2018 Marvel film *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler), in which the British Museum's treatment of African material, acquired during the colonial period, was parodied.

9 See, for example, the response from Tristram Hunt and colleagues (2018), the opinion piece by Thomas (2018), and the article by Hunt (2019).