



COLLOQUIUM: ICONOCLASM, HERITAGE, RESTITUTION

## Destruction or dialectics

### Other iconoclasm and the new heritage culture industry

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This essay examines Zoë Strother's efforts to historicize recent debates about the repatriation of cultural heritage while also situating contemporary protest movements, such as "Rhodes Must Fall," in the long and varied history of iconoclasm on the African continent. Additionally, it considers what might be gained conceptually if iconoclasm is extended to encompass forms of critique directed against dominant image traditions by feminists and critical race theorists. It asks if such an explosion of the concept might deliver us from the colonial histories that try to explain African resistance to colonialism as an effect of African culture.

Keywords: iconoclasm, critical race theory, feminism, performativity, dialectics, "Rhodes Must Fall"

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I begin this response to Zoë Strother's erudite essay with a few preliminary position statements about the politics of restitution: the determination of whether or not coercively obtained objects, texts, works of art, and human remains ought to be returned from the museums of Europe to the places and communities whence they originated should rest exclusively with the communities to which they would be returned. It should not be decided by the holding institution—which would make it a gesture of European self-repair as much as one of decolonial justice. The decision about such return can and should include further determinations about how to enable and nourish the material, institutional and social infrastructures to support the preservation of these objects, the costs of which should be underwritten by the European authorities in whose name the objects were originally taken or who became the beneficiaries of these processes. That is to say, there can be no restitution without reparations. Accepting that the determination of whether to receive the objects lies with those from whom they were stolen does not solve the problem of how to reckon the relation between the originating artisans, individuals, and communities from which the objects were first abducted and those to which they will be restored. Nor is this problem reducible to the matter of legal title and the genealogy of its transfer or the ethical entailments that oblige recipients to pass these objects on to

future generations. Their negotiation is a matter for those who could have expected to inherit them in the course of history, had it gone uninterrupted by colonialism. That these negotiations must take place in the shadow of this dream image long ago betrayed by history does not negate the legitimacy of the process; it merely means that any such decisions will depend on the work of imagination. Restitution will therefore be an aesthetic and not merely a political task. It is in this context that I now turn to Strother's essay.

As Strother rightly notes, the privileging of youth as the audience and recipient of restitution efforts opens the enterprise to questions of futurity. For youth is a generational category whose members will ultimately be displaced by those who come after. To deliver something to "the youth" is to demand that they preserve that bestowal for future youths, even as they leave that status behind. The question, "who might serve as the stakeholders" of restitution, acquires its importance for Strother in the context of such generational displacement. This is not merely because of the implicit demand that youth be transformed into de facto conservators (a role that is perhaps structurally antithetical to the nature of youth) but also because the social heterogeneity of their worlds ensures conflict over the uses to which the objects will be put, the form in which they will appear, and the investments that they will receive.





The sign of iconoclasm animates the disapproval of repatriation efforts on the part of the self-appointed trustees of cultural heritage in the European metropolises. Strother's response to this anxiety is a historically and geopolitically capacious survey of iconoclastic gestures that recognizes their role in conflict as well as the productive cycles of which they are part. She bids us consider iconoclasm not only as destruction but as part of cultural heritage.

Such an argument will surely not assuage the anxieties of the current holders of these objects. It therefore seems important to separate out distinct levels of analysis and to acknowledge that objects transferred as part of a restitution process will be other than those which were taken. The singular remains, which depended for their full existence and significance on the social milieu of their circulation, now also bear a representative function. When conceived as the transfer of cultural heritage writ large, the notion of restitution covers over this fact, imagining the materials that make it up as constituting an original wholeness instead of recognizing the complex history of abstraction and reification to which they have since been submitted. For the sculptures, amulets, inscriptions and mortal remains that were once tokens of beauty, bearers of force, objects of power, and artifacts of artisanal skill are now signifiers and not merely elements of something called cultural heritage. The entailments and obligations that attend cultural heritage are different from those that attend discrete objects whose original circuits and functions were circumscribed by other systems of meaning, whether of political potency or ritual efficacy. Indeed, this is why so many states have legislation and policies devoted to cultural heritage. Any discussion of iconoclasm must grapple with this fact—of the transformed conceptuality within which objects are read as being more than themselves. For just as cultural heritage functions differently in the semiotic field of the global restitution debate from the way, say, an *nkisi* figure from Congo or a gold-embossed leather amulet containing scraps of Quranic text from Mali function in their semiotic worlds, so the implications of destructive impulses toward the abstract value named “cultural heritage” are different from those enumerated by Strother. This difference has profound implications for the affective and psychosocial experience, as well as the analytical significance of iconoclasm.

Two different orders of destruction are encompassed (and perhaps conflated) by the term “iconoclasm” in

Strother's analysis. The first has to do with what she aptly terms a “dialectic of destruction and creation.” As she notes, this dialectic was often misrepresented and coded by Europeans as wholesale destruction because it was interpreted on the basis of European experience—the waves of witchcraft accusation in the Reformation and the events of the French revolution. On this basis, African iconoclasm was assimilated to antifetishism, which in turn validated the accusation that Africans were fetish worshipers. Dismantling this fantasy of nearly total destructiveness, Strother notes that objects could be destroyed or removed from a society for many reasons, including to preserve belief (the aniconism of the Baga is adduced as example), as part of a theater of genuine conversion, or even in the interest of aesthetic renewal—for new forms and imageries were often generated in the aftermath of destruction. This did not prevent such gestures from causing great pain, Strother reminds us, even when the normative purpose of such expurgations was the cleansing or healing of individuals—women in the *Átingà* instance. And indeed, inflicting pain and humiliation appears to have been the goal in some cases, as when young men used the cover of iconoclastic movements to direct their wrath against the elders whom they felt had oppressed them, partly through their use of figural emblems invested with power.

Strother posits a certain continuity between the grief of the elders, whose power objects were assailed by young men vying for authority, and that of the emperor, whose defeat in war was accompanied by the loss of the forms in which his power was represented. In assembling this vast survey, she aims to harness a scholar's purposeful disinterest to the ethical task of listening and thus to reserve judgment on iconoclasm. In the process, an important distinction is lost, one that is central to the specific histories within which colonizers and missionaries either encouraged iconoclastic destruction or, as she notes, profited from it by taking or buying the objects cast off in such movements. For when objects are destroyed in the conflict *between* religious and political systems, however porous and unstable these entities may be—as when the structures housing ancestral icons were burned by Christian missionaries or when Islamists defaced the figures they deem to be idolatrous—the semiotic reordering that takes place is informed by a drive to totality quite different from that which obtains *within* systems whose axiomatic bases remain unchallenged by the destructive act in the dialectic



of self-critical self-renewal. The iconoclasm performed as part of warfare or political conquest aims to eliminate the possibility that the venerated objects or representations of the vanquished will remain available as repositories of force, to be animated by a future resignification. It is intended to terminate the dialectic of destruction and creation and to undermine or annihilate the axiomatic bases on which it rested. It is my belief that the abstraction “cultural heritage” overdetermines the reading of object destruction in these terms, with significant consequences for how we read contemporary protest movements. Indeed, it renders these movements the mere mimesis of colonial conquest.

In her account of the protest movements in South Africa (“Rhodes Must Fall”) and elsewhere that have included the defacement and removal from public of monuments that enshrined representatives of racist and colonial histories, Strother invokes David Freedberg, who assimilates these gestures to censorship and repudiates them on these grounds. She then describes the different ways in which monuments have become targets of destruction depending on the “context” of their installation. What she calls context stands in for the entire signifying milieu within which the object is given to be seen as an object of investment—or not. A statue of Leopold II in the middle of Kinshasa, elevated and centered in public space, is evidently different from one assigned to a leafy cemetery of decrepit statuary. And the explicit abandonment of a monument in a space of death is itself an exhibition of Leopold’s and Belgian colonial denegation. But is this iconoclasm? Or critique?

In discussions about African iconoclasm, there is rarely reference to the explicit debates and critical rationalizations that accompany the elimination of particular works from public spaces—and this is partly because the works are thought of not in their singularity but as representatives of that abstract totality called cultural heritage. Indeed, the spectral nightmare conjured by the European trustees who claim they fear the ruin of cultural heritage is not so much iconoclasm as the presumption of its totalizing automaticity and its enactment by an unthinking mob. In this manner, an irrational Africanity surges up out of the colonial unconscious and over the electrified fences of museal civilization. The argument that iconoclasm has a lengthy history and assumes a multiplicity of forms may not be sufficient to exorcise this phantasm. We might therefore consider what could be gained if these critical gestures were read alongside those that have, for several decades, been at

the center of feminist and critical race theory—which have also often been oriented by a concern with “bad representations” and the need to replace them. Such an approach would demand that iconoclasm be understood as the outcome of considered decisions based on an analysis of how imagery functions as the bearer of ideology, as performative enunciation, and as part of an unceasing conflict of representations. Adopting this method would also require interrogating some forms of critique in feminist and critical race theory *as* iconoclastic.

In their weakest forms, these critiques have devolved into the demand for unanimous and uniformly positive representations of previously denigrated groups. A considerable proportion of popular criticism directed against Hollywood and mainstream media takes this form. But such demands have also generated debate about whether the drive for “better” representations should mean good representations, and, moreover, whether good representations are representations of normative values. For example, Griselda Pollock questioned “the attempt made by certain feminist artists to provide what they termed an alternative and positive imagery of women” (1992 [1977]: 136) on the grounds that despite the fact that it encouraged “political solidarity,” this strand of feminism was beset by “the impossibility of challenging existing imagery without an adequate theory of ideology and representation” (1992 [1977]: 136).<sup>1</sup> Two decades later and from within an entirely different framework, Judith Butler (1997) questioned scholars like Katherine MacKinnon and Rae Langton, who confer on pornographic imagery a performative force that not only denigrates women but incites violence toward them. In this analysis, MacKinnon occupies the place of the iconoclast. While US courts, Butler observes, have regularly taken seriously accusations against pornography that accord its images social and political efficacy (one might want to say fetishistic efficacy—in the doubled sense that the images fetishize women and are fetishized by MacKinnon), they have not deemed gestures like the burning of crosses by the KKK to have such force. And this despite the fact that “the relation between cross-burning and torchings of both persons and properties is historically established” (1997: 57). She notes that “a heightened sexual conservatism works in tandem

1. I am grateful to Oluremi Onabanjo for her helpful insights on this issue.



with an increasing governmental sanction of racist violence" (64). From Butler's perspective, MacKinnon's feminist antipornographic stance inadvertently colludes with the sexual conservatism that was then, as now in the US, sutured to state-sponsored racism. Her position is fundamentally antistatist, and this antistatistism is allied to her disavowal of the totalizing drive in MacKinnon's work, which wants not to critique but to remove misogynist representations of women from the public sphere.

Within debates about black aesthetic production, parallel and sometimes overlapping arguments have been proffered. When, for example, bell hooks writes with respectful but critical suspicion of the Black Arts Movement and indicts Larry Neal's essentialism for suggesting that "everything black was good and everything white was bad," (1990: 107) she advocates not so much choice of representations for spectators (the consumerist idiom of much anticensorship discourse) as a recognition of the possibility for change within every black subject (107). This is somewhat different than advocating for imageries that attest to complexity or ambiguity. Hooks's illustrative example is critics' deeply hostile response to Alice Walker's novel *The color purple* (1983) on the grounds of its ostensibly negative portrayal of black men. Rebutting this denunciation, hooks notes that Walker's character Mister is transformed in the course of the narrative "from a brutal male chauvinist to a compassionate caring presence." She then observes that in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of the novel, this change has been "completely overshadowed" (1990: 69). She adds that Spielberg's cinematic revival of the image of black male brutality is dangerous because of the way "these images *work* in movies" (69; emphasis in original). And this is because they offer to white supremacist culture the image that has already been anticipated and that confirms the violent stereotypy on which it is premised.

A thorough analysis that would do justice to these debates cannot be pursued in this brief space. Yet we might learn from even this truncated thought experiment. One lesson is that the relatively totalizing demands of thinkers like MacKinnon, Rae or Neal, who would replace all negative imageries with affirmative ones, provides something like a mirror image for the debate on African iconoclasm, conceived as a risk for cultural heritage. Above all, the debates are critical contests about representations—both about specific images and about the nature and force of images as they travel in specific media forms and in specific spectatorial con-

texts. Hooks's concern with the relative efficacy of cinematic images compared to novelist ones, like Butler's concern with the relative force of legal pronouncements, does not lead to a demand for censorship, which is to say the destruction of the images. To the contrary, hooks and Butler call for careful critical reading, cultivated in specific relation to traditions of autocritique. Traditions of autocritique are precisely what is threatened when images and objects are ensconced in the discourse of cultural heritage and made to function as token representatives of a totalized value called cultural heritage, at which point they have been entirely severed from the dialectic of destruction and creation invoked by Strother. In other words, it is the discourse of cultural heritage, as a conceptual frame, a value and an institutionality, indeed as a new culture industry in Adorno's sense, that makes these images "work" (to use hooks's idiom) in a manner that summons the totally negating energy of iconoclasm rather than critique. This is because culture lacks any specific referent in this discourse. It is an abstracted value, a form of appearance of universality legitimated by the recourse to "youth" and thus to a futurity that lacks any particular form.

The terminological distinction between iconoclasm as practiced in Africa and image-based ideology critique as practiced by members of the Euro-American academy (which includes much of the discourse in African universities) tells us a great deal. But beyond this recurring and problematic division, the boundary of which is secured not by a distinction between the types of objects addressed (sculpture versus entextualized discourse, for example) but by the category of Africanity itself, the debate on iconoclasm lays bare another issue, with which I would like conclude (bearing in mind that any such conclusion is as provisional as this argument has been schematic). This issue is general and generalizable, and it has both practical and philosophical implications. It amounts to the following: without a theory of the dialectic, negation risks becoming mere destruction. This is the tragedy of much contemporary criticism, just as it is the tragedy of all the holocausts of images that come to us from the annals of colonialism and from the wars that consecrated victory not only with blood but with the destruction of their victims' creations. The tragedy is the incapacity to generate a form and content for the new.

By now, a vast literature proclaiming the death of dialectics has condemned it with all the other teleotheologies that the regressions of recent history have mocked so



cruelly. But dialectical thinking need not be teleological or progressivist, as Walter Benjamin's writing clearly shows. The moment of the *Aufhebung* (the culmination of the dialectic) marks the emergence of something new but it also carries over the trace of what precedes it. In this sense, dialectical "destruction," or more philosophically phrased, negation is by definition not total. It therefore excludes that kind of iconoclasm which takes place at the threshold between social worlds in war and conflict that, as I have already argued, has as its aim the annihilation of the axiomatics within which what Strother calls the dialectic of creation and destruction might take place. For this reason, if we do not want to leave the discourse of iconoclasm behind, we may at least want to recognize that as a concept it operates most powerfully within that totalizing and alienating dis-

course of "cultural heritage" at the point where the legacies of colonialism return in the mirror image of its gravest fears.

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