

# DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
agnes.queensu.ca

## Transatlantic Reverberations

*An Institute for Curatorial Inquiry*

17 August 2022

### SPEAKERS

Romuald Tchibozo, Qanita Lilla, Carolina Manoel, Nomusa Makhubu, Julianna Ribeiro de Silva Bevilacqua

### KEYWORDS

African Art; Colonial Legacies; Lang Collection

### TRANSCRIPT

**Romuald Tchibozo:** Thank you so much Qanita for the invitation. I'm happy to be part of this panel here and know that it is a great challenge to work on a collection, an African collection. I would like also to thank all staff of Queens University and all the people who make this possible. Thank you for the organization offered at this institute. My talk is about two experiences directly relating to the absence of certain object in Benin. They are present in Western collections and the difficulty that this creates for the constitution of knowledge. The first is Gelede. What is Gelede? In order to not dwell on it, it is necessary to know that it is a cultural artefact characteristic of the world view of Yoruba societies spread out in what is today Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. To this day, for example, locations of it origin remains unresolved between those who believe that it is located in the former kingdom of Kétou in Benin and those who on the basis of various oral source believe that the origin of Gelede is in Ilobi, a hamlet located in the present day Federal Republic of Nigeria. The main reasons are the important successive migration characteristic of this ethnic group, which gradually left large areas in the West African sub region. The current general characteristic of Yoruba culture date back to a very long time before the Christian era, to the emergence of the Nok culture as pointed out by Fagg in 1963, Willet in 1971, and Drewal in 1990. These are the characteristics which, transmitted from generation to generation and having undergone many mutations through, on the one hand, the various contributions of the people encountered and on the other hand, the evolution of the materials used that have take shape and result in what we know today. Here I present some Gelede mask, but all of this masks are not in Benin anymore but are in Musée of Quai Branly in Paris. That why I talk about it. Despite the patriarchal system that governed these people, the main function of the Gelede is to celebrate our mothers and ask for their indulgence in solving the problems of society. Therefore, all manifestations of the Gelede are ad hoc, that means linked to a specific problem of a society. Often very difficult problems that the society is experiencing at the time (allowed for) the decision to dance the Gelede. The choice of the superstructure that we trivially call 'mask' that accompanies the ceremonies is then fundamentally linked to the pending problem. Thus, no mask ever resembles another, and that is why after this first use, it is pieced throughout the ears or nostrils to signify that it should not be used for anything else. This led to the huge misunderstanding that resulted in the destruction of the archives of these societies created by the colonial administrators. At the very least, an irreparable (gap) was created since most of the masks have left the country. Indeed, each manifestation of the gelede shows that the mask constitutes a revealing document: of the history, the psychological stage, the social progress,

philosophic and artistic life of a society concerned. Moreover, the name, the same skill, as well as the ability to make the imaginary real depends on each period and each artist. Therefore, each mask that disappears along with all the immaterial aspects that characterizes it, notably the songs and dances is an archive that has burned. It is what Jean Gabus underlined by writing "each object is a witness of something: history, techniques, forms, function and often of several things at the same time, if not of all, and that in various degrees." However, at the same time as this objects were being collected, a reinforced separation between Europeans and non-Europeans was implemented or even staged. Because of the object on display, the men had to be kept at the distance or be inscribed in a relationship of domination. As a result, museum in the west have invested little in the study of the object, particularly the provenance, but also their inventory. Until 2016, there was no research on the origin of African pieces in many, many, many museum. We'll talk about masks later. The second is Bocio. It is as Joseph Adande refers to in 1996, a sculpture of nothing" always roughly carved and often installed around living quarters. These places are privileged for the manifestation of great magic and panentheism because everything is possible there. The bocio's functions is to watch over the houses in this environment. It is also often designed to prevent death from taking hold of someone in some cases, or in others to fully facilitate it. I will not insist on what the bocio represent in Beninese culture. It'll be more a different to expose here my experience in relation to the production of knowledge on this kind of sculpture. In 2013, while I was in a research program in Berlin for about a year, one of my students wanted to do his Masters on the following topic; "L'art sculptural Agonlin : essai d'analyse stylistique (Contribution à une meilleure lisibilité de l'histoire à partir de l'étude du Bocio et du masque Guèlèdè)". I say that in French because that was in French, [foreign language]. He wanted to try to studies bocio's culture but from the perspective of style evolution. But the requirement of such studies are mainly related to the establishment of a sufficient corpus giving a long term perspective. The unceasing efforts of the student who has been several time in the field of research, which he knows well because he has already carried out the research for the Master's degree, came to nothing. The Agonlin country does not count many bocio anymore, which are even destroyed, sold, or taken away. It was therefore recommended to go and see the ethnographic museum in Porto-Novo. And all this bocio I show here are from the of Ethnographic Museum of Porto-Novo. But they were in museums because they are heavy and long so they could not transport them. That remain in Benin because it's difficult to transport them. The Agonlin country does not count many bocio anymore which are either destroyed, sold or taken away. It was therefore a recommended to go and see the Ethnography Museum in Porto-Novo. (But) this did not solve the problem ever, but the important issue that could arise even if there were a solution at the museum, is the data disruption that could be created in relation to his field of research. The museum in fact reserves object from all over Benin and could naturally not have only bocio coming only from Agonlin and thus not enough element to feed the copies. As a result, the subject was abandoned, because to succeed in a study of style with a chance of arriving at a good analysis over time, it is necessary to count 30 or 50 years of regular production and then of possibility of reconstitution. Since colonization, sculptural production has changed direction, seeking to satisfy more a target of colonial administrators and tourists done to continue in the same vein. Worse, the introduction of Christianity made both the producers and the sculpture disappear because of the demonization of the latter. After independence, although there were still a few sculptors, bocio's sculpture, declined and the region was almost completely impoverished. To summarize, it must be said that in addition to the absence of the object due to the massive explore during colonization, successive evangelization, but also clandestine sales, there is a difficulty of

identifying the evolution of the style of these sculptures and to succeed in organizing the production of knowledge on their mythical religious environment. These two examples show the complexity of the studies to be undertaken with regard to the collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Our Zoom meetings have identified some avenues that need to be pursued. We also need to invent other (categories) in relation to the particularity of this collection, which was first private before finding itself today in a collection in a space open to the public. This mode of collection of this environment is never the same. My experiences of (African) collections in Germany have taught me that. We'll come briefly on the gelede mask. The problem with this mask of gelede is that this term, this term the culture is about knowledge and domination because you have the ethnic and so I am not sure that this mask has served at ceremonies. We need to continue the research to know exactly when they carved this mask. The second problem is that always agreed polemic about African sculptures because in 19 -- not 19 -- no the 14th century, people who collected the first African sculpture believed that Africans had no notion of colours. So every sculpture in Africa is monochrome. But we have some sculpture from Africa, and I am not the first who will speak about that, [inaudible] speak of that since 1960s. There is a colour on this culture in Africa that means people also have notion of colours. We have to discuss that. This culture is, I think, also a bit problematic because what is -- that is for the first, not for normal days. And if we take into account what is about gelede, gelede ceremonies is every time to solve a difficult situation in the society. We can also there ask where and who did that. And this is possible use because there is a symbol of Chango. Maybe you have already heard about Chango. It's a divinity. And this, we discussed that with the people of [inaudible] and it is possible that was used for. And the last, the last is that this gelede, mask gelede, they continue to bring out gelede, even a contemporary gelede. That means the field is really impoverished from the gelede. Thank you for your attention.

[ Applause ]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you Romuald. Now we'll have Carolina's video.

**Carolina Manoel:** Hi everyone. My name is Carolina Manoel. I am a PhD student at Queens in art history and I'm doing a practicum with Dr. Qanita Lilla at Agnes this Summer and this is part of my research that I've been developing with her. I'm also supervised by Professor Dr. Juliana Bevilacqua. And the name of this presentation is called "Language Reflections in Archival Materials" from the Lang Collection of African Art. And I would like to apologize upfront for the birds. Language bears witness to the way we see and experience the world and our place within it. For institutions that have colonial legacies like art museums, the English language is saturated with terms that reinforce domination and hierarchy. This excerpt contained in a catalogue of "With Opened Mouths" on display at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre from August 2021 was written by Dr. Qanita Lilla, associate creator of the institution. Within a specific context such as that of Agnes and its respective Lang Collection of African Arts, it provokes us to think about language, the mediator of our relations, and its use and is used. Language is capable of bringing together or separating universes in their differences. This is the subject of this brief explanation, how the African works in the Lang Collection have been scripted and presented by language since their acquisition as pieces of art by a museum, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. According to Catherine Hale, the Lang Collection donated to Agnes in 1984, is the result of 40 years of acquisitions of African pieces by the couple Justin and Elisabeth Lang between 1940 and 1980. Comprising more than 570 objects, the collection has

different origins primarily from West African peoples with objects in different sculptural forms. According to Hale, at the time of the donation, the collection was considered to be the largest Canadian collection of African art in private hands. Also according to this research, the Langs would have participated in a select group of African art lovers in Canada, a network of connections responsible in large part for the African pieces present in Canadian institutions until today. Using Herbert Gans and Pierre Bourdieu, Hale argues that the collection of African objects made by the Langs as well as their subsequent acquisition by Agnes participates in a context governed by a culture of taste, largely interested in what she called modernist primitivism. That said, a video 1986 and a version of its script about the Lang collection produced when the works were acquired by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, as well as two other exhibition catalogues, visual variations from 1987 and Heroic Figures in 1988. Both exhibitions by Jacqueline Fry with pieces from the collection will guide this reflection. My premise is that this archive of materials provides a good basis through which to examine early theoretical underpinnings of the Lang collection. My objective will be to problematize these perspectives. With access to your first script of the video and to the video in question mentioned, entitled respectively, "The Lang Collection in Cultural Perspective," and, "The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art." It is possible to reflect on the language assumed to present the highlights of these extensive collection. The distinction between the script I had access to and the video itself is necessary and interesting as the text has been modified to fit in a more compact format. Thus, the access to these two documents reviews an important stage in the curatorial process, the one that builds a discourse on the presentation of the works. In the video "The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art," images of art makers and songs with artificially selected rhythmic beats set the stage for the presentation of the collection. The collection is limitedly represented by some examples of objects subjected to categorizations. From now on, let me introduce some problematic excerpts from this script. Excerpt 1; As is the case in western culture, African sculptures are created within the recognizable limitations of their own art traditions. Western culture or the idea of the West, distinguished from a polarity with the rest as explained by Stuart Hall in his 1992 'Essential Essay' is often a vague and stereotyped image just as much as the marginalized cultures that are deemed to be called 'primitive'. However, the idea of the West is related here and we will be cited by many authors as a hegemonic and standard setting place, creating asymmetrical relations with the other. As much as the excerpt, which appears only in the scripts, strives to argue that recognizable limitations exist not only in the traditions from which African sculptures originate, but also in Western culture, this is almost never said about Western art. This happens because Western culture is based on the idea of 'civilization': known to be the holder of history and multiple knowledges that does not recognize limits. The hegemonic thinking feeds on these asymmetries in whose origin all sorts of binarisms reasons can be found, such as the Cartesian distinctions between body and mind, art and craft, form and content, masterpiece and object. When African works are moved to the other side of the polarity inside museums, the contextualist and formalist approaches to them compete for space. This was especially true in the late 80s. Among the texts in the catalogue of heroic figures of 1998 in an Agnes exhibition, Nigerian philosopher, artist, and curator Nkiru Nzegwu discusses these two approaches. She explains that for contextualists, information about the origin and customs that surround the piece are essential for understanding it, while formalists believe that information about the context of a work suffocates the experience of aesthetic appreciation, simply capturing the formal elements. Although this discussion still exists, the inseparability between both is increasingly recognizable. Excerpt 2; experts can, in this way, often identify the village from which a carving comes or even the individual artists

who produced it. After generally identifying the ways in which artists receive their training on the continent, mentioning apprenticeships and the gender distinction that places men as major object producers, the text presents in this excerpt the figure of the expert who is capable to identify and categorize productions based on a vast knowledge. Such knowledge can reach as the text states, even identify the identity of the individual who produced the piece. In the 'Visual Variations' catalogue from 1987, the second exhibition featuring pieces from the Lang Collection, creator Jacqueline Fry writes a text that above all is sensitive and careful in dealing with the works as well as the entire issue of African arts in Western contexts. However, with regards to the authorship of the works or other gaps and knowledge about them, the text adopts a silencing posture. Although Fry consciously positions herself in relation to these issues at the beginning of the text, she seeks to accept limits of interpretation, avoiding the lack of information about the artist so that this does not impede the objective of the exhibition to demonstrate all the inventiveness of African sculpture. Fry chooses to speak of visual variations and the possibility, although obvious, that they are a sign of imagination. By adopting the concept of visual variations, Fry avoids potentially slippery points, complicating understandings of style as she draws a distinction between this concept and visual variations. This conscious yet silence posture avoids the problem of African productions displaced from their context. Excerpt 3; the sculptures made for this purpose be seen as falling to five basic categories as follows. Spiritual and ceremonial sculpture, devotionals objects, devinational and magical objects, power and status objects, and decorated domestic objects. These categories also do appear in the video and reflect the ways in which African works are classified and organized according to Western distinctions. The Western scholar determined not only an organization for the understanding of this vast heterogeneous production, but also inevitably uses terms such as 'magical' and 'power', conceptions of Western values that reflect in translation, risking imprecision and ignorance about relevant values within the context of origin. In other books that I had access to in the Agnes Library in African art such as "Art in Africa" by Tibor Bodrogi and "African Art: Its Background and Traditions" by Rene Wassing, both from 1968, use of problematic terms is very evident such as "exotic" and "art of simple people", as well as the affirmation of an opposition between Western art and African art. In the case of Bidrogi's work, there's also distinction between African art and prehistoric art. In addition, the ruler of Western values appears, in the author's insistence, on giving great prominence to modern art in order to speak of African pieces. Even in books such as "African Art in American Collections" by Robbins and Nooter, published in 1989 and therefore more current than the first exhibitions of the Lang Collection bring forth retrograde conceptions of Africa. Although we are talking about old books on African art, many of these conceptions are crystallized and outdated in museum archives, as is the case with the information we still have about African works at Agnes. In the registration of which piece there is the use of inappropriate terms based on Western conceptions, there are things that cannot be arbitrarily translated because they relate to a very specific African world view. It is worth remembering that the reflection put forward by Carolyn Dean in 2006 when thinking of a supposed translation for the casual term [foreign language] as being artist. She asks, "What has been lost or added or confused in the translation?" Excerpt 4; "it's noteworthy that division of labour by sex in other crafts varied from region to region". Another example, music was of equal importance in these ceremonies. The excerpts are written in the past tense. Sally Price's "Primitive Arts in Civilized Places" attends to temporality issues. She cites William Rubin from 1984 for whom triple art expresses a collective feeling rather than an individual one. Primitive artists, according to this thought, would be unthinking and undifferentiated beings. Because of that, these peoples would not experience

historical changes. Africa and Oceanian peoples would not have history or memory. The history of primitive art is written in the present, but it is chosen to portray[Africa] in the past tense. From Johannes Fabian's "Time and the Other" 1983, we learnt that the social cultural nature of certain conceptions of temporality as opposed to the strictly chronological ones. For Fabian, topological time is mostly used in discussions of primitive art. It contrasts with physical time. According to Sally Price, Fabian's analysis helps to understand why the so-called primitive art objects produced in the late 1980s to the present moment are systematically excluded from the Modern art category. To contrast Modern and primitive is to use a temporal metaphor that distances two cultures that are historically contemporary. Excerpt 5; among the devotional objects, fertility figures are of particular interest. Robert Swain, Director of Agnes Centre in 1984 at the time of the acquisition of the Lang Collection, wrote a foreword in the catalogue of 'Visual Variations'. 'This is not an exhibition of masterpieces'. According to Swain, the diversity of types of pieces offered a plantation for exploring the visual form. As in the excerpt from this script, Swain's speech indicates that there are selection criteria to determine which works deserve to be highlighted, whether for extensive reasons or the supposed authenticity attributed to the piece for its proven use in a community specific practices or for the provenance of collections that give it a pedigree. These criteria exist and belong to Western culture. Sidney Kasfir, in her famous and controversial text, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow" 1992 questions the cloudiness of this judgment. Who decides and how do they assure the authenticity of an object? Dr. Qanita Lilla, in the catalogue of "With Opened Mouths," pays attention to the history of the (African) collection as something more real than the exhibitions tell. tells the history of objects that are not considered masterpieces, that do not have a pedigree nor claim to be authentic, story, Instead according to her (their story is) of trauma and imprisonment. "The collection is a place where the ancestors lie isolated, wrapped in plastic, stored for extended periods, reinforcing the imperial taxonomies of display in a suspended dream world. This dream world, according to the creator, is the world of the unseen." As these cases studies have shown, working with language can play a decisive role in transforming the way we look at objects from Africa, bringing the unseen to the world of the seen. The discussion about the use of language and what it can reveal to us about our own conceptions of the world is very interesting and especially relevant for rethinking collections -- for rethinking collections, recording and creation practices at Agnes Etherington Art Centre. In the records of works in the Lang collection, attention is drawn to the imprecise terms in which they are described, as well as the many works that lack information. It is necessary if not to fill in the gaps with information to discuss this absence and misused terms.

[ Applause ]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you. Our next speaker is Professor Nomusa Makhubu who is Associate Professor in Art History and Deputy Dean of Transformation in the Humanities at the University of Cape Town. And she's had many prestigious awards and so she'll be joining us now. Thank you.

**Nomusa Makhubu:** Hi. The joys of being short [brief laughter].

[ Music ]

[ Singing ]

**Nomusa Makhubu:** Good morning. So you can move when the music plays [brief laughter]. I trust you're keeping well. It's been a thought-provoking past few days, and I think one that has necessitated that we rethink, reframe, you know, or rethink our frame of mind at least. But I think particularly, especially in thinking about the transformative processes of institutions in different parts of the world, but also particularly institutions on the African continent. Now, South Africa, of course is particularly different, and I'll talk about why. Before I do that, I wanted to just quickly make a reference to the song that you've just heard. So that was Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte in the song Wenyuk uMbombela. uMbombela that they're referring to is a train, right? It's the trains that in South Africa were constructed to move the labour from the areas that were created for Black people, the Bantustans, to the mines and back, right? So it's movement, it's internal migration, but also it's contained migration. But interestingly enough, the word uMbombela in SiSwati also means a gathering in a small place. And I wanted to begin with that song because it reminded me of the image from the exhibition With Opened Mouths where you have these gatherings of the sculptures from the Lang Collection. But of course, behind that you have the sound of the ocean. And of course, this enables me to begin to think about the importance and significance of movement of itinerancy and how we can begin to think about the impact of particular types of movement, but what movement should mean for how we rethink museums today, especially within the African continent. So I come into this conversation from several entry points. First, in my interest in African art as social practice. I run a platform called 'itinerancy', which facilitates dialogues on African arts and social engagement. Second, in my interest in transforming institutions. And Qanita, you'd already mentioned that I work as the Deputy Dean of Transformation at the university. Prior to that, I was and still am a member of the Black Academic Caucus at the university, but also chairing the works of art committee, which oversees and manages the university's art collection. So already being in some ways caught in these conversations and discussions about what we do with the collections that we have -- that we have in the institutions. So part of these portfolios have been to address the questions that all institutions are facing. And that's the question of imperialist legacies, you know, through which those institutions are built. But we expect that this question would look different from the African continent. You know, for us, of course, it's about once the return happens, what kinds of institutions do we build? Do we simply just mimic the kinds of museums that have always existed? But what kinds of institutional cultures do we then also generate? South Africa, of course, is different. For many African countries, the call is for the restitution of objects. For South Africa, it's not necessarily that there are objects that must, yes, of course, there may be some, in some collections that must be returned to us, but that South Africa itself has to return collections from other African countries. So we stand in the position of colonized and colonizer, which is a quandary. And so for me, this question has always necessitated a need to attend to spatial politics, especially in South Africa. You know, so you know, whenever one encounters the museums, and I think I'm really grateful to Qanita for having given us the chance and opportunity to really feel and be with the Lang Collection. And in my mind, I keep thinking, what happens when we close our eyes, when we no longer have something to see, and we hear it? What are the journeys that we might learn from listening? Because you walk into the vault and you're confronted with a very heavy silence. But then also the minute you start to close your eyes, you start to realize that there's a cacophony of sounds. But of course, museums are constructed with this, not just with the idea of this missing silent sound but also of course, they are a particular representation of geography. This we all know, right? It's about the compression of time and space. But also often the way that they

displayed are based on a particular kind of or at least on the basis of geographical taxonomies. So in many cases, when we look at these objects, we may not know who the maker is. We may speculate on the provenance; we may think about the people who collected the object. But we are almost always certain of the region objects -- of the regions to which the objects can be traced. And sometimes we do that, you know, because of stylistic aesthetics and so on. But also of course the entry of these objects into personal collections. So with these objects, of course we are confronted with a kind of resounding of skewed geographies, but also particularly the unfinished and suspended journeys. These objects always mark places that will never exist again. I'm reminded here of the adage that you can never step in the same river twice because it always changes so rapidly that it's completely a different constituency the second time you step in it. And it makes me feel in some ways that there is this experience that African art collections are these mournful spaces. We're mourning geographies that will never exist again and we're mourning spaces that we can never recuperate. But there's also something hopeful in that experience in the possibilities of the pathways that we should be seeking to create. But when one thinks about those journeys, and particularly collecting, collecting in my view as a kind of journaling of the collector's travels, and in many cases, it is about, you know, not just possessing the object, it's about possessing place. So if you think about collectors in those days, it wasn't just that I have this particular sculpture, but look, I have been there, I have been to that place. So for me then, any meaningful talk of decolonization has to take very seriously the question of space and territory. I am reminded here of the way that Henri Lefebvre put it, and he says, "Any revolutionary project, whether utopian or realistic must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the re-appropriation of the body in association with the re-appropriation of space into a non-negotiable part of its agenda." It makes sense therefore to consider a peripatetic approach through which we recall the nomadic wandering itinerant lives of objects and the people from whom they were taken. Whatever our curatorial result, it would seem to me that to hear these resounding would necessitate movement of the unsettled, restless in transit beings we encounter in the carceral geographies of museums. So this presentation is arranged in the sense of three vignettes. They're not necessarily related. They are about different locations. But again, this is an exploratory discussion of the personal experience of some of the collections that we've encountered in South African museums. But again, also the encounter with the Lang Collection. So I start with the first one.

[ Music ]

**Nomusa Makhubu:** Okay. So many of you may be familiar with this phrase, 'Doctor Livingstone, I presume'? You might have of course seen it in multiple movies. And I don't -- I think there is a questioning of whether the statement was actually made, was actually journaled in Henry Morton Stanley's journeys to the Congo under the instruction of King Leopold. And of course, we know of the kind of violence that journey represented. But I won't necessarily go into that detail. Of course, the music here is to begin to think about particular types of journeys. So let's imagine this, it's 1942. The artist Irma Stern sets out to travel to the Congo. While there she acquires mats, figurines, masks. Well, of course, during this period, she also travels to Dakar, to Zanzibar. She gets doors, window frames that become part of her paintings, but of course, become part of her personal collection. And today all of these objects that she's collected are now housed in a house that she bought in 1927, in a house that today is referred to as The Firs. And it's in Rondebosch in Cape Town. And of course, you know, this was, of course, this was the question we were faced with, what



do we do with the West African works that are sitting in South Africa? Because we now are like Western museums who are sitting with West African collections. But if you take, of course, if you start to think about, I mean, you know, I mean, obviously there's not enough time to do this. If you start to think about the individual journeys of all of those objects and the way that they trace Irma Stern's own movement, take for example, the Luba Caryatid stool prior to its journey to Rondebosch in South Africa, the stool would've been used during inaugurations of chiefs. But also one begins to realise that it's also part of a not yet heard of social life and journeys. Irma Stern, like many Europeans in the 1930s and 1960s would've travelled and perhaps to quote LaNitra Berger, Stern's travels represented a period of South African internationalism that began to decline with apartheid introduction in 1948. The South African audience was curious and interested in other African cultures, perhaps as a confirmation that White supremacy was an effective way to maintain a high standard of living. It also would reflect that as a period of accumulation of African objects from other African countries by White South Africans. It cemented a particular kind of ethnic separatism that was also taking shape in South African, particularly the social engineering, the spatial engineering of apartheid in which people were then separated by race. Similar kinds of logic that we see in the way that museums are, but also when you think, when we start to zoom out of the museum as a space itself, we begin to realize that the location of museums in South Africa, were in spaces that were meant to create particular types of settler publics of a growing middle class, bourgeoisie that then of course would have these cultural objects, but the idea of being in the world all at the same time. So in many ways, African collections in South Africa have a similar kind of dislocatedness as in European and American museums. And we were faced with this question about access, because of course, when in 2015 the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement started, the question was, you know, 'How do we provide access, because we have these public places that cannot be accessed.' What apartheid special planning did was to separate people, but also to take them very far from the city centres, but also very far from the museums. So how do you take museums to people? Because obviously the bigger goal is to change that kind of spatial planning. And you need, you know, leaders with serious vision [brief laughter] for that kind of work. But it didn't actually make sense, you know? So when we realized, oh my goodness, but we are taking these works to their so-called communities, these communities would have no resonance with any of these objects. And I remember someone in the group saying, oh, but maybe we then have to appeal to the migrant communities from West Africa who are in Cape Town. And again, you know, very problematic way of thinking because even in Cape Town, there isn't a homogenous migrant community, West African migrant community that one can so easily refer to. And I mean, one begins -- and again, I mean, one can begin to see, you know, I think something that Qanita you also mentioned the particular crucial nature of understanding the way that space works, but also again, the ironies that are embedded in the trans-location of European publics onto African landscapes and what that has meant for the people who were there, who occupied those places before, and perhaps in more nomadic senses than we often make it out to be. So you know, there is this bizarre disconnect and estrangement with African art collections that necessitates movement. And if you think about the works in the Irma Stern Collection by remaining captive in the house, in the museum, the more they recede from public life and from the social imaginary. Okay, I'm going to go to the next vignette. And I'll try and wrap up everything because I also realize that I might go a little over time. Second vignette.

[ Musical Instruments Playing ]

**Hugh Masekela:** [Singing] There's a train that comes from Namibia and Malawi. There's a train that comes from Zambia and Zimbabwe. There's a train that comes from Angola and Mozambique. From Lesotho, from Botswana, from Swaziland, from all the hinterlands of Southern and Central Africa. This train carries young and old African men who are conscripted to come and work on contract in the golden mineral mines of Johannesburg and its surrounding Metropoli. Sixteen hours or more a day for almost no pay. Deep, deep, deep down in that belly of the earth when they are digging and drilling for that shiny, mighty evasive stone, or when they dish that mishmash mash food into their iron plates with the iron shackle. Or when they sit in their stinky, funky, filthy flea-ridden barracks and hostels, they think about the loved ones they may never see again, because they might already have been forcibly removed from where they last left them, or wantonly murdered in the dead of night by roving and marauding gangs of no particular origin, we are told. They think about their lands and their herds that were taken away from them with the gun and the bomb and the tear gas, and the gatling and the cannon. Now, when they hear that choo-choo train, [inaudible], and smoking them, and pushing them and popping them, the crying and the scheming and [inaudible] and woo, woo.

**Nomusa Makhubu:** Okay, that is Hugh Masekela. Okay. Very popular now [brief laughter] revival of Hugh Masekela, but of course he's referring to, again, the train, which was part of the migrant labour system in South Africa. And you'll remember Cecil John Rhodes, of course, planned to create the railway all the way from Cape to Cairo in order not only to move bodies and labour but also of course to move mineral resources. But of course, Hugh Masekela enables me now to think about different types -- a different type of movement or different types of journeys, not just of course of the European settler collector, but the Africans themselves. But also particularly on the question of labour. Now, the other thing that one encounters, whenever you, you know, one experiences whenever you encounter African art collections is also, is again, the silence around labour. Again, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes we not know -- we may not know the maker, but the question about who laboured is also almost always a silent question. But one of course that is very crucial and necessary to positioning labour sits centrally in the usurping of space and territory and the exercise of power. And in many ways, you know, African art collections almost seem to be displayed in ways that labour is eclipsed. Now, I want to think about the journey of one artist. And again, there are many, but particularly Ernest Mancoba, who in 1938 leave South Africa to go to France. Part of Ernest Mancoba's work and of course, you know, he stays there for a long time, starts a family there, becomes part of CoBrA. I've sat in conference presentations where there are people who can talk about CoBrA and say absolutely nothing about the labour that Ernest Mancoba contributed to CoBrA. But a part of a series of works by Ernest Mancoba depict the Kota reliquary figures. Now, of course, a very curious addition because Kota reliquary figures would have never been something that is used in South Africa particularly. So it's a particular kind of frame of reference that comes up in his experience with European modernism. And, but they, you know, his exploration of Kota reliquary figures is also particularly interesting. So not only is he dealing with the representation of this sculptural object, but it also starts to dissipate into marks. It you know, almost starts to become invisible. You yourself, as a viewer have to start to make up that shape of the Kota reliquary figure. But also you begin to think about what this kind of reference to particular notions of Africanness in relation to West African sculptures might have meant for the formation of modern art and particularly African artists like Gerard Sekoto. So post-independence and what Chika Okeke-Agulu refers to as post-colonial modernism, something that actually may be better defined as neo-colonial

modernism relied on the idea of these kinds of works and these kinds of collections as reference for formulating what it meant to be modern and African. But remember, there was also a time of complete overhaul of our understanding of geography, because this is when the idea of nations had to be formulated a new. So they're very, you know, shifting from those ideas of tribes to the formulation of modern nation states. But for someone like Ernest Mancoba, of course it becomes particularly interesting to have this insertion, this travelling of the Kota reliquary figure into this kind and it -- or rather travelling across time and into this kind of reincarnation of modern art. Now, something that's interesting about the Kota reliquary figure is that of course, it also speaks to the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. It is about -- it's something that would be placed on a basket in respect of family members and ancestors. But again, I mean, I think it's particularly interesting because as much as we can talk about the disconnect in South Africa with those particular collections, it's interesting that many of the South African artists, Ernest Mancoba, but even Gerard Sekoto would have worked with a sort of broader notion of what African art actually meant, but developing it as modern art. Now, again, one can go on for much longer about this particular vignette, but I'll stop here for the interest of time and move to the next one, third vignette. We are almost there.

[ Music ]

**Nomusa Makhubu:** Okay. So this is [inaudible] it says, we -- the lyrics say we will leave the township. And I started to think about what kind of geography this might be, especially when we start to think about, of course, the museum. In South Africa, we can't avoid it because whenever you start to talk about excess, it's about when and whenever we start to talk about communities, it's about black townships specifically. And the reason for that, I've already stated and of course this song says, we will leave the township, but I, you know, one starts to actually realize that museums themselves also have -- they're internal townships. And so how do we transcend those internal townships, those black townships, the ghettos within museums. This particular vignette is not necessarily about the museum or the collection at all, but I want to kind of think about broader. So if these objects are to travel, if these museums are to open, what are the kinds of terrains we might be encountering? What are the kinds of public spheres we might be encountering? One of the projects that I'm currently working on at the moment is based on an area called Evaton. Now, Evaton is particularly interesting because it wasn't actually established by the apartheid government in the 1950s following The Group Areas Act. It's actually, it's a miracle, in fact, because in -- most of the plots in Evaton were purchased by Black land owners in 1902. This is something we were talking about yesterday. Now, if you can imagine in the 1800s, this would've been the time when the Dutch descendants, who today of course, we refer to as Afrikaners, would have travelled northwards into the country and would've settled in this area. So in the 1800s, this area belonged to Afrikaner owners. But given the Anglo-Boer War those Afrikaner owners, and I think at the end of the Anglo-Boer War, towards the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902 those owners, of course, then sold it to two British colonels. But again, because at the end of the war, there were not many resources, Britain also did not want to spend money sending resources to, you know, to you know, following the war. So those two British colonels then decided to sell it to black landowners. And but at the time, of course, it was very difficult for Black people to own land. You couldn't own land in your own name. You had to buy it in trust, which means that you, even if you bought it yourself you would have to have it signed off by a White person. But in that year, 1904, well in those years, 1904, 1905,

one case was won which showed that actually there is no legislative basis upon which they can say Black people can't own land. So luckily at that point, Black people bought large tracts of land and could become independent in that particular area. Now, by 1905, the African American missionaries, African what is it, the AME church bought land in Evaton in South Africa, and of course, established institutions like Wilberforce College, which was of course named after Wilberforce here in the United States. So you have, of course, these very interesting transatlantic journeys that we actually don't expect, might have also created the kinds of geographies into which we imagine the movement of these objects will take place. Now, of course, by 1913, South Africa passed the Land Act, which meant that most of the arable land, in fact, 90% of the arable land would be given to White owners, and the Black majority would be contained within 10% of that land. And so over time, of course, the, you know, Evaton became very you know, cosmopolitan space with Black and White land owners' kind of non-racial space, if one can call it that. But only by the 1950s, their apartheid government started moving White people to different parts of Evaton, but eventually outside of Evaton but also forcibly removed other people where the White areas were, where areas were declared White into Evaton. So today, Evaton, of course, represents that kind of history, but also the hidden layers into which -- into the kinds of terrains that we're talking about. There is not a single museum in Evaton. And the recent project that we did was about talking about what, you know, what kinds of representation of heritage should be -- should we be exploring within spaces like black townships, but also particularly spaces that may be seen as black townships, as black townships that were formulated in the 1950s were very small little places really just to house the labour that would then service White South Africa. Whereas Evaton, of course, differs significantly from this. And of course, in the latter years, Evaton, becomes really just sort of the centre of the politics, the bus boycotts, the rent boycotts. But again, I think also that happens because by the 60s and 70s it became a sore point. So they began systematically dispossessing people of their land by raising rent, but also creating things like permits that people had to pay for. And then forcing them into a kind of municipalization, which meant that either they sacrifice part of that land or they don't get any sort of municipal services. But I mean, again, although this particular vignette has nothing to do with actual objects not that it doesn't have anything to do with actual objects, but it allows us to begin to think about how problematic these spaces are. And again, what are the broader unseen museums and heritages of apartheid and colonialism? So the place or places themselves become artifice and artifacts. And so the study of museums and decolonization of museums and our curatorial practice can't but engage in this, in the kind of spatial sacrifices that are facing us. So these scenarios are kinds of hypothesis, and again, as I said, very exploratory on my part, but they reflect multiple journeys within countries like South Africa within the African continent, but also beyond it. Itinerancy and the historical and habitual restlessness of objects and people may enable us to carve untrodden pathways in the framing of institutions and the publics that they inhabit. So taking curatorial itinerancy as a practice of mobility, fluidity, and the restless quest for social engagement and justice, these reflections traverse across time to speculate on what it may mean to humanize classical African art collections. So what do we mean when we begin to particularize in terms, when we talk about communities, when we particularize, what are the terrains that we're actually talking about? And, you know, does that actually, you know, we would, and in many ways we would need to begin to undo those geographies first. So while many African art collections signified disposition, displacement and capture, there is continued movement. Their transatlantic journeys, their dissociation from everyday life and the pursuit of their reintegration beyond institutional and national boundaries to precarious and often uneven publics. And again, I

mean this is a kind of contrast to the kind of immobile and slow to transform institutions which would require for us to develop modes of generating and disseminating knowledge through nomadic approaches. And in contrast to the permanence and hubris that is displayed in the domineering architecture of imperial and colonial institutions. And in this way, we begin to think about knowledge as much more fluid, social and relational. And to think about it as a kind of epistemic justice that needs to be pursued, which would involve the recognition of multiple sites in which knowledge is generated and exchanged, it would necessitate moving between boundaries and reclaiming the collective right to space. And in some ways, you know, it's reminiscent of the Zulu saying that "ukuhamba kuwukubona," to move, to travel is to see. But it also means that to learn one must make a journey, and it feels as if we've suspended these journeys in terms of the collections. And so and movement is transformative since it potentiates new encounters. And so you know, if we begin to think of our own curatorial practices or ourselves as curatorial practitioners and think of ourselves as pedagogical nomads in this way we begin to transgress multiple forms of social boundaries. And even from the, you know, from, even in terms of class, not just race and gender. This would mean that curatorial practice also becomes more responsive to the change in conditions within which senses of community could be created, which are also responding to the geopolitics of colonialism and subsequent national independence. Therefore, even the way that we think about the geographical scale of community which could specify sometimes local community of practice, but could also be extended to refer to, for example, the diaspora, national and global political communities of transatlantic -- -- Pan-Africanist kind of understanding and also the acknowledgement that there are communities that are constantly being created and exchanges and trans, you know, transforming and changing communities. So again, I mean, I think one of the ideas that I lean on when I talk about the importance of itinerancy in our curatorial practices, I lean on an idea by Emeka Okereke, he calls it kinopolitics, which is the social politics of movement, the word kinetic and politics. But it's the social politics of movement within countries and across their borders which of course he defines as I am, where I think and in this way one can begin to think about a sense of transness as a central part of our practice. Not just transness in terms of transformation, but also the transit. And as I said, many of these objects are like in transit objects, but also a kind of temporariness that we have to accept being transitory as well. So yeah, so thank you. I mean, this I think brings me to the end of my talk, but again when one thinks about being in the uMbombela, one wants to not necessarily be in the train that was constructed to move labour, but one wants to be in the gathering that allows us to understand transitory or transness or trans communities. Thank you so much.

[ Applause ]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you so much, Nomusa. It was really emotional hearing all that South Africa music. Thank you so much for bringing that to us. So our next and final speaker, Juliana Bevilacqua is an assistant professor and Queen's National Scholar in art and visual culture of Africa and Africa diaspora at Queens University. She's worked as a research and curator at the Museu Afro Brasil in San Paulo for 10 years, and she's done extensive curatorial and research work in different museums in Brazil to explore and share African art and Afro Brazilian collections. She's also published extensively and has a new book out. So let us welcome Juliana.

[ Applause ]

**Julianna Ribeiro de Silva Bevilacqua:** Hello everyone. I hope you are not so tired, [brief laughter]. I would like to congratulate Agnes for this great initiative and also I would like to thank Qanita for inviting me. In 2011, the Sao Paulo based Afro Brazil Museum organized an international conference on museums and African art, which gathered curators and scholars from Brazil, the United States, Mali and Senegal. During a visit to the museum exhibition rooms, it was possible to notice part of the American participants embarrassed when they came across the African art collection. Only recently I understood that discomfort probably has different reasons, but the main one seems to be related to the fact that most of the works in that museum were not canonical. The way the works were displayed contributed to this perception. Instead of exploring the particularities of its own collection, the museum visibly tried to reproduce similar display strategies used in museums from the north, which were emphasized by the use of labels with general information that could easily approach works from different collections. More than 10 years after that episode, I would like to bring some thoughts on how non-canonical collections, but with deep meanings for their communities could contribute to the discussion on the colonizing African art in museum collections. The history of African art collections in Brazil, like in most museums, is initially connected to European modern art. The art dealer, Ladislav Segy, owner of the Segy Gallery, opened in New York in 1950 was an important figure in the initial formation of some of those collections. Segy was married to a Brazilian woman from a rich family and had wide access to collectors and institutions like the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of Sao Paulo. Segy gave lectures on primitive art at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1950s, reinforcing the connections between African art and European modern art. It's not by chance that Pietro Maria Bardi, one of the creators of the Museum of Art of Sao Paulo MASP, for example, exchanged letters with Segy in 1958 to buy an African art collection for the museum. A deal that did not happen for unknown reasons. As director of a museum well known for its European modern art collection, Bardi was clearly interested in the relationship between modern European artists and African masks and sculptures. The relationship between African art and European modern art in Brazil, however, did not last long. The 1960 researchers of the African culture in Brazil, most of them initiated in Candomblé, an Afro Brazilian religion with Yoruba origin, based on the [inaudible], it started to become actively involved in the creation of the African study centres in Brazil and African art collections in museums contributing to a major change in the profile of those collections. Rather than focus on connections with European art, African art works were acquired in order to reinforce the African ancestry of the Brazilian people through Candomblé. It's not a coincidence that the majority of African art collections in Brazil are formed by works from the Benin Bay region, notably from the Yoruba peoples indirectly or indirect linked to the Candomblé religion. This change was quickly noticed by the dealer Ladislav Segy who began to offer to his Brazilian clients, works exclusively made by Yoruba peoples. While in New York, he continued exploring African works from different parts of the continent and as primitive art. My research on Ladislav Segy work in Brazil, that was possible thanks to a University of Sao Paulo grant in 2017, showed that Segy was aware about the specific interest in Yoruba sculptures. He bought books about Yoruba art and travelled to Salvador Bahia, the city in the northeast Brazil, famous for its Candomblé house and Afro Brazilian culture. Pierre Verger, a French photographer who moved to Brazil in 1946, was probably the most prominent figure in the process of building collections linked to Candomblé. After travelling to Benin as a photographer, Verger realized that Brazil, especially the city of Salvador and countries like Benin and Nigeria, had many cultural and religious similarities. His experience on both sides of the

Atlantic Ocean was the start point for his [inaudible] research on the ebb and flow of slaves between Benin Bay and Bahia is still a seminar work in Afro Brazilian studies. Besides his work as a photographer, Verger was involved in the creation of the Centre for African Studies at the Federal University of Bahia in 1959, and in the creation of the Afro Brazilian Museum in Salvador in 1944 -- 19, sorry, '74. He also play a decisive role in the formation of African art collections at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of Sao Paulo, and indirectly in the collection of the Afro Brazil Museum in Sao Paulo. Since its founder and creator Emanuel Araújo is a Candomblé member and was a close friend of Verger. The notion of collecting based on African ancestry, reinforcing the historical ties and connections with specific African regions influenced how Brazilian museums changed the notion of authenticity. The fact that the works originated from Africa was enough to consider them authentic. The example of Afro Brazilian Museum at the Federal University of Bahia, is quite significant to understand the particularities of the African art collections in Brazil. When Pierre Verger travelled to Benin the middle of the 1970s to acquire works for that recent founded museum he did not prioritize works used in ceremonies and rituals. Instead, he commissioned works from local sculptors. His acquisitions in Nigeria mixed sculptors made by local sculptors, and those purchased in the markets of Oyo, Ibadan and Ede. Although those works had not previously used in ceremonies and rituals, the alters of the objects were extensively documented by Verger, something rare in museums, African collections everywhere. During his many research travels between Africa and Brazil, Verger also worked as a mediator taking and bringing objects to be used in ceremonies in some Candomblé house in Bahia, something that actually has been happening since the 19th century through other key Candomblé figures and dealers. Despite of being bought in markets or commissioned from sculptors, those objects gain new functions and meanings while being used and collected by Candomblé house and priests. Some of those works eventually found their way into museum collections. The relationship between the Brazilian audience and African art is also aligned with an idea of ancestry through Candomblé religion and can be exemplified by the image of an installation at Afro Brazil Museum in Sao Paulo, composed of a set of [foreign language], one of the most symbols of the Orisha Shango. The display is clearly an interpretation of an installation dedicated to Shango at the famous Candomblé house Casa Branca in the city of Salvador. As soon as the installation was open in Sao Paulo, the audience began to offer gifts and coins, a practice that still happens inside Candomblé house and on the streets. Here we can see some, I hope you can see some gifts and coins. This example reveals that the symbolic meanings carried by these objects remained even after they have been taken to museums going far beyond an aesthetic [inaudible]. The recent inclusion of works from other African regions in some museum collections is still follow the same criteria, excluding, for example, the traditional notion of authenticity. The reason for that cannot be explained exclusively by the lack of funding an issue faced by most Brazilian institutions or by the fragility of the African art field in that country. The few canonical African art collections in Brazil have never been privileged in exhibitions or publications. Part of the African art collection of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, was formed through an extinct, sorry, agreement with the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, the 1920s. However, it was not fully studied by Brazilian scholars, curators, and audience before its destruction in the 2018 fire. In 1988, the Museum of Art of Sao Paulo MASP organized an exhibition, African Negra Black Africa, to celebrate the centennial of the abolition of the slavery in Brazil. The show created by Pierre Verger and the Italian architect based in Brazil, Lina Bo Bardi gather four economical art African artworks from the Musée de l'Orangerie in France. Verger and Bardi did not hesitate to include in that same exhibition, 50 Yoruba sculptures from

Brazilian private collectors, some of them Candomblé members. Both curators did not create any hierarchies between the works from French and Brazilian collections. Curiously, the exhibition design was a clear reference to xirê, a cycle where Candomblé members dance possessed by Orishas. Despite the inclusion of works from African societies unrelated to the Orishas religion, the exhibition Africa Negra and the installation at Afro Brazil Museum seemed to be an exception in the Brazilian context. Apparently, museums in Brazil have difficulty in recognize the specificities of their African art collections. At the same time that exhibition criteria are not the same as those of museums from North America and Europe. Sorry, I have a picture of xirê. The ways of displaying them and addressing them and labels still use those institutions as their main reference. Despite the particular stories and unique life cycles behind many African works in Brazilian collections, they are usually displayed without highlighting their rich particularities. What led us to understand the reaction of part of the group that visit the Afro Brazil Museum in 2011. What would happen if that same group had a chance to see the Shango installation and the audience reaction? What would happen if the participants knew the history of that African art collection? I don't think the reaction would be the same. The history of African art in Brazil may help us rethink and problematize categories that we regard as universal. Maybe this is the right time to include collections from the global soul in the discussion about museum, the colonization and the legacy of colonial practices. It's an important opportunity to reexamine the stories being told about African art collections. It's time to bring out of the museum storage those objects that might challenge the canal and that are present or hidden in almost every European or North American museum as well. What stories might be behind those objects until today overlooked by most curators and scholars everywhere. Thank you.

[ Applause ]