

00:00:34:10 - 00:00:59:05

Zarina Muhammad

Hello and welcome back to the White Pube Podcast. I'm ZM, Zarina Muhammad. And if you don't know, the White Pube is the collective identity of myself and my collaborator Gabrielle de la Puente. We publish reviews and essays about art exhibitions, culture at large. Whatever takes our fancy on any given Sunday, you can read those essays and texts on thewhitepube.com or .co.uk, or you can listen to us narrate those here to you.

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Zarina Muhammad

But occasionally here on the podcast feed, we will make a special little bonus episode where we investigate a topic that's out there in the culture. This episode has kindly been sponsored by MUBI. That's right, MUBI, baby, MUBI, the one, the only MUBI, to celebrate the release of Dahomey. Directed by Mati Diop, Dahomey is a documentary set in November 2021.

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Zarina Muhammad

It follows 26 Royal treasures from the Kingdom of Dahomey that were in a French museum - 'were' being the key word because at the beginning of the film, the royal treasures are due to leave Paris and return to their country of origin, the present day Republic of Benin. The film is, on the face of it, about the stolen objects in Western museums, and the contested issue of restitution, but under the bonnet, it's also about appropriation, self-determination.

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Zarina Muhammad

How should these artifacts be received in a country that's reinvented itself in their absence? There's a kind of poetry, magic or sci-fi ethereality to it all. Mati Diop gives the objects themselves a voice, but there's also a whole bunch of footage of students at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin debating through the perspectives on what the return of these objects means to them in the present day.

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Zarina Muhammad

And it also won a Golden Bear at the 2024 Berlinale. But it's out on MUBI today. If you're listening to this on the 13th December, we have a special link where you can get 30 days for free. That is MUBI.com/thewhitepube. You can watch Dahomey, but also here's my list of things to watch on movie over Christmas.

00:02:34:22 - 00:02:52:08

Zarina Muhammad

You can watch the substance if, like me, you've still not seen it. You can watch in-camera by Nakash Khalid La Camara with that guy from The Crown, Josh O'Connor and the Worst Person in the World by

Joaquin Trejo. I went to see Dahomey at the BFI for London Film Festival this year. I loved it, I wanted to write about it.

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Zarina Muhammad

I wanted to find out more about restitution and all these objects locked up in British museums, because the royal treasures in Dahomey, they leave Paris. But what would our equivalent here in the UK be? So I have roped in help on MUBI's dime. Thank you MUBI. I've spoken to Dan Hicks and Sumaya Kassim, two people who are actually experts.

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Zarina Muhammad

So first I spoke to Dan Hicks. Dan is professor of contemporary archeology at the University of Oxford, curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and a fellow of Saint Cross College, Oxford. You might recognize his name from bookshops because he wrote a book called The British Museum's The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution, and that was published by Pluto Press in November 2020.

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Zarina Muhammad

But he's also written at length for publications like Art review, the Art newspaper, the TLS, frieze, The Guardian, everywhere, basically about the restitution of stolen objects, contested public monuments and the wider conversation about decolonial work in relation to museums. Dan has also got a book coming out next year with Penguin called Every Monument Will Fall: a pre-history of the culture War and that book is about fallism, which is the pulling down of public monuments.

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Zarina Muhammad

And what that all means. Here is my conversation with Dan. Do British museums actually fundamentally have the autonomy to decide what happens with their collection?

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Dan Hicks

So I think in the UK, you know, we have to look at the range of different institutions. I mean, often when we're talking about returning objects, we're talking about the enduring legacies of imperialism that we see in our museums. We think of the, the British Museum. But of course, our national museums are only one element of this.

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Dan Hicks

And, you know, most of the objects that were taken from the continent of Africa in the 19th century or the early part of the last century, you know, are not in London, they're in the non-nationals. So that that sort of loose network of the 40 to 50 institutions, you know, which are university museums, they're the

museums in the regions and the cities, and so the Bristols.

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Dan Hicks

And the Ipswiches and the Liverpools and Edinburghs, the Belfasts. In terms of the governance, actually, all of those institutions are under very different sort of legal frameworks as compared with our national museums, which is why you've seen so many of the returns happening from the university museums and, and from the non-nationals over the past, you know, decade.

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Dan Hicks

Really. So it's important that in this conversation, you know, let's, you know, center the British Museum sometimes because it's a really important institution and we want it, you know, to be as good as it can be. But let's also remember the regions. And of course, in a lot of cases, you know, these are institutions that, you know, that don't even have curators who are looking after things because of austerity, because of the cuts that have happened in the regions.

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Dan Hicks

You know, these are orphaned collections, as people say, in that there isn't even a world culture curator who's looking after them. But ultimately, yeah, council taxpayers are having to pay for the warehousing of these objects, you know, some of which would be subject to a demand. But we don't even know what's in the museums often.

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Zarina Muhammad

See, I am in the London bubble. I will admit, I am like, when I think of museums, I think of the Nationals in London. I didn't yeah, I didn't know about that. Can you think of any example off the top of your nut of regional museums sending things back?

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Dan Hicks

Well, yes, of course. You know, it's been the university museums that have really been leading on this Edinburgh for years, you know, were leading on the return of ancestral human remains. You've seen Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, you know, overseeing returns from their collections. So there's a route for doing it now at an English level. You know, there's also Arts Council England, you know, now have a guidance, you know, for how the process ought to work.

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Dan Hicks

But it's really you know, it's the Birmingham's and the Bristol's and the Liverpools and Ipswich's which are so important because actually we just don't know what's in those museums. And so a part of the reason you're seeing returns from the university museums is

that we understand what's in them, and they're well-enough funded in order to actually oversee and to share that information and to oversee the process.

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Zarina Muhammad

Maybe a slight shift, but how do museum curators and workers generally feel about it? Is it a bit bad vibes? Do they want like -- which way does the sector trend, if any?

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Dan Hicks

The attitudes have shifted among the people that work in museums as they have into the wider society. And so most museum curators, you know, understand the importance of the museums as being something other than a one way street, you know, something other than, space that objects go to die, you know, and to be, you know, left alone, not on display.

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Dan Hicks

Those people who work in museums understand that 99.9% of anthropology and archeology collections aren't actually on display in the first place. And they want to understand the collections, and they want investment in the databases and and the transparency, which are the necessary things in order to, you know, begin a conversation about sort of restitution, to turn that conversation into action.

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Dan Hicks

Of course, importantly, because ultimately returning objects has been a central element of our work for, you know, decades again, in the very, you know, different sort of cases of the return of, Nazi looted art. Art that was taken between 1933 and 1945, or the very different cases of, you know, the return of ancestral human remains.

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Dan Hicks

You know, it's actually a normal sort of element of what happens in our national museums and in our regional museums, of course, internationally. Yeah. NAGPRA (The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) in North America has actually, you know, set up a legal framework for the return of, you know, cultural items and ancestral human remains, to, you know, Native American communities. And you've got the similar approach in terms of First Nations in Canada, Aboriginal Australia and New Zealand and so forth.

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Dan Hicks

But how come, we're not able to return items to the continent of Africa when they're being asked for, you know, cultural objects rather than these other, you know, categories. And that's been the shift because it's been, I think for a lot of people who work in

museums exactly like everyone else, it just hasn't made any sense that we're able to return in some circumstances, but not others.

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Dan Hicks

So that's the shift. There's a lot there, but there's a lot of risk as well. But we think there's a single approach. And so a part of the challenge and a part of the maturity of the conversations that are now happening in museums. And if those conversations move into actions and move into procedures and move into ways of working, you know, it's all about understanding the case by case, the complex sort of nature of returns.

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Dan Hicks

It's a demand-led process. I mean, returning items is about, you know, number one, the sharing of information of what's in the collection. And then it's about actually returning when asked and making a situation in which the descendant groups are able to ask in the first place, but it isn't about sending back, it's about, you know, giving back when asked and the way in which those requests are going to come and the histories in which items were taken are really, really varied.

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Dan Hicks

And so we need a nuanced, you know, human approach, you know, one that understands the the politics of these histories, that understands the risks of enduring colonialisms in the processes of returns and so on. So, yeah, I mean, that's why it's such an important issue, and that's why there's there's a lot of really, you know, new thinking that's happening.

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Zarina Muhammad

I feel like the British Museum does take up majority of space in the public imagination. When we're talking about restitution, how does it work for them? Because they have got specific blocks when it comes to government policy in sending things back.

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Dan Hicks

You know, you've got an intergenerational shift in historical consciousness that's happening in the, you know, European and the North American sort of context, you know, one that was understood from the continent of Africa and in India, in indigenous communities around the world for much longer. And actually, it's a sense of sort of learning from arguments that have been put of understanding, that have been put in those contexts for so much longer that there were reasons why these actions were taken in the first place, that there was a weaponization of the museum in the 19th century where it was, you know, a part of the military apparatus for

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Dan Hicks

attempts, you know, to use the culture and art as things that could be, you know, taken from people in order to remove their culture or to seek to remove their culture, but also to put them on display in the Metropole and the British Museum or wherever, sort of in order to tell a narrative that these sort of cultures were dead.

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Dan Hicks

And so, you know, when the Benin Bronzes were taken in the 1890s, within weeks they were on display in the British Museum in their Assyrian saloon alongside items from ancient Egypt or from the Bronze Age of ancient Near East. And so the message was really obvious, you know, it was we we are saying, you know, we in the museum are saying that this culture has been blown back into the Bronze Age.

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Dan Hicks

You know, it's now the past. It's there to be appreciated by art lovers and cared for and protected, but actually in the protection and the care underneath that is all of the killing and the loss and the dispossession. So it's really that understanding of those sort of later periods of empire. We think when we think of colonialism, we often think of, you know, settler colonialism alone.

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Dan Hicks

A British museum is a part of empire itself. It's in London, but it's a part of empire because it's a part of the intellectual apparatus. It's a part of the of the infrastructures of cultural whiteness that are there to try to tell a narrative over cultural supremacy that's there to justify, you know, violence around the world, you know, and that's I think it's the recognition that actually that is not what a museum should be about anymore.

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Dan Hicks

It shouldn't at the time, but certainly not now. So we're now working with those legacies in the present and the public and the communities and the stakeholders who love these institutions are also, you know, pointing out, look, these are things that are in your institutions still and they need to be dealt with.

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Dan Hicks

Museums were turned into weapons to put forward one vision of the world, which was incredibly proto-fascist and far right. That's only one thing that happened in museums but it's a big one and it's one that we haven't really dealt with. I mean, remember when we beat the fascists in 1945, one of the first things that happened to museums was that any of the last remnants of the displays of human remains in natural history museums that told the racist lie that there were different species of human were removed.

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Dan Hicks

You know, the scientists had no issue at all to say this was bad science. You know, this is wrong. Yeah, morally wrong. But it also actually is factually wrong. So of course, all those items are taken, all those ancestors are taken off display. But right next door to the natural history museums, you know, the museums of the culture where, you know, so many of us would think that we're far more aware of issues of ideology or racism or colonialism.

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Dan Hicks

We haven't even started, really, to dismantle the same displays that were put up for the same reasons, except they were using items of arts and culture rather than sort of natural -- teah, natural history or science.

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Zarina Muhammad

Speaking around that government level where policy is at -- for 15 years the Tories had a specific kind of position on what to do with objects --

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Dan Hicks

Well a sort of non-position. Yeah. It's a non-position. It was an attempt just to kick the can down the road every single time wasn't it. I mean they never actually came out and said no we're not going to give anything back. It's just: no, it's too complicated.

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Zarina Muhammad

What can you tell from Labour's short time in office at the moment about their position?

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Dan Hicks

Yeah. Lisa Nandy has said that the culture war is over and I really hope that's the case because the culture war was never a two sided war about culture. It was a war on culture. It was a weaponization of culture, you know, that has a history. And that history is one that we see in our museums and we see in the public art in the streets, you know, whether the Confederate statues or, you know, Cecil Rhodes at the University of Oxford, you know, we see it in the seminar rooms and the libraries of our disciplines at the universities.

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Dan Hicks

You know, some ideas that were formed in the late 19th century as well, and so we're inheriting all those things from this sort of culture war, a long history of you know, violence in relation to culture. Yeah, of course it's time for peace and reconciliation.

And, you know, for putting things right.

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Dan Hicks

So I do think, yeah, I think what's really good is that we don't have a government who want to fight the culture war anymore. And even I think within the Conservative Party, I mean, it's an obvious, decision for the right now in terms of where they go. Are they going to continue on the, you know, war on culture, you know, or are they going to, are you going to see a more moderate right?

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Dan Hicks

that isn't actually attacking our cultural institutions. I mean, just look at the attacks on the National Trust, you know, you know, look at attacks in the form of the money being taken away from arts and culture, but also attacks upon even the rewriting of a label in a museum; the moving of an object from A to B, this idea that a historic building or listed building [indecipherable] to something that should never happen or a museum should never alter a display.

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Dan Hicks

Yeah, it's absolutely crazy. I can't imagine any other parts of society. If you think about the criminal justice system or healthcare, well, any other parts of, you know, how we live, where there'd be a narrative that if something's hurting people or something's inherited from the past, it's right in the present that we sort of have to protect it and keep on doing it, rather than reform it, you know?

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Dan Hicks

Rather than seek change. So I do think -- Yeah, I'm really optimistic in terms of the fact, but it's so, you know, it's so obvious that, these histories of things that we inherit -- our museums were made in some ways in order to make some of these ideas last. So, you know, now begins the really, you know, complex work of actually, how are you going to take apart these things that are, you know, some elements of which are so hurtful and so much of which is so valuable.

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Dan Hicks

And important. I mean, we've never needed something like a world culture museum more than we do in the present. These are the spaces, you know, where we can see arts and culture, ways of living, ways of thinking outside of a Eurocentric lens.

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Zarina Muhammad

Right. That question of the future feels like, for me, the most exciting bit of this whole consideration. Because, you know, I'm an art critic thinking about the art world, but still relatively in the

world of museums, kind of feeling like a layman. I can kind of like I can see your optimism and I can kind of share it.

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Zarina Muhammad

It doesn't feel like, I don't know, I feel like I've learned lots just from this conversation because, from my perspective before this, before speaking to you, I was kind of like, if they send everything back, surely there's nothing left in the British Museum other than like some Celtic knives and like, you know, some, like Saxon helmets. That's it.

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Zarina Muhammad

I'm worried or not worried -- I'm not worried at all. I've got questions about what the future of museums could look like with demands for restitution answered. But does it open up new avenues of potential? You spoke about the World Culture Museum. That sounds like something an interesting framework to work with, but like, yeah, what else is there in terms of futurity?

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Dan Hicks

Yeah. And so absolutely. And exactly as you say, you know. Yeah. Returning objects is all about what happens next, right? This isn't going back in time. So the conversations over restitution, we shouldn't see the you know, sometimes we're accused of presentism, you know, that we're interpreting the past in terms of the values of the present and we shouldn't be saying that these things were -- that it was wrong for things to be looted because at the time it was okay.

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Dan Hicks

And so just leave it alone. And that's yeah, that's a narrative that's failing. Equally, some people would say, hey, it's a paradigm shift we're moving forward in time, we're reinventing museums, it's really positive and they're all going to be spaces of hope. And yeah, re humanization. I also don't buy that either. That, you know, that idea that, you know, that we're going to fix the museum, we're going to decolonize the museum.

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Dan Hicks

I mean, that seems to me like spin. For me isn't about the present or where we're going next. It's about the past catching up with the museum. That's what's going on. The past, you know, is there. The museum is, you know, think about it in terms of art. You know, what sort of artwork is a museum? We might think of it as a representational art form.

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Dan Hicks

It's there to describe and depict, like a photograph or a realistic

painting. Or you could see it as a time based medium, durational artwork, because it's made to make ideas and things last into the present. And that's how I understand museums. You know, their medium is really time. And so it's history and so it's memory and they're memory institutions.

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Dan Hicks

So at their best our world culture museums like the British Museum or the Manchester Museum or the Pitt Rivers where I work, or any museum you know, that we might think of around the world that has these items of world culture. You know, actually, if if we understand them as, as institutions that are about memory, then we actually they are the the spaces where we can think about the legacies of empire and we can we can have conversations, but also maybe undo some, some of the violence in the present and sort of rework how we understand those histories in the present.

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Dan Hicks

So, so a part of the role of our museums, you know, oversights of conscience and with sort of living with those histories or, you know, reinterpreting them. But also there has to be the work of understanding the risk if you don't dismantle those -- and that's what my last book was all about, you know, the physical dismantling that actually restitution, which isn't just returns, it's not this idea that everything has to go back where it originally was.

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Dan Hicks

You're going to empty out the museum, you're going to burn down the, you know, the British Museum. I mean, I'm often accused of: 'why do you hate the British Museum so much? Why do you hate museums, you work in museums. Why don't you just, you know, give up your job?' You know, I love museums. That's why I'm in this.

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Dan Hicks

Yeah. I've worked in the Pitt Rivers now for 17 years. You know, you don't do that if you don't, you know, love an institution that you work for. But that's the point. You want it to do better, you understand it, you know, and you want it. You see, you know, you listen to the communities and the visitors and the audiences who are saying, actually, you know, this is a bit off or this is really hurtful.

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Dan Hicks

I, I'm not even going to walk into the building because I know what this museum is. For those reasons, we can't shy away from those issues and those sorts of criticism. So. So yeah, it isn't about attacking museums. It's about actually wanting to make them -- to bring them into step with our times.

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Dan Hicks

And to understand that the past, as I say, is catching up with us, whether we like it or not. You know, the museum curator in part is like a conservator. Our work in part is to keep things the same as I said earlier, but actually that shouldn't be. Often there's a mission creep whereby the curator thinks that they're able to stop the world from changing around them.

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Dan Hicks

And that's the mistake. That's always the mistake for heritage or museums or any of us that work with the physical remains of the past. We have to understand this, as you know, happening in the present. It's not about history, it's about memory. You know, when we think about a statue, when it isn't about the man who is, depicted in the form of Colston, it's about whether we want to remember Edward Colston in Bristol or not.

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Dan Hicks

It's about memory, not about [a right or wrong] about the guy that was there. It's the same for museums. It's about how do we want to weave together ideas of world culture with ideas of the memory of, you know, all human beings and of ourselves in terms of the wider world.

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Zarina Muhammad

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Dan Hicks

That's all make sense.

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Zarina Muhammad

That does make sense. And I think it kind of it finds restitution and I think fallism when it comes to like Colston and things like that, often they're framed as iconoclasm. And you're kind of you squaring that circle quite well in a nice way. Thinking about them as being time based is about memory, rather than putting them down just because you got a destructive urge.

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Zarina Muhammad

Just for clarity, can you give us a quick definition of fallism for people who are listening with no clue.

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Dan Hicks

Yeah. So the fallism movement emerged in the context of the decolonization of the continent of Africa, not least after The Year of Africa in 1960, where there was a recognition in the newly

independent states from Zambia to Zimbabwe to Algeria that within the landscape of the colonizers, there were images, there were artworks that had been put to use in order to normalize colonial violence, you know, white supremacy of various kinds and so on.

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Dan Hicks

So the removal of those images, you know, which I guess I mean, the obvious examples that people would know would be the falling of Rhodes, of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town in 2015, the toppling of Edward Colston in, you know, Bristol, you know, in, in 2020. But remember that actually Rhodes had already fallen in Zambia in 1964 and in Zimbabwe in 1980.

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Dan Hicks

So the, the the links in between the decolonial movements in the history of Africa and indeed elsewhere in the world, there were conversations about all the Captain Cooks in Australia and so on, or the Christopher Columbus's in the Caribbean, you know, so the conversations are happening internationally. But yeah, really led in the context of the decolonial what that means for institutions that are never going to be decolonized.

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Dan Hicks

I mean, that's yeah, that's about the challenge. But we can certainly learn from those conversations about fallism and from the actions of fallism and, and the history of fallism, that art can be weaponized, that a statue is something that can hurt people, it can be built in order to hurt people. It can be built in order to put forward an ideology.

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Dan Hicks

And not least, if it's in the form of arts and culture, because it's incredibly hard to remove. It's a lot easier to put up an image than to take it down. It's a lot easier, you know, to put an object into a museum than to give it back and that's the whole point there. They are parts of our society which are incredibly hard to change in the first place, but that doesn't mean that they can't change.

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Dan Hicks

Of course, they always sort of changing as we go along.

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Zarina Muhammad

You briefly mentioned, I think a couple questions ago, a couple of answers ago, that you were cynical about whether museums can be decolonized. You called it spin. Can you say a little bit more about that?

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Dan Hicks

Yeah. So I think we need to be, you know, someone on a zoom call over lockdown when we were having conversations over, the Benin Bronzes -- a dialog group, of course, has been there for, you know, for ten years or so having conversations about the return of the Benin Bronzes and this colleague said to me, colonialism used to be that you tell me that you're superior to me.

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Dan Hicks

Colonialism today is that you tell me that we're in a dialogue. And that was -- we're having a -- there were two different perspectives there. And we're just going, you know, state our positions and see and then have a conversation and the conversation because that's a very, very good way of kind of making sure that nothing ever happens.

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Dan Hicks

And to kick the can along the road. Yes. Again. And it all becomes very complex. And the language that's used by the museum leaders that like this sort of stuff is all about entanglements, you know, complexity. This is our colonial history, it's really entangled, we're told. There's a whole sort of aspect of this that gets into theory and we're told, oh yeah, the objects have got agency in the museums as well.

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Dan Hicks

We need to think about the way that they -- rather than actually human beings having agency rather than actual communities that are asking for things back that might have agency. No, no, no. Object agency is really important. We need to think about material culture in these theoretical ways. Let's use the museum as a sort of laboratory. Let's have a research project about it.

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Dan Hicks

That's a really great idea. You want it? Yeah. You want these objects back? Okay. I'm going to I'm going to apply to the AHRC for a collaborative doctoral award. And we can get a PhD student that's going to look into, you know, your objects that you might want back. And you know my approach and my positionality -- but I think it goes deeper than that, which is a source of the fact that the narratives that a lot of your listeners, if they were taught in art school or in anthropology of archeology, will know well the idea of being reflexive, that kind of a 90s fix of being self-aware, the important work from the feminists of saying, you

00:30:08:13 - 00:30:35:22

Dan Hicks

know, situated knowledges are a part of this. We need to understand how knowledge is situated but that morphed into a kind of what ultimately rather reactionary idea that you state your

positionality, you state the privilege that you've got, and then what? It's okay. It's just that, right, I'm going to state my maleness and my whiteness and the privilege that I've got in this institution that I work in.

00:30:35:22 - 00:31:03:11

Dan Hicks

And, okay, that's on the table now. And now. Yeah, we can go back to having the dialogue. I mean, that obviously -- that as a fix, Ryan Jobson has called it for anthropology the Boasian fix after Franz Boas, who was the great early 20th century sort of cultural relativist in anthropology. But that fix of being reflexive simply isn't working in our museums anymore.

00:31:03:11 - 00:31:42:15

Dan Hicks

So we need to do more. We actually need to dismantle the positionalities, as well as only sort of pointing them out. So that's why I worry that some of some of the work, you know, that if you reduce restitution in the Macron way to soft diplomacy, you know, if you reduce it purely to, you know, a good news story, I mean, Sumaya is the person that's really underlined this about, you know, the sorts of [indecipherable] narratives that, come about, when people say, oh, yeah, we're going to decolonize, we're going to return objects and so on, it becomes self-serving.

00:31:42:15 - 00:32:13:02

Dan Hicks

And actually, it is a very good way seeing as there are millions of objects in these museums, seeing as 99.9% of the objects aren't on display. The museum can afford to lose some objects here and there, while not making the change that those objects sort of show us. So for me, as a curator, Restitution is the word I use rather than returns, because that has to be about something more than just sort of giving back.

00:32:13:02 - 00:32:18:15

Dan Hicks

It has to be giving something up, as well as giving something back.

00:32:18:17 - 00:32:48:20

Zarina Muhammad

Then I spoke to Sumaya Kassim, a writer, curator and editor. Sumaya has written fiction and poetry that has appeared in Dardishi Zine (we love Dardishi zine), the Good journal and more. She is the prose editor of Middle Ground magazine and she's currently working on two novels. Mostly. I have been dying to speak to Sumaya since like 2017, when she published an essay called the Museum Will Not Be Decolonized in Media Diversified and charted her reflections after working on a co-curated show at a large museum.

00:32:49:01 - 00:33:19:24

Zarina Muhammad

The problems, and wider context of those problems, and it's been

pretty widely cited since 2017. So much so that I, lowly, humble art critic, read it and absorbed it and thought about how it reflected dynamics between galleries and art workers of color. In the years since, Sumaya has written an essay called Museums Are Temples of Whiteness, which sets out a framework for the way museums literally construct and uphold our Western understanding of what whiteness actually is and what purpose it serves.

00:33:20:01 – 00:33:46:21

Zarina Muhammad

I'll link the Media Diversified article in the show notes if you want to have a read yourself, but the second, as I mentioned, was published last year in the Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art history. Anyway, here is my conversation with Sumaya. How does decolonization relate to diversity? Inclusion, representation, equality? Are they actually related? Is there an overlap secretly or are they very separate things?

00:33:46:23 – 00:34:09:03

Sumaya Kassim

I think some people may consider them related. I would consider them unrelated. I think one can relate them in the sense that the idea of, like having, a diverse workforce is seen as generally a good thing. You know, we want to see – or rather institutions – and indeed we want to see like, people, you know, different types of people, working institutions together.

00:34:09:03 – 00:34:39:22

Sumaya Kassim

In a sense, that goal of multiculturalism is really is sort of like this. It's sort of like this, dream that this nation has. But the actuality of that is sort of debatable. Like the success of that is debatable. I don't say that because, you know, goddam the immigrants and all that. What I mean is that racists make it seem a little bit, unrealistic that we can we can live harmoniously although we do live harmoniously, I would argue, in this country somewhat.

00:34:39:24 – 00:34:59:20

Sumaya Kassim

Yeah, exactly. Somewhat. But I think the problem with that model is that it's sort of an assimilationist model, because basically you go into the institution and they're like, we're really happy you're here. We're really happy you're here. You're, you know, I'm imagining myself. I am a woman of color and I wear a hijab or whatever.

00:34:59:22 – 00:35:14:19

Sumaya Kassim

But generally you constantly face all these roadblocks, which are telling you: we very much don't actually want you here. And so it sort of becomes a microcosm of Britain because it's like, well, we're really happy you're here. Thank you so much for your great food. And thank you so much for all of your hard work.

00:35:14:19 - 00:35:37:03

Sumaya Kassim

You know, because obviously I'm imagining a good immigrant here who, who does those things, I, I'm saying good with scare quotes. But then in an institution, suddenly it's kind of similar. You're sort of being told, oh, we don't really want you here at all. And indeed, in the case of -- if we're using the nation, people are literally being sent away despite them being citizens.

00:35:37:03 - 00:36:01:01

Sumaya Kassim

Right. So the idea of it being separate, I think I'm more agree with because decolonizing is the idea of challenging colonization from the very root of the matter, whereas diversity is much more about including. Including and kind of having people assimilate and be a good citizen, whereas decolonizing, I think, has this kind of idea of what the system itself is deeply broken.

00:36:01:01 - 00:36:18:08

Sumaya Kassim

And we either need to fix or challenge the system or recognize that this the system, whether that be the colonial system, the racist system, the white supremacist system. We're actually looking at the framework and asking, well, what system are we entering into to create that diversity, if that makes sense?

00:36:18:08 - 00:36:52:23

Zarina Muhammad

It makes complete sense because it's like fundamentally -- I don't know -- we've been having this conversation since the 60s, the 70s, since like Naseem Kahn, 'The Arts that Britain Ignores,' right? And it's so many points. The institution has kind of twisted and turned to adapt it and like defaulted to a political understanding of diversity, like Blairite multiculturalism. And you were describing decolonization as like a way of getting a handle on the thing that we want, which isn't the political fallback, but it's like, you know, equity.

00:36:53:04 - 00:36:57:21

Zarina Muhammad

It's like some sense of like stable ground. Does that describe it?

00:36:57:23 - 00:37:28:03

Sumaya Kassim

Interesting you use the word handle. Yes. Because we live here together but we live in these deeply unequal circumstances together. And so the idea that we enter the institution and then we are all here in this together, but we're not, are we? Because we're at these different levels, we're at these unequal levels. And so then you're being tasked with this grand, kind of task of, you know, bringing difference.

00:37:28:03 - 00:37:46:05

Sumaya Kassim

You're bringing difference. Actually, that's your kind of your role. Your goal is to bring difference. And that's the reason why I used to love Sarah Ahmed's work on the institutions. And so when you use that word handle, I was thinking about her because she has this really interesting, like, way of thinking through furniture and thinking about, you know --

00:37:46:05 - 00:38:06:16

Sumaya Kassim

And so I'm thinking of handle the door. And I was like, that's kind of what it is. It's like I'm trying to, like trying to grasp this handle, and I'm trying to open this door. And people are like, please, you know, open this door, open this handle. And it's like, the thing is, this door has a history of never being opened -- kind of thing.

00:38:06:19 - 00:38:27:03

Sumaya Kassim

So it's like, I'm like trying to force this door open and let other people in, perhaps, or like, just let myself in and everyone else is like, no, this basically can't be opened. So it's like, and that's how I often think of, whiteness as being this door that that will forever be shut and people are being told you can open it, you can diversify the space.

00:38:27:03 - 00:38:33:20

Sumaya Kassim

But actually, that door isn't designed to be open. So it's that's kind of how I think about it a little bit. Yeah. That's it.

00:38:33:22 - 00:38:59:13

Zarina Muhammad

I really like speaking in metaphor because often these are like quite abstract constructs. And but metaphor is a nice way of like making the abstraction material. And yeah, love that. Speaking of handles and doors that cannot be opened, can you describe the ways that colonialism does live on in museums in the present day? I'm aware that galleries and museums are different, have different contexts.

00:38:59:13 - 00:39:05:20

Zarina Muhammad

But yeah, what is there to undo and destroy with decolonizing? In your experience?

00:39:05:22 - 00:39:36:19

Sumaya Kassim

So I said earlier that colonization still exists. I mean, I you know, when you contacted me about, this conversation, I was just like, I felt really overwhelmed because I was thinking so much about, like, the destruction that's happening in Gaza at the moment. And, I was thinking about, like, what I feel has been a very muted response from cultural industries, the art world, Tate, all of it.

00:39:36:24 - 00:40:08:04

Sumaya Kassim

I was just thinking about that. And I was thinking so deeply about, this idea that on the one hand, artists, cultural workers, writers, we are asked to bring ourselves, our radicalism, our history, all of this. And yet the way it functions is that we go into these spaces and we're asked to perform all of this and do all of this, and then we're asked to shut the door behind us and leave.

00:40:08:06 - 00:40:31:11

Sumaya Kassim

And, and then outside in the world, we're told that's now the status quo can remain. And so basically, I do feel that both in museums and in art galleries, they function in a kind of whitewashing way, basically, is how I would put it where, the radicalism is contained and therefore will not actually spark anything in the real world.

00:40:31:17 - 00:40:54:10

Sumaya Kassim

I think people make their careers off of that. Basically. I think that's what I think anyway, and I just, I see the destruction of human life. And I also see the destruction of architectures, and I see the destruction of art and cultures and nature. And so the question of like, how does colonization continue to exist in, in museums and art galleries?

00:40:54:10 - 00:41:20:02

Sumaya Kassim

I mean, I do think art galleries and museums are different because, museums fundamentally, are products of colonialism as are art galleries. But they do something quite interesting, which is they provide taxonomies of, you know, collecting, exhibiting all of that stuff. They systematize knowledge in a very particular way. As we enter the museum space, they're basically telling us about how the world is ordered.

00:41:20:02 - 00:41:41:09

Sumaya Kassim

How is the world ordered? The world is ordered in such a way where we have human at the center. And when I say human, what I'm saying actually is white man. And then we have the, you know, the other humans. The other races, women, you know, and then we have, nature.

00:41:41:11 - 00:42:05:04

Sumaya Kassim

So museums divide all of these things up. And so we fundamentally live in a world that is deeply divided by these systems of knowledge. And we act and we're told that these things are real. And so our whole world is colored by this way of thinking that we're all divided and that basically there is no unity between people, between nature, between, ways of thinking, essentially.

00:42:05:06 - 00:42:41:15

Sumaya Kassim

When you say like how does it continue? I mean, the thing is, we live in a colonial present day. So the idea of somehow it not continuing in the gallery or not continuing the museum is kind of like, well, we live in a clear and colonial reality today, so of course it continues within there. I think also, I think it's safe to say that also just simply the way the racism and the kind of sexism that happens within, just the work that goes on in museum spaces, the kind of experiences that I've heard, and have been subject to tells me that, yeah, we still live in a colonial present because

00:42:41:15 - 00:42:44:00

Sumaya Kassim

racism is an effect of colonialism.

00:42:44:05 - 00:43:09:16

Zarina Muhammad

And that's, you know -- I'm so glad that I'm asking you these questions. I'm so glad you said that. Thank you so much. Good. Yes. Because, yeah, I mean, I think as well, like within the difference between galleries and museums, so many people are like very quick to point at like, oh, the objects are mislabeled and like the captions are there and, you know, like the way that things are categorized, half of this is in storage.

00:43:09:16 - 00:43:30:16

Zarina Muhammad

But your answer kind of gets at a wider problem that is maybe more difficult, unwieldy for these institutions to fix, which is because it's they're very premise. Right? Like, the entire format that they operate on. You wrote an essay in which you say individuals reproduce institutions, and can you say a little bit more about what that means?

00:43:30:18 - 00:43:53:01

Sumaya Kassim

What I mean by that is, quite physically, when you have a lanyard around your neck, you kind of become the become the institution to a certain extent. So what I mean by that is your self preservation is actually tied to the preservation of your institution. Your livelihood is tied to the institution.

00:43:53:03 - 00:44:18:22

Sumaya Kassim

And I'm not saying that's inherently problematic, but it does become inherently problematic when challenge conflict comes to the fore. Let's say that someone finds an exhibition problematic in some way. I do think that individuals do go on the defensive, and they they feel like they have to protect the institution. They must do that because that's part of your job, basically, because I don't really believe in agency --

00:44:18:24 - 00:44:39:22

Sumaya Kassim

complete agency when you start working for an institution, I think

that a certain point, your agency is compromised in some ways, pointing out racism, pointing out sexism, sexual harassment even, it ends up becoming so much more about the person who's made that complaint, or it becomes about being about what that person has brought to the table. They become that problem basically.

00:44:39:24 – 00:44:46:16

Sumaya Kassim

And I hugely think that that is one of the main ways that colonialism continues in our institutions.

00:44:46:18 – 00:45:08:23

Zarina Muhammad

Decolonizing is kind of being co-opted. You identify this in one of your essays like that, the institution, it's kind of taking a grab it, turning into subject, turning it into something that it can utilize in its own particular way, according to its own particular logic. So what do we do now? Because the term itself is an action that must be carried out.

00:45:09:00 – 00:45:15:24

Zarina Muhammad

And it's a process that must be carried out. How do you do the thing? Despite the institution being difficult to change or self-aware.

00:45:16:01 – 00:45:40:10

Sumaya Kassim

There needs to be a kind of balance between self-preservation. Right. And at the same time, to continue the work, to continue to do it, to continue the fight, really for a world in which we can all live and see each other as more than our value, basically, the idea of protecting what it means to be a human being.

00:45:40:12 – 00:46:03:24

Sumaya Kassim

And I know I realize that sounds quite strange. What I mean is I think that a lot of these institutions have this power to kind of create the idea that the object is more important than the human being. The artwork is more important than the human being. And so a lot of, I think, our work is about making it very clear that human life is sacred, essentially.

00:46:04:01 – 00:46:37:03

Sumaya Kassim

And so and so again, I say this with the back of my mind thinking about Gaza. And I really do think it's really important to remember that. So the work must always continue, whether it happens within the institutional space that is willing to deny a genocide is happening. Or does this work happen outside of those walls? And also it's sort of very dependent on geographical location because indigenous, conversations around settler colonialism is very different to us living here in the UK.

00:46:37:05 - 00:46:55:10

Sumaya Kassim

So here in the UK, we have this really interesting situation where you have people from all over the world here. And so that kind of opens this door of like, what does decolonizing even mean? And can all of our stories fit into -- can all of us fit into --? No, but that's what's so kind of special in a way.

00:46:55:10 - 00:47:16:23

Sumaya Kassim

Right. That's a good thing. I wouldn't want all of our stories, and I wouldn't want all of us to be in there because, And why wouldn't I want that? Because our very uncontainability -- the very fact of all of the possibilities that we are -- all of our multiplicity should not fit in an institution, if that makes sense.

00:47:17:00 - 00:47:39:03

Sumaya Kassim

So I believe these kinds of the idea of like decolonizing -- that it is something that is happening in the same time that colonization is happening, but can decolonization happen within an institution? I don't think it can. No. Are people decolonizing it in in the real world? Yes they are because they're fighting for their lives and that's why.

00:47:39:08 - 00:47:41:09

Sumaya Kassim

That's what I think decolonizing is.

00:47:41:11 - 00:47:51:09

Zarina Muhammad

Can you describe how race and the museum were invented concurrently or overlapping parallel to each other? How do those two inventions bear any relationship to each other?

00:47:51:12 - 00:48:15:19

Sumaya Kassim

So every museum's going to have its origin story, and they're all different. And I'm not going to rattle on about all the different, ways museums were made. I really like an essay by Subhadra Das and Miranda Lowe, where they kind of talk about Natural History Museum, which is quite interesting because you wouldn't think about race when you're thinking about natural history museums.

00:48:15:19 - 00:48:46:17

Sumaya Kassim

And they kind of talk about, the way that race is kind of -- the way that museums kind of consolidated, and kind of entrenched scientific racism. And so, you know, scientific racism, eugenics, these are all ideas that came out of, the 19th century and, and the kind of, the idea of like, what is a human, essentially, and categories of human.

00:48:46:19 - 00:49:13:15

Sumaya Kassim

And at that time there was this like obsession with like categories and like, hierarchies, taxonomies and stuff like that. And so, museums, that is their bread and butter. Where, where do things go. And in a sense, I think as colonialism happened, one of the key factors is this idea of, there needed to be a justification for the trauma, the murder, the exploitation. There needed to be a justification for it.

00:49:13:15 - 00:49:52:06

Sumaya Kassim

And racism emerged from that right. Racist hierarchies emerged from that. And, museums then, as museums developed, collections developed, you know, including the plundering that took place throughout colonialism. You know, all of these things that have happened at the same time to create a system of knowledge that museums still have today that present us with this history, present us with a history in which, kind of shows us, in a sense, the way that colonialism happened and also at the same time shows us, the way in which, like, society is seen through the kind of Western mind.

00:49:52:06 - 00:50:16:17

Sumaya Kassim

In a sense, we need to remember 1492 as like the key date here -- that indigenous people, their meeting of colonizers, that was the beginning of our own knowledge about the West. And it's really important to kind of remember that even as we are discussing this, we are still doing it from this kind of Western European framing, if that makes sense.

00:50:16:19 - 00:50:38:03

Sumaya Kassim

And it's really difficult to remember that actually our encounter with it, our peoples encounter with it, that that storyline is going to be very, very different. Museums, kind of, I think have this really interesting way of thinking about who is the active protagonist of history, who is the the passive, victim or who is the rescuer?

00:50:38:03 - 00:51:13:00

Sumaya Kassim

All of these things about the story of history, the way it's framed -- That's what a museum gives us. A kind of way of thinking about history and reality, which puts a particular type of person as the actor, a particular type of person as the victim. And that is a huge part, I think, actually, of decolonizing in a strange kind of way, because when you start to consider, history in a slightly different way and you place another person as the victim or another person as the aggressor, suddenly world history looks very, very different.

00:51:13:02 - 00:51:39:00

Zarina Muhammad

My earlier conversation with Dan Hicks, he really seemed to have a lot of faith in the idea of world culture. Museums like a framing

where British museums could still kind of like hold onto these objects. And there was a valid case for objects from other places to be here in the UK and on display, the context around them changing like the framing of them changing.

00:51:39:00 - 00:51:55:05

Zarina Muhammad

But like ultimately there is a role for, you know, beyond just like Saxon burial hoards and like, and you know, Celtic knives, there's, there's a case for objects beyond this tiny island being here.

00:51:55:07 - 00:52:17:20

Sumaya Kassim

One of the things that I feel is, like very powerful about museums and particularly restitution debates, this idea that there's something stolen in the museum, I think it's such a powerful -- it's such a powerful image and it's such a powerful symbol for people. People, you know, just everyday people. That idea that something was stolen and it's in the museum, it's like a hugely powerful thing.

00:52:17:22 - 00:52:37:14

Sumaya Kassim

And so that idea of like, we're, you know, we're holding on to this thing and we're looking after it. It's like, well, no, you stole that thing, and you need to return it. That I think is sort of it. It concretizes, it makes something that is very, quite abstract -- because I think people don't have an education about colonialism.

00:52:37:14 - 00:52:58:12

Sumaya Kassim

Right. So that idea of like something is stolen in the museum, it kind of solidifies something that is real about our experiences, about like the ways in which maybe our families were stolen, the way that maybe our own heritage has been taken away from us or like, why are we here? Because of these colonial legacies.

00:52:58:14 - 00:53:23:18

Sumaya Kassim

And so I think that stolen object thing is, is actually very important. And so when you say like world, world Culture Museum, I think something about that troubles me somewhat because in my mind it's like, well, firstly, in a way, all of the big museums in the UK are kind of world culture museums, but why are they that way?

00:53:23:20 - 00:53:47:07

Sumaya Kassim

And so it's sort of like a strange thing. It's all about like the conditions of possibility, if that makes sense. It's like I'm sort of struggling with that a little bit because -- and also it's premised on this idea of education. And I think so much like really strange things happen under the guise of we're teaching people about different worlds, but that in a way it's like, in what way are you teaching people about those other cultures?

00:53:47:07 – 00:54:06:13

Sumaya Kassim

And like, how is that coming across? And are the people who are learning about those things, do they understand, our relationship, Britain's relationship with that, with that country, if that makes sense. The historical relationship, which is a deeply unequal one. So I kind of feel a bit mixed about that is what I'd say.

00:54:06:15 – 00:54:17:04

Zarina Muhammad

What is the link between decolonial thinking and restitution? Like how does decolonial thinking in or around institutions affect the chances or possibility of restitution?

00:54:17:06 – 00:54:40:02

Sumaya Kassim

So so restitution, the idea that an object should return to its, place of origin, the idea of decolonizing. Again, it comes back to this idea of we're challenging colonialism. That object has been stolen. That's a very material reality. So if that object is then returned, that is a material valuable thing for that community.

00:54:40:04 – 00:55:07:23

Sumaya Kassim

And so, again, I don't want to make it into a metaphor. I don't want to make it into a symbol, but I just want to rest on that idea that that's a very powerful thing to have happened. I think, on the other hand, I do want to make it into a symbol a little bit because I often say, and I often think to myself that the the stolen object in the museum, it kind of I think it represents something because it's saying like what has been stolen from us, right?

00:55:07:23 – 00:55:36:04

Sumaya Kassim

There is a particular thing that colonialism took from us and it's the ability to live with each other without that particular process having happened, potentially without racism. Right. We would metabolize difference in a completely different way. Again, like who knows. So it stole something else from us, right? It stole our ability to live together differently.

00:55:36:06 – 00:55:58:03

Sumaya Kassim

And in certain communities, it stole people's whole lives. I think about, people who are the descendants of enslaved people for instance. It stole something. It's all about a kind of a deeper type of theft that goes on and unacknowledged. And so whenever we talk about restitution, my mind always goes into that direction, into thinking about what else?

00:55:58:03 – 00:56:16:07

Sumaya Kassim

What else did you steal? What else did you steal? But then at the same time, I want to stick to the idea that restitution to me also

symbolizes a very material reality of an object that you shouldn't have, and therefore returning it and, believing that that community can take better care of it than you.

00:56:16:09 – 00:56:44:03

Sumaya Kassim

Those types of things I think is important. And I also it also makes me think of reparations and the idea that we must -- we (laughing). The idea this country must provide reparations to countries that it colonized. Will it do that? No, but it should. Right. So it sort of enacts this not enoughness.

00:56:44:05 – 00:57:06:18

Sumaya Kassim

And maybe that's important, that it's not enough. Even if you return this object, that's not enough. And I think that's very productive because, like, it's never enough, right? It's never going to be enough. And I think that again, it's in a strange way, this is the way that I am articulating my hope. There's something very important about saying, and that is not enough.

00:57:06:24 – 00:57:32:19

Sumaya Kassim

What you took from us is never going to come back. I think there is a kind of, I guess the academic word would be a kind of affect happening there where it's like there is a kind of grieving or mourning that may never end for what happened. And I think that that idea that you return the object and therefore, okay, now we can draw a line under it.

00:57:32:21 – 00:57:36:09

Sumaya Kassim

That's not what's going to happen. Does that make sense?

00:57:36:13 – 00:58:06:16

Zarina Muhammad

Yeah. Yeah. It also it makes sense on my question, but it also makes sense of this feeling I've been sitting with for like last year? A while. Of like -- Mark Fisher, the hauntological and is it Achille Mbembe, the necropolitical. Yeah. I'm trying to I'm trying to square this circle between those two.

00:58:06:18 – 00:58:15:13

Zarina Muhammad

I don't know how they interact, but I think your answer, I might listen back to it and be like, oh, there's something there to fill in the gap.

00:58:15:15 – 00:58:19:22

Sumaya Kassim

Yeah, yeah, I feel you, I feel you, yeah.

00:58:19:24 – 00:58:40:17

Zarina Muhammad

So there you go. That was my conversation with Dan Hicks and Sumaya Kassim. Thank you to both of them. And thank you to MUBI for sponsoring this episode. And this research and investigation. Hopefully you have learned something. Hopefully this has been interesting and it's given you food for thought. If you do want to watch Dahomey, then you can do so on Mubi from today.

00:58:40:17 - 00:59:00:08

Zarina Muhammad

13th of December is out now. If you already have a subscription, it's on there. Off you go. And if you don't then you can head to mubi.com/thewhitecube where you will get 30 days for free and you can watch Dahomey but you can also watch La Chimera with Josh O'Connor. You can watch In-camera by Naqqash Khalid.

00:59:00:09 - 00:59:27:18

Zarina Muhammad

You can watch the substance. I will watch this. Everyone else in the entire world has watched the substance except me. I'll be watching the substance and a bunch of other films we love MUBI unironically, uncynically. Match made in Heaven. There you go. If you do end up watching the film and or if you want to watch Dahomey and you want a guide rope around the film in the form of my opinion, then stay tuned for this Sunday, 15th of December when I'll be publishing my review.

00:59:27:20 - 00:59:46:19

Zarina Muhammad

But that is it. I will leave you with that. Thank you Dan, thank you Sumaya. And thank you, MUBI. And thank you to you for listening. Goodbye.