

A Global History of Architecture for the Age of Reparations

Esra Akcan (Cornell University)

GAHTC Theorizing the Global Symposium Deliverables. Eds: Mark Jarzombek, Eliana AbuHamdi Murchie, Vikramāditya Prakāsh

I. Global History as Justice and Peacebuilding

According to me, writing and teaching global history is a historian's appeal for justice and peacebuilding. A geopolitically conscious global or intertwined history of modern architecture rewrites modernity in terms of migrations and translations, in a way that makes a call for cosmopolitan ethics, for political and ecological healing and for unbound world citizenship, as opposed to a new colonial, nationalist or extractionist attitude.

[Writing global history](#) means seeing a much more connected world, because of the people, ideas, objects, technologies, images, and information that travel between places and get translated in each location, rather than writing a narrative that reproduces the geographically dependent and stagnant racial identity categories. I understand translation to be the transformation in the act of transportation. Writing global histories in terms of translations avoids passive metaphors of epistemic or actual colonialism such as transfer, export or civilizing, and thereby gives due acknowledgment to all parties in any given cultural flow between places. While established art historical categories perpetuate essentialist geographical identity categories such as "African," "American," "Chinese," or "Middle Eastern/Islamic culture"--like those disseminated with the "clash of civilizations" rhetoric-- the intertwined global architectural history project observes the countless evidences of translations in world history and thereby establishes an antidote to such epistemic formations. But writing the history of translations does not mean trivializing colonization or cultural imperialism where only the powerful party benefits. Writing translations is a method that seeks to understand the global circulation of architecture with both its colonial aspects and cosmopolitan potentials. It means advocating for translation both literally as a lingual project so that we understand peoples in their own words, and as a metaphor so that societies open themselves to the hitherto foreign as a rejuvenating and equalizing force, rather than a threat.¹

[An anti-racist global architectural history](#) project works on at least two levels. The first is writing architectural history in a way that exposes racism in order to repair its damages and to deconstruct racial categories. The second is to show the agency of the racialized subjects in the making of the architectural and urban spaces that we assumed had been created by white male architects. I understand race as a socially constructed category that produces racism based on what people look like, how they sound or where they come from. Given that the categorization of races, and its product racism, rely on the artificial typification of human bodies with essential characters attached to them by birth-- namely that races are racialized-- architectural historians have to speak about race to undo racism. At the same time however, we need to study race with the anticipation that racial studies will not be needed and will disappear in the future when racism's undoing is fully accomplished. In other words, anti-racist global architectural history means exposing the roots of

¹ For more discussion and related concepts, please see: Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey and the Modern House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

contemporary racisms in historical violence, while giving due acknowledgment to the black and brown migrants in the making of even the most perceived white places. Writing global history therefore involves registering the spaces designed by both the [internationally connected professionals and local users of architecture](#).²

[Teaching global history](#) does not necessarily mean circumnavigating the entire planet and checking every box as if this was possible, but it still means choosing examples from evenly distributed geographical locations. It means, for example, presenting the network of people's revolutions that took place during the same time, rather than discussing the French Revolution as the chronological marker of freedom, equality and human rights. It means teaching the architectural icons of the American, French and Haitian revolutions together as symbols of people's sovereignty and self-governance. When teaching Industrial Revolution, global history not only looks at the impact of new materials, technologies and mass production on architectures in London, Paris and Chicago, but also discusses the strong cause and effect relations between industrialization, colonization and environmental extraction in Asia, Africa and the indigenous lands of the Americas. When teaching postcolonial independence, global history means registering the continuing Western mandates, as well as the erasure of ethnic minorities in the name of anti-colonial resistance and national consciousness. It exposes the contradiction in robbing people from their language in the name of language. It involves seeing the connections between the monuments of different capital cities that were built as physical signs of nationhood.³

There is no shortage of environmental history in established narratives of architecture. As a matter of fact, many historians during the foundations of the art history discipline, from Johann Winckelmann to those in the service of the colonial explanations of "tropical architecture," insisted on the climate-specificity of art and architecture. What we need today is not to put environment into architectural history, but to put architecture into environmental history, so that we can come to terms with the impact of industrialization and extractive economies as a geophysical force. Rather than blaming climate change on an abstract and undifferentiated species called humanity, a geopolitically conscious global history shows that the factors contributing to global warming are connected to capitalism and imperial domination of the first industrializing nations, as well as to the actions of nations that aim to hold the same superpower today, such as Brazil, China, Gulf States, India, and Turkey. It means showing the connections between ecological, geopolitical and feminist problems, because it is women and children of the global east and south that get disproportionately affected from environmental extraction. It requires tackling slow violence against nature and racial capitalism together by showing that the displacement of the poor and non-northern populations due to climate change forecasts an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. It requires understanding the connections during the historical construction of the inequalities between economic classes, races, nations and species, and thus acknowledging the intersectionality of social, global and environmental justice.

² For one example and my own ideas about rewriting history in this way, please see: Esra Akcan, *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA-1984/87* (Basel, Berlin: Birkhäuser/De Gruyter Academic Press, 2018).

³ For more on my ideas about teaching of global history of architecture, see: Esra Akcan, "Writing a Global History through Translation: An Afterword on Pedagogical Perspectives," in *Modes of Architectural Translation: Objects and Acts*, Karen Koehler and Jeffrey Saletnik (eds.) Special Issue of *Art in Translation* 10:1 (2018): 136-142; Esra Akcan, "Translation Theory and the Intertwined Histories of Building for Self-Governance," in *Terms of Appropriation*, Ana Miljacki, Amanda Lawrance (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2018).

In other words, critical global history involves showing the violence of both colonization and nation-building during decolonization, of both slavery and lack of reparations after the freeing of the slaves, of both carbonization and Eurocentric environmentalism. Yet, the ultimate aim of global history in uncovering these injuries is to build justice and peace. Therefore, global history also excavates the cosmopolitan potentials in translations, and the contributions of the hitherto erased architects of any gender from any place who sought for just practices.

Writing and teaching global history in the United States—namely, a major military and soft power that is responsible for most of these wounds because of its history of settler colonization, slavery, environmental extraction, and global military interventions—means taking accountability by exposing this history critically. For those of us who have been involved in writing and teaching a version of global history for at least two decades, it is encouraging to observe the increasing use of words such as coloniality and decolonization today, and to hear the recent declarations when institutions commit to anti-racist education and professional practice. I am happy to see that historians collectively develop a more complex picture that shows both the liberating and colonizing forces of intertwined histories, and disseminate this knowledge through websites such as the one administered by GATHC. At the same time, I can't help but notice the continuing vulnerability of this project. Many of us witnessed the dangerous face of white resentment and Eurocentric backlash during the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, when an entitled mass mobilized by the president himself refused to accept the results of a democratic election. Signs of anti-immigrant and anti-cosmopolitan sentiment, as well as nationalist purism against translation had been long in the making around the world. And these signs may have been closer to our discipline and universities than we think, as they may appear in the hidden trivializations by colleagues, minor aggressions in student evaluations, and even grievances of privileged men claiming to be excluded from history courses in departments of architecture. In a context where white supremacists are acting explicitly to avoid losing control and where national purists are gaining momentum around the world, it seems ever more important to uphold global history as a project of justice and peacebuilding. In the next section, I suggest another relevance for this project by defining architectural history's role in transitional justice.

II. Historical Wounds and Transitional Justice

Transitional justice is a new sphere in international law and human rights that was officially recognized in the mid-2000s, and it has opened up new possibilities for architectural history's relevance in global justice and progressive change. The accountability for past abuses came to the forefront of human rights movements with the grassroots protests in South America and elsewhere since the 1980s. The concept of transitional justice entered the lexicon of international law as new nations emerged out of the end of cold-war, and with human rights conflicts such as the ones in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The official U.N. Definition for transitional justice, released in 2004 when Kofi Annan was Secretary-General, reads: "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation."⁴ Just like human rights, transitional justice has much more to offer than the legal debate administered by the institutions of international law alone. I suggest to study architecture's place in transitions from and reparations to military regimes,

⁴ U.N. Secretary's report "The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies" August 23, S/2004/616, p.4.

civil wars, genocides, and apartheid, as well as in reckoning with the past to heal from colonization and slavery, as relevant topics in the multidisciplinary field of transitional justice.⁵

Transitional justice is an evolving field with unresolved issues. In many cases, results have been compromising or even flawed, reparations have functioned as whitewashing devices, financial compensations have been symbolic, and institutional reforms have given unfair advantages to new regime supporters. As Pablo de Greiff summarized, transitional justice takes place in “a very imperfect world,” which means that one despot’s violations may need to be rectified by several consecutive governments.⁶ Moreover, the assumption of the “objectivity” and “universality” of international law is rightly debated, and the framework to reconcile the international and place-based justice systems remains unresolved. Conceptions of justice among communities vary; societies respond to violations differently; methods that they use to find justice differ; reconciliation means forgiveness in some countries, but punishment in others; there is no direct correlation between victimhood and desire for war crime trials; individual opinions about justice in a given country are skewed according to nationalist and ethnocentric ideologies, depend on social and economic factors, and change over time.⁷ When perceived as a toolkit that can be applied anywhere without translation, transitional justice mechanisms foreclose a society’s right-to-heal. In the context of the unfinished struggles toward justice, the imperfect conditions of transitions, and the unreconciled international and national laws, transitional justice needs to be conceived as a continually evolving, self-reflective and open platform, where societies formulate new forms of peacebuilding steps.

Transitional justice ought to gain momentum today as the question of reparations has a newfound relevance in the United States with the Black Lives Matter movement, and as the question of multifaceted healing has become urgent around the world with the recent public health and related crises exposed by Covid-19, and moreover as the question of repairs after climate-change related disasters continues to loom in our planet’s future. Giving such a momentum to the accountability and reparations debate was the intention of the [“Repair and Reparations”](#) panel series that I organized in AY 2020-21. Below, I selected three cases from this multidisciplinary series in order to foreground the role of architecture and architectural history.

Slavery and colonialism reparations

During the Summer of 2020, several Confederate and Military Monuments were toppled or removed during the Black Lives Matter protests in Virginia, Boston, Alabama, Bristol, Antwerp and other cities. While the [future of commemoration](#) is a topic in its own right, the monuments discussions also sparked debates of accountability and right-to-truth. For instance, during these protests and monuments debate, [Angela Davis](#), called on the transitional justice language including a Truth and Reconciliation commission to reckon with the historical damages caused by slavery and its continuing racist legacy. We might indeed see USA as a country still in transition from its history of slavery and settler colonization. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ call for reparations (2014) and UN Working Group’s Report of Experts on People of African Decent that (2016) used the transitional justice language (that had been developed in some parts of South America, Africa and Europe) have already

⁵ Esra Akcan, *Right to Heal* (book in progress)

⁶ Pablo de Greiff, “Theorizing Transitional Justice,” Melissa Williams (ed.) *Transitional Justice* (NY: NYU Press, 2012): 31-77; Also see, *Nomos* vol. 51. (2012):31-77.

⁷ Rosalind Shaw, Lars Waldorf (eds.) *Localizing Transitional Justice. Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

given a new push to this debate.⁸ Unlike remedial or distributive justice that opts to close the present gaps (income gap, education gap, incarceration gap) by allocating present resources slightly more evenly, transitional justice is invested in tracing the historical causes of this gap much more precisely, and bringing justice against past violations. Recently, scholars in the transitional justice field have made the case that in the major U.S. transition periods, such as the Reconstruction and Civil Rights Era, equity has been sought through ahistorical distributive justice, and has thus remained less effective than possible.⁹ Instead, the transitional justice procedures may move toward fairer reparations including monetary redress, and may have a better chance in preventing white backlash (as seen in statements such as “affirmative action is reverse racism”).

Our panel “[Belgium to Congo: Colonialism Reparations and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions](#)” (with Amah Edoh, Pablo de Greiff, Pedro Monaville, Liliane Umubyeyi) also explored the theme of reparations and restitutions to bring justice to the residual inequalities caused by slavery and colonization. Shortly after the toppling of the statue of King Leopold II in Summer 2020, Belgium instituted a sort of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the form of a parliamentary Special Commission, meant to scrutinize Belgium’s colonial past, and to discuss reparations to ex-colony Congo. Truth and Reconciliation commissions are one of the mechanisms of transitional justice in addition to trials, reparations, compensation programs, institutional reforms, memorials and museums with education programs, among others.

Recognized by international law in the human rights convention against enforced disappearance, the right-to-truth oversees the right of relatives and society to know the truth about state brutality and human rights violations in the past, which have been obscured due to denial of responsibility, and distortion of facts in official national histories. Truth and recognition of suffering is a prerequisite of healing. [I suggest](#)¹⁰ to draw attention to the place of architectural history in right-to-truth. The physical environments can indeed be treated as primary sources of history, and evidences in truth-telling in mechanisms of transitional justice.

Far from being resolved however, the right-to-truth claims have often injected a dilemma into the healing process, because truth commissions that were established during transitional periods often secured amnesties to perpetrators in return for collaboration. A history of transitional justice might indeed be written by showing the dilemma between truth and criminal justice, and the historical struggles in different countries to minimize it, such as the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission during South Africa’s transition from the apartheid regime, or the right-to-truth movement, protests against impunity, and trials for truth in Argentina. The “Belgium to Congo” panel addressed the possibility of Belgium to take accountability for the historical violence it inflicted on colonial Congo and to give reparations.

Postwar, post-communist and pending postcolonial memorials

⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014 issue.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

⁹ See for instance: Desmond S. King, Jennifer M. Page, “Towards Transitional Justice? Black Reparations and the end of Mass Incarceration” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol 41, No.4 (2018): 739—758; Debra Satz, “Countering the Wrongs of the Past: The Role of Compensation,” Melissa Williams (ed.) *Transitional Justice* (NY: NYU Press, 2012): 129-150.

¹⁰ Esra Akcan, “Healing Spaces of Enforced Disappearance,” *The City: Traces of Urban Memories* Symposium, American Academy in Rome, May 10, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byY5CEtYUe8> 2:03:00--2:31:00

No other country but Germany has a longer history of memorialization that reckons with its past crimes, where the discipline of architectural history took on active roles. Germany has also served as a model for the elaboration of transitional justice mechanisms, both due to its crimes and reparations. In an agreement reached in 1952, West Germany approved to make restitutions and monetary reparations to the Jewish victims of Nazism. Additionally, the country took several educational steps and moral reparations that served as models for transitional justice and international law. While East Germany refused accountability in 1952 claiming it did not bear moral or historical responsibility to the crimes of the Nazis, the state agreed to reverse this policy in 1988. The memorable image of Willy Brandt kneeling down in a dramatic apology in Warsaw in 1970 has recently sparked new debates on reparations. After the dissolution of East Germany and the two Germany's reunification, authorities discussed reparations for property seized by the Communists for the past four decades. Only recently in 2015, the official deliberations started for a consensus over the history of and an apology for the German pre-Nazi genocide in southwest Africa.

The collective memory debate in Germany, and its repercussions in the United States, have often been competitive, as if different groups of victims need to compete with each other in their struggle over scarce resources, and as if recognizing and taking accountability for the oppression of one group would take away these rights from another. While Holocaust has often been declared unique among genocides and Nazis among perpetrators, it can and it has served as a model for the mobilization of other material and moral reparations in unexpected places of the world. Its confrontation has sometimes helped, at other times impaired, the articulation of other horrors and the recognition of other victims. Moreover, the early Holocaust memory debate actually took shape in dialogue with the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles of intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, W.E.B. Du Bois and Charlotte Delbo, as scholar Michael Rothberg has convincingly analyzed.¹¹ Andreas Huyssen has also traced the beginnings of this memory discourse and the growing awareness of the Holocaust to decolonization and the civil rights movements.¹² The relations between Holocaust memory, xenophobia, and the reception of Muslim immigrants in Germany after the 1970s have been no less complex and changing. Many immigrants compared racism against them to anti-Semitism, such as the Neo Nazis' deadly attacks in Mölln (1992) and Solingen (1993), and many Middle Eastern immigrants took the German-Jewish trope as a model for their own cooperative unions, associations, and demands for rights.¹³ In literary studies, Leslie Adelson has analyzed Holocaust consciousness and accountability in German-Turkish immigrant literature after Germany's reunification.¹⁴ Esra Özyürek has drawn our attention to the fact that that the situation changed in the 2000s, when "the interconnected commitments of European leaders to fight anti-Semitism became one of the grounds for legitimizing racialization of immigrants, and signaling out the Muslims as the main contemporary anti-Semites."¹⁵ Another indication of the competitive memory is the implied ranking of suffering due to unequal monetary resources, space and scale

¹¹ Michael Rothberg *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹² Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹³ Mandel, *Cosmopolitan Anxieties*, 109–40; Gökçe Yurdakul and Michael Bodemann, "We Don't Want to Be the Jews of Tomorrow: Jews and Turks in Germany after 9/11," *German Politics and Society* 24, no. 2 (2006): 44–67.

¹⁴ Zafer Şenocak, *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (Munich: Babel, 1998), 89. See also Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*, 79–122; Andreas Huyssen, "Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts," *New German Critique* 88 (2003): 47–164.

¹⁵ Esra Özyürek, "Export-Import Theory and the Racialization of Anti-Semitism: Turkish- and Arab-Only Prevention Programs in Germany," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no.1 (2016): 40–65. Quotation: 41.

granted to different memorials. Comparing Holocaust memorials to other apology structures, many commented on the lack or insufficiency in the commemoration of other Nazi-victims such as the Roma and homosexual populations. Moreover, Holocaust memorials in immigrant neighborhoods such as Berlin's Kreuzberg failed to triangulate German, Jewish, and immigrant memories, even though many intellectuals drew connections between historical and contemporary discriminations against the Jewish and Muslim populations.¹⁶

These examples from Germany point to the fact that different struggles for transitional justice in general, and accountability and reparations in particular, have sometimes blocked, but at other times learned from each other. One group's struggle for the recognition of pain could actually inspire and guide another's. It could help devise mechanisms of truth-telling, confrontation and non-recurrence, including survival testimonies, naming of the crimes, memorials, educational programs, repatriation protocols for cultural heritage objects, compensation norms and "never again" movements.

["Germany to Germany: New Perspectives on Postwar, Post-Unification and Postcolonial Reparations"](#) panel (with Rebecca Boehling, Tiffany Florvil, Nicholas Mulder, Ruti Teitel) brought together scholars who provided new perspectives on the historical and pending reparations in the eras after colonization, Nazism, and communism in Germany, as well as the significance of these restitutions in serving as a model for transitional justice and international law. We gathered to discuss post-war, post-unification, and pending post-colonial reparations in Germany, not to blur the distinctions between the three, or to rank suffering, but to see if and how this dialogue can build solidarities, identify double standards, if any, and work towards overcoming them. We explored both material and moral reparations, such as return and restitution of property that had been confiscated, monetary payments as compensation, and educational steps to take responsibility for the past. The panel not only acknowledged reparations to ex-citizens and refugees, but also questioned the limits of established formulas and the inequality of reparations throughout the history of today's Germany.

Museum restitutions

Art and architecture is relevant for reparations much beyond the right-to-truth struggles, historical monument debates and transitional justice memorials. One such topic is museum collections and architectures of exhibition. On October 7, 2020, France's National Assembly voted to pass a bill to return twenty-seven colonial-era artefacts from French museums to Benin and Senegal. This vote came three years after President Emmanuel Macron's promise in November 2017, that he "wants to see the conditions put in place so as to allow for the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage to Africa." While this promise and the bill in favor of restitution may become a chronological marker in the long struggles towards repatriation of museum objects, it would be good to remember that there are 90,000 objects from sub-Saharan Africa in public museums in France, and the recent vote to return them concerns only twenty-seven of them. It may also be good to note that the British Museum has 69,000 objects from sub-Saharan Africa, Royal Museum of Belgium holds 180,000, Humboldt Forum in Germany 75,000.

What is the responsibility of museums to objects taken into their collections by violence or deceit during the colonial times or wars? What is the role of museum-object-repatriation in the recognition of colonial and military violence? While museums in Europe and North America have occasionally returned objects in their collections back to their native communities or lands of arrival, the issue of repatriation gained an accelerated epistemological and ethical momentum in November 2018, with

¹⁶ For more discussion, see Esra Akcan, *Open Architecture*, Stop 6; Esra Akcan, "Apology and Triumph: Memory Transference, Erasure and a Rereading of the Berlin Jewish Museum" *New German Critique* 110 (Summer 2010): 153-179.

the publication of a report commissioned as a follow-up to Macron's reparations promise and authored by Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoye.¹⁷ Many communities and formerly colonized countries had already been making restitution demands for over fifty years. In 1978, UNESCO had made a plea for the return of cultural heritage arguing that "the peoples who have been victims of plunder... have also been robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge."¹⁸ Before Macron's promise, the question of repatriation and restitution had gained considerable momentum with the work and organizing of museum scholars, artists, journalists, students, and even major global art events such as Documenta (2017) and big box-office movies such as *Black Panther*. In Germany, forty organizations wrote an open letter to Merkel to take repatriation more seriously. The German Lost Art Foundation, originally established to support investigations of Nazi-looted art, decided to expand its mandate to include objects from former colonies. The repatriation discussions also exposed that most museum collections in Europe were initiated through violence, with cultural spoils acquired in wars, before the 1899 Hague Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War. To quote from Savoye-Sarr report, "destruction and collection are two sides of the same coin" that lie at the history of the great museums of Europe.¹⁹ Yet, violence in collecting did not come to an end with the Hague convention. The history of acquisitions shows that public museums gained the majority of their collections during the era of colonization. The Savoye-Sarr report identified that the number of objects from sub-Saharan Africa in Museum of Quai Branly in Paris jumped from 1000 to 45 000 between the Berlin Conference of 1885 and the independence of many colonies in 1960. During the ten-year period between 1928-38 alone, namely during the rise of ethnography museums, 20,000 objects made it to the collections. The objects acquired after 1960 also had colonial ties, as they were donations from families of former colonial military officers, or had circled back to the art market after colonial collecting practices and illicit trafficking. Documenting that these objects have been ripped away from Africa, but also that they have been cared for and preserved by generations of curators in Europe, the report concluded that these museum objects are "equipped to serve as mediators of a new relationality." Their restitution would "allow for the possibility of writing a new page of a shared and peaceful history, where each protagonist can provide his or her fair piece of the common story."²⁰

The repatriation debates in the United States are no less significant. In 1990, the United States Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act requiring federally-funded institutes to identify and return Native American remains. As a result of this law, Smithsonian museum repatriated remains from seventeen members in 1993. The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago returned 156 bones to British Columbia in Canada in 2003, extending the repatriation of remnants to Native American communities internationally. Since 1994, MET is known to have returned a dozen objects to Rome, India and Egypt. For instance, in February 2019, it took out from display and returned an ornate golden coffin after it was found to have been looted from Egypt in 2011. In 2007, Getty agreed to return 40 items to Italy. Art stolen during the Nazi-era sparked a chain of restitution requests. In 2010, the American Alliance of Museums published *National Standards and Best Practices*, which contains a section on treating unlawful acquisition of objects from the Nazi era and objects subject to dubious acquisition, but leaves a lot of ambiguity

¹⁷ Felwine Sarr, Benedicte Savoye, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics" Translated by Drew S. Burk, Report November 2018.

¹⁸ Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "A Plea for the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to those who Created It," UNESCO Report, 7 June 1978, p.1. (Report available on UNESCO website: http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/PealforReturn_DG_1978.pdf)

¹⁹ Felwine Sarr, Benedicte Savoye, 14.

²⁰ Ibid., 87.

concerning repatriation of human remains, archeological objects and cultural artifacts.²¹ The repatriation debates in American museums continue in slow and fragmented pace as institutions reexamine their collections.

The critics or skeptics of repatriation fear this will drain museum collections and block the public right to information. They point to the impossibility of the mission due to legal limitations, to the loosely defined criteria of restitutability, and to the cases when some returned objects were sold to black market and replaced with fake objects.

The topic of repatriation raises multiple sub-questions. Once the objects are parted from their communities and no longer serve their original sacred functions, where are they to be returned: to the nation-state that currently holds the land as its territory, to the descendants of the sacred community or to another party who is deemed as the legitimate owner? Are the current policies and international conventions for protection and repatriation sufficient? What are the legal structures that prohibit or allow deaccession in the museums of different countries? Is temporary restitution or making long-term loan agreements with museums in formerly colonized lands an appropriate answer, as it has often been the case recently? What determines how far back museums consider repatriation claims legitimate and why? Should museums get away with restitution demands for objects acquired before their countries ratified UNESCO conventions concerning illicit trafficking and cultural property protection? How to secure the role of objects as artifacts of universal heritage whose value is not necessarily tied to their location? The recent repatriation debates concern sub-Saharan Africa, but what about Middle East, North Africa, West Asia or South Asia? What is the future of “universal museums” around the world? How to design exhibition spaces to display repatriated objects? Against this background, [“Repatriation of Museum Objects”](#) panel (with Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Jonathan Fine, Cécile Fromont) discussed repatriation and restitution as a form of reparation to colonized and looted lands. In addition to theoretical issues, panelists discussed current debates on returning some objects from sub-Saharan Africa in public museums in France and Germany.

I outlined three themes above, but the “Repair and Reparations” panel series also brought together discussions on the political misuse of [cultural heritage](#); on [reconstructions](#) after deadly explosions and collapses; on the need for reparations for not only war crimes, totalitarian regimes, colonialism and slavery, but also the [global apartheid blocking refugee movement](#); on the amends to victims of [nuclear disasters](#) and their memorialization spaces; and on repairs and reparations from climate-change related disasters. Can we think of rehabilitation and resettlement as a form of reparation to current and future [climate refugees](#), even though neither international law nor nation-states are prepared to face up to this challenge in a way that would secure refugee’s human rights and dignity? How, if at all, is it possible to think of restitutions to climate refugees by acknowledging the accountability of the first industrializing countries of the Global North in imposing this displacement on the peoples of the Global South?

Global architectural history has a big part to play in these accountability, reparations and transitional justice debates. A geopolitically conscious global history of architecture demonstrates how present wounds have deep roots in history, and can be traced to connected events throughout the past

²¹ American Alliance of Museums, *National Standards and Best Practices*, 3rd printing, (Washington: AAM Press, 2010): pp:50-55.

centuries as colonizing and industrializing empires dissolved into equally violent purist nation-states. Recognition of global history is the prerequisite for healing and peace, precisely because this history traces how and why these global wounds and injustices have been produced in the past.