From slave trade to fuel tanks: On Benin's colonial displacements

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz

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In this article, I propose the possibility of alternative ways of narrating African histories through art objects as allusive openings inciting a change in Western ways of perceiving the African continent. Based on my experience of visiting the Benin pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024, I will explore the role of artistic ways of alluding to Benin's past and present by way of seemingly cancelling its colonial past through its topographical displacement to the historic Kingdom of Dahomey, a West African kingdom which existed between 1600 and 1904 within the territory of the present-day Republic of Benin. The artists' conflation of Benin with Dahomey will be read as a historical and topographical displacement, which the artworks displayed in the Benin pavilion used as a background for artistic projections of the future, envisioning the necessity of empowering women by way of alluding to the Yoruba tradition of *Gèlèdè* as a dialogical space of rematriation. In this article, I treat the artistic allusive history as a necessary supplement to official histories, which, along with traditional museal practices, constitute what Arjun Appadurai calls "testaments of fixity" – a category which may be held responsible for demoting Africa to the provinces of anthropological and development studies. The return of cultural artefacts looted by colonisers to Benin, alluded to in the exhibition, will be read in the light of Graham Harman's notion of "allure" as an illusion of the possibility of a return to the once lost state of completeness. This impossibility will be brought in through the exhibition's allusion to the ecological threat brought to Benin by traffickers of petrol from Nigeria. The article also brings in a brief analysis of two recent films which I find significant for broadening its perspective: Gina Prince-Bythewood's *The Woman King* (2022) and Mati Diop's *Dahomey* (2024). **Keywords:** Benin, history, displacement, colonialism, slave trade, Venice Biennale 2024.

For the first time in its 60-year history, the 2024 edition of the Venice Biennale presented the Republic of Benin's national pavilion. Located at the Venice Arsenale (rather than in some far-off location as is often the case for African national pavilions), the intention of this inaugural pavilion was to bring the Yoruba *Gèlèdè* traditions highlighting women's vital social and political roles to visitors' attention and to simultaneously inspire them to think about the precariousness and fragility of living in the contemporary world. The poetically sounding title of the Benin pavilion, "Everything Precious Is Fragile", was, in fact, a translation of the term *Gèlèdè*. The title reflected, as Azu Nwagbogu, the curator of the exhibition, put it, "on the way we treat the things that are most important to us" (Horton). Nwagbogu is the founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation, an organisation established in 2007 and based in Lagos. He is also the founder of the annual Lagos Photo Festival and is an internationally acclaimed curator of numerous local and international artistic events and exhibitions. As Rolien Zonneveld put it on the Homecoming Gallery webpage, Nwagbogu "has become a visionary curator" whose mission is to challenge "the lingering cliches that attend Black creative self-representation" (Nwagbogu and Zonneveld). He formulated the complex task of the Venice Biennale as a recommendation to explore "traditional ceremonies and rituals, such as those associated with *Gèlèdè* traditions and Vodoun; Benin's amazon warriors, Agojie, and the role of women in protecting and nurturing the nation; the history of colonialism and slave trade" (Nwagbogu, "Azu Nwagbogu on Curating the Republic of Benin Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale"). Underlining the necessity of restituting the memory of the historical empowerment of women in the *Gèlèdè* tradition and in Benin's historical past, the exhibition interestingly alluded to the country's patriarchal ancestry by way of, perhaps intentionally,

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz is associate professor in the Institute of Humanities, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, SWPS University, Warsaw, Poland
Email: apantuchowicz@swps.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3238-0864

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excluding male monarchic figures. According to Nwagbogu, what "paved the way for *Everything Precious is Fragile*" was another exhibition (C&, "Benin Pavilion for 60th Venice Biennale Announces Artists and Theme", italics in original). It was titled "The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today: from Restitution to Revelation" and was held in 2022 at the Palais de la Marina in Cotonou in Benin. It displayed 26 objects looted from palaces in Abomey in 1892 by French troops. The objects were first donated to the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography in Paris and then, in 2000, were moved to the Quai Branly Museum, also in Paris. They were sent back to the Republic of Benin in 2021. One of the 26 objects was Sossa Dede's sculpture, which showed King Béhanzin, the 11th king of Danxomè (later renamed Dahomey by the French) who waged war against the French colonisers between 1889 and 1892.

Accompanying Béhanzin were two ceremonial thrones of kings Ghézo and Glèlè and, additionally, "more contemporary art created by 34 Beninese artists such as Dominique Zinkpè, Julien Sinzogan, Yves Apollinaire Pédè, and Ponce Zannou" (Athena Art Foundation). The absence of any figures or effigies of kings at the Venice Biennale seems to be a result of Nwagbogu's hope of bringing in a "reflection around Benin's history and feminism" without explicitly referring to particular historical events, a reflection on "something that we can all relate to and which brings us back to the thing that makes us all feel human" (Horton). The absence of kings in the exhibition seems to be an allusive attempt at looking at the potential of rethinking rematriation through realising Benin's complex historical turbulences reaching back to the military activities of European colonial powers in the 19th-century Scramble for Africa, which gave rise to various pre-colonial non-existent political units. Benin was first created by the French colonial conquest at the end of the 19th century (Ronen, Adotevi and Law), but its present borders and territories cannot be fully identified with those of the historic Kingdom of Dahomey, which constitutes only Benin's southern part. The return of the looted figures to Benin may be seen not as a justice done to a particular political state but as a potential rebuilding of the present as an, however imaginary, way to a non-colonial future in which it is Africa, or its spirit, that can be awakened. The Benin pavilion brought an aesthetic dimension to the displayed artefacts as an invitation to the awakening, or revelation, of creative spirit and genius—a possibility strongly accented by Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin, in the opening address:

> Statues or sculpted doors, elaborate thrones, portable altars […], none of them leave us indifferent. There is no doubt that many of you will come into contact with them and contemplate their exceptional beauty, magnificence and splendour, signs of the prodigy of their creators. Many voices will see them and praise the vision and grandeur of the kings who commissioned them. (Talon)

The genius of the returned kings is a rediscovery of the alleged greatness of the Benin culture and art, and Talon reads it as a beginning of a process of restitution and return which, as yet, is incomplete, a beginning of a longer story to be told by Benin to the world:

> It is the time of restitution that has begun and that will continue resolutely until we reach our objective. For it must be admitted that the 26 royal treasures recovered are only the very first episode of a soap opera that promises other sequences. In this same spirit, we are also beginning the time of revelation: revealing to ourselves the best we have and revealing to others how, without Benin, the world would not be quite the same. (Talon)

Benin is thus posited as indispensable in the making of the world as it is, though what is needed to reveal this significant position is the return of the forcibly pilfered objects to their alleged homeland. Such returnees from the colonial capitals and their museums, the objects, in the eyes of Benin's president, testify to the magnificence of the past, tell the untold story of an enforced absence, though not exactly from the places from which they had been taken, but from the space of another museum or exhibition, in the space offered to them as a regained home.

Arjun Appadurai personifies museum objects and names some of them "accidental refugees" (401) whose relocation, unlike in the case of human refugees, he sees as unintended. Though the objects of his remarks are German museums, some of his observations also refer to museums in other European states. "On the face of it", he writes, "the objects that have ended up in German custodianship did not come to Germany willingly or by their own volition. Like all objects *discovered through conquest*, collection and curation in the great museums of the West, they are accidental refugees" (407, italics added). The idea of discovery through conquest, collection, and curation translates colonialism into an epistemological endeavour in which things are made present and knowable from the outside of their origins as objects of scientific insight. Since only some of them can be taken away to specialised places to be studied, their selection is seen as accidental. On the basis of this premise, Appadurai proposes a

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rereading of stories told by accidental refugees by way of anthropomorphising them, endowing them with the ability to speak, though not exactly with their own voices. Historically, museum objects have "been given voice through the work of the scholars, curators, exhibition professionals and museum educators who have ended up as trustees of these objects" who talked "about their roles, uses and meanings in the places from which they originally came" (407). Their "accidental refugee" status was thus concealed by the image of objects still remaining there and then, enabling an imaginary ocular contact with the where and when to which they once belonged. Interestingly, Appadurai does not consider the possibility of the accidental refugees' return to where they had been taken away from. What he proposes instead is to concentrate on their displacement and circulation. In the hands of scholars and curators, "these objects are made into testaments of fixity and not of circulation, though complex processes of circulation and displacement are what is most important about them" (407). What is thus needed is a certain supplementation of the ways we understand museum artefacts with migrancy so as to make our fixed ways of understanding more vigorous and livelier—in line with the living energy of objects. "Objects too have lives and biographies", writes Appadurai, "and furthermore they can be seen to exert force, purpose, even motive (in the sense of Spinoza's idea of *conatus*)" (405). Admitting them the status of refugees rather than that of dead and passive things, we will be able to hear in their stories what we also hear in the stories of human refugees, which "focus on their dislocation, disenfranchisement and suffering as key elements of who they are" (407). What is thus proposed is the achievement of "a better balance" through seeing both "refugee objects" and "refugee humans" as "complex and interactive mixtures of stability and dislocation" (407).

Talon also sees the objects looted by the French from Danxomè as objects of discovery, though not through conquest. Rather, he sees them as returnees from exile who, telling the history of Danxomè, translate it into the history of Benin, which will also attract emigrants from Benin:

> From the North to the South of the country, from the East to the West and from the farthest reaches of all the diasporas, Beninese people of all generations are invited to come and discover them. As much as any citizen of the world who wants to. These are unique cultural works that tell our history, our identity, our soul. (Talon)

It seems to be here, in the Palais de la Marina, where Appadurai's mixture of stability and dislocation promises a return of stability through the discovery of the spirit of Danxomè, which, as we have seen, is also the spirit of monarchs, simultaneously being the spirit of Benin's exceptionalism. Talon's speech is also addressed to the Beninese diaspora, to emigrants from Benin, and to refugees who are invited to discover what they really are, their souls and identities. This encounter of refugees with the display of returned objects, perhaps with accidental returnees (not all of the looted objects were returned by France in 2021), is a vision of unity and oneness akin to Appadurai's "testaments of fixity" responsible for immobilisation of objects and projections of the stability of historians' or ethnographers' creations. The promise of regained oneness of Benin speaking through its president's speech is a vison resulting from the conflation of sameness and identity with locality. This imaginary oneness, in fact, eliminates the complexity of Benin's past and forgets about what Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall see as "the potential of *sameness-as-worldliness*" (351). Scholarship on Africa frequently followed the paths of seeing Africa along the lines reflected in Talon's address, the lines as it were dictated by the discursive "relegation of the continent to the twin provinces of anthropology and development studies" (Mbembe and Nutall 350). What the two disciplines have brought in is the vision of Africa as inferior, as the world's other, "as a residual entity, the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or of the human condition in general" (351). The foundational assumptions of anthropology and development studies are still the unconscious belief that particular modes of describing reality are appropriate to "modern" societies, on the one hand, and to nonliterate, underdeveloped, and "residual" worlds, on the other hand. In this view, there can be no authentic description of Africa that does not touch on witchcraft, kinship, poverty, or chieftaincy. This compartmentalisation of knowledge undergirds the obsession with Africa's uniqueness, and it feeds the overwhelming neglect of *how* the meanings of Africanness are made (350).

Talon's message is exactly that of a developmental path to a worldliness seen as a return to the universalised world, not through its experience but through an alleged overcoming of the wrongs of colonialism. His Benin follows the universally trodden path to unity as an emergence from its social and topographical complexities into a oneness now emanating as its origin. The return of the refugees, however accidental, attracts and brings back other refugees, simultaneously attracting "any citizen of the world" for whom sameness is a desirable state of being, regardless of the fact that the phrase was first used by Oliver Goldsmith as a way of expressing his

cosmopolitan spirit. If, as Dan Hicks notes (writing about the brutishness of British museal collections of colonial lootings), organised displays of such collections "re-tell the history of empire, no matter how 'critically' or self-consciously" (xiii), then a crucial aspect of Talon's address is also a re-telling of such a story, though its imperial message gets somehow camouflaged by the allegedly universal dimension of oneness and unity.[1]

Mbembe and Nutall conceive of worldliness as a paradoxical kind of unity founded on diversity. "After all", they write,

> the unity of the world is nothing but its diversity. If, as we believe, the world has nothing other, if it is not subject to any authority, and if it does not have a sovereign, then we must read Africa in the same terms as we read everywhere else. This is not tantamount to diminishing aspects of its supposed originality or even its distinctiveness or the potency of its suffering. It means that scholarship on Africa should be deprovincialized. (351)

An attempt at such a deprovincialisation may be seen in the design of Benin's premiere Venice Biennale exhibition. Talon proposed that Nwagbogu be the curator of the event and that he be handed "a carte blanche" for its curatorial direction (Baumgardner). Nwagbogu is not from Benin and identifies himself as "Western-educated from Anglophone Africa, of Nigeria" (Baumgardner). He is the founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation, which promotes African art and artists. One of its aims is "to become a change-maker through the power of art" (African Artists' Foundation). Before the return of looted artefacts to Benin, Nwagbogu addressed the question of colonial losses at the 2020 annual Lagosphoto Festival which followed the theme of "Rapid Response Restitution" and proposed "a potential model for a broader diasporic and pan-African engagement with questions of restitution and repatriation" (C&, "Lagosphoto Festival 2020: Rapid Response Restitution—Home Museum"). In November 2020, in an interview for *The Guardian*, he compared African cultural heritage losses to phantom limbs, a kind of present absence that Africa should acknowledge:

> When I think of what has happened in terms of our artistic heritage [...] the analogy of the phantom limb phenomenon comes to mind—you have lost a limb, but you feel it is still there. Well, we have lost our heritage and we know we have lost it, but we can somehow still continue even though we are walking on crutches. I am saying, it's time to drop the crutches and feel the pain and the loss. Let us at least acknowledge what has been lost. (O'Hagan)

The losses cannot simply be undone, though the return of looted artefacts to Africa has been a matter of long-lasting disputes and negotiations. As Elias Aguigah notes, "[d]emands for the return of cultural heritage looted from Africa during the colonial period are not a twenty-first century phenomenon. Africans whose (or whose ancestors') belongings were expropriated have kept on claiming these since they were stolen" (157). For Emery Patrick Effiboley, an art historian from the University of Abomey-Calavi, the acknowledgment of the loss proposed by Nwagbogu seems to be too little. Such objects as those looted from Danxomè, which he calls war or blood-related objects,

> should be returned to the intrinsic owners without condition. The reason for this is that these exiled objects belong to a set of objects that has been dismantled by the colonizers. Repatriating them is not only returning them to their home but also completing/re-appropriating the meaning or their original meaning to the benefit of future generations both at home and abroad. (76)

Nwagbogu's Venice Biennale exhibition acknowledged the colonial looting of Africa not only by way of the significant omission of reference to the royal treasures and the figures of masculine monarchs returned to Benin in 2021. Rather than assuming an unquestionable magnitude of Benin's past and promising its renewal, the exhibition was strongly allusive, avoiding strong literal references to established identification of Benin with the birth of voodoo or *Gèlèdè* masks which, as Nwagbogu put it, have become a Pan-African trope, "a very commodified, commercialized, objectified version of something that must be deeper" (Baumgardner). The concept of *Gèlèdè*, though associated with masquerades celebrating Yoruba women and harmonious coexistence with the land, is also etymologically related, as we have seen, to fragility and vulnerability in the title of the exhibition—"Everything precious is fragile". From the catalogue description, we learned that the idea of the presentation is that of bringing "to life the fragility and resurgence of indigenous wisdom, with a focus on the return to mother nature" (Rama). I will not describe and discuss in detail all the works of the artists who presented their works in Venice—Chloé Quenum, Moufouli Bello, Ishola Akpo, and Romuald Hazoumè—which in various ways address and underline the empowerment of femininity and women as bringers of different attitudes to nature and society. For the purpose of this article, I will read them through possible associations and allusions they bring to the

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mind of a non-African reader and interpreter who finds the general design of the exhibition to be an intellectual challenge and an invitation to think about Africa without any pre-formed concepts or stereotypes.

Akpo's huge tapestry that opened the exhibition presented an *Ìyálóde*—a high-ranking Yoruba chieftain—surrounded by an all-female military unit. Here, the issue of empowerment of women was brought to the fore through reference to the Agojie, the Danxomè Amazons who were employed by the largest slave-trading African empire at the time. The tapestry alluded to the Queen of Danxomè, Tassi Hangbe, who ruled the Kingdom of Danxomè for a short time in the early 18th century. Her 98-foot-tall statue now stands at Esplanade des Amazones, a public square located in Cotonou. Though the historical beginnings of women warriors in Dahomey are uncertain, there exists a theory that suggests that they were formed in honour of Queen Hangbe (who ruled from 1708–1711), the twin sister of King Agaja. According to Kplangan, the palace historian, she was the only woman to rule the kingdom. Others believe that Hangbe herself formed the female corps as palace guards. The problem with this theory is that some historians see Hangbe as a legendary figure who may not even have existed (Murtala, Hamza, and Lawal 184).

Akpo's tapestry does not present a real situation, and the artist has alluded to the uncertainty of Hangbe's history by not including her figure and replacing it with the local figure of Ìyálóde, a motherly figure whose chieftaincy questions the traditional delegation of power to men. The tapestry belongs to a series of collages titled *Traces d'une reine/ Traces of a Queen* in which Akpo, as he himself admits, has "deliberately substituted the heads of the sovereigns for that of the queens, thus staging archives to the glory of the latter. I propose another version of history by rehabilitating these women" (8). The queen in the tapestry also alludes to other African women rulers other than Tassi Hangbe who have been half-forgotten or erased from the African memory. "I decided to explore", Akpo told Elisa Dainelli,

> the memories and heritage of forgotten, neglected, or even erased pre-colonial African queens such as— Tassi Hangbé (ruling Danxomè between 1708 and 1711), Njinga (ruling Angola between 1582–1663), Ndaté Yalla Mbodj from Linguere Wollof, (ruling Senegal between 1810–1860). During my research, I noticed the absence of archives despite the importance and the real political weight of these queens ruling different kingdoms of the continent, so I started to excavate and collect information that led me to tell the complexity of the story of these queens. (Akpo and Dainelli 8)

The erasure of Queen Hangbe's traces was not the work of the colonisers but, according to a legend, may be ascribed to her power-hungry brother, Agaja. This story was told to BBC correspondent Fleur Macdonald by the current Queen Hangbe (the ancestor of the 18th-century Hangbe) with whom Macdonald had been granted an audience in Abomey in 2018. The Queen also told her that all traces of her ancestor's reign were erased by Agaja, who believed that only men should hold the throne. In a dusty museum that lies within the walls of the Royal Palaces in Abomey, the monarchs' elaborate bronze sceptres are displayed in order of their reign. There is no sign of one belonging to Hangbe, and some historians question whether she existed at all (Macdonald).

The story told by Akpo in Venice proposed a vision of the uncertainty and fragility of imperial histories by bringing in the complexity of the distribution of power and its gendering. Though solidity seems to be a positive aspect of cultural or social constructs, Akpo drew attention to the possibility of re-reading fragility, of seeing in it not something to be strengthened, but as a constitutive element of cultures where the imposition of a seemingly desirable, solid order of things is, in fact, a way of concealing a weakness via promises of improvement.

Though colonialism is perceived as an explicit expression of bringing the exemplary stable and solid order of things to places seen as weak, fragile, and inferior, it is the inherent fragility of things that it attempts to somehow cover with what Shakespeare saw as "bold stern looks" of strong men—of conquistadores, soldiers, kings. Fragilities of political states, both the colonised and the colonising ones, are, according to the traditional image of history *magistra vitae*, errors or mistakes that should be eliminated if our future is to be successful. What some historians propose, however, is a study of "'fragilities' rather than posited 'successful' mechanisms of rule that can lead to understanding of political and social change" (Yoffee 3) and the "fragile nature and the means by which rulers sought to manage their fractious infrastructures" (1).

Akpo's allusion to the Dahomey Amazons is also an allusion to the colonial re-naming of giving familiar names to things and phenomena as a way of, however illusory, mastering them. The term "Amazons" (*Les amazons*) does not exist in the Fon language spoken in Dahomey, and the women warriors were called Agojie, Mino, and Gbeto, the names whose senses ranged from elephant huntresses (Gbeto) to "our mothers" (Mino), the last term signifying a respect for women as mothers "known to be over-protective and highly sacrificial for their

children's survival at all costs" (Murtala, Hamza, and Lawal 182). Interestingly, this protective facet of the warrior women can be seen in King Gezo's decision to make the Agojie not only part the army but also his bodyguards, in which position their main role was "to prevent rebellion among the male soldiers" (184). Most of them were also ceremonially married to the king, a tradition that was one of King Gezo's arguments against the demand to end the slave trade in Dahomey that was brought to him by a British mission in 1850. According to an account of the king's conversation with the British, he said: "I cannot send my women to cultivate the soil, it would kill them" (qtd in Law 215). Since what the British emissaries demanded was that Dahomey re-orients its overseas commerce from slaves to agricultural produce, this re-orientation would also mean a renunciation of what Robin Law calls its "military prowess" (Law 215) in whose building women played a significant role. Akpo's tapestry does not explicitly refer to the historical entanglements in the slave trade. The dispatch of the empowerment of women is carried by the allusive variety of possible historical readings and re-readings that a museal gaze might somehow lose. The symbolic beheading of kings and reimagining them "as female royals elided from history" (Johnson-Nwosu, Morrison, and da Silva) is also a gesture toward an excavation of the palimpsestic history of femininity in which Africa plays a significant role.

The Dahomey women warriors have become figures of fighting feminists in Gina Prince-Bythewood's 2022 film *The Woman King*, whose narrative somehow uncurls and smooths the complexities of the West African kingdoms of the past, projecting upon them the dualities of Western discourses of power and gendering, which reifies cultural essentialism and its constructs. The man/woman duality, as rendered in the film's feminist perspective, may well be seen as an imposition of a typically Western prototype of the emancipation and liberation of women. For Manu Ampim, the film constitutes a clear example of "white feminist propaganda", as "there are literally no good or honorable African men in the movie" (2). What the film reflects seems to be a result of what Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí sees as "somatocentricity" of the Western dual approach to sex and gender divisions. In *The Invention of Women* (2001), she claims the woman question is "a Western-derived issue—a legacy of the age-old somatocentricity in Western thought" (ix). The book provides strong arguments for claiming that the Western perspective on African cultures is frequently based on linguistic misunderstandings, also as regards the positioning of man as a binary opposite of woman. "The usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as 'female/woman' and 'male/man,' respectively", she writes, "is a mistranslation" (32). Oyěwùmí strongly critiques Western feminism, seeing in it the work of "the unbridled universalism" (195). She perceives of Western feminism as a part of the Western "mishmash theory of Africa", whose projections resulted in the continent's unbridled homogenisation of African cultures even when it is clear that these cultures do not share identical institutions or histories. There is no question that Africans have many things in common and that some generalisations are possible. But care must be taken in deciding how these claims are to be made and at what level they are to be applied, given the paucity of detailed, historically grounded, and culturally informed studies of many African societies (xiv).

The unbridled universalism, along with the unbridled homogenisation resulting from some mishmashed theorisations, may be read as an invitation to bridling, and thus of controlling and restraining universalism's and homogenisation's totalising tendencies by way of diminishing the scope of analytical vision to localities and things which are common. It is not, she writes, that "gender categories are necessarily limited to the West, particularly in the contemporary period. Rather, I am suggesting that discussions of social categories should be defined and grounded in the local milieu, rather than based on 'universal' findings made in the West" (16).

In Prince-Bythewood's film, women are shown as powerful not only as warriors who ruthlessly slaughter men in the initial scene of the film, which may be read as an extreme version of the struggle against patriarchy. Patriarchy's presence within the social sphere of the filmic Dahomey is also signalled at in the beginning of the film through the offering of one of the protagonists of the film, Nawi, to King Gezo by her father as a punishment for her refusal to marry one of her suitors. The father's will remains unfulfilled because another woman, Izogie, sees her resistance as a symptom of power and manages to enlist her as one of the Agojie—the warrior women. The makers of the film project this image of liberated women upon the Agojie and portray them as liberators who fight against the slave-trading kingdom of Oyo, simultaneously fighting against European trade and thus against the slave trade in general. The film, as one critic notes, ignores the fact "that the warrior women (known as Agojie) were employed in the largest slave-trading empire in West Africa, but are presented as victims and heroes in the film" (Ampim 1). Though King Gezo, at least according to some sources, refused the British demand to give up slavery, the filmic Dahomey is envisioned as a liberator state that carries the banner of universal freedom, sharing it, perhaps paradoxically, with the British. The film camouflages the active involvement of Dahomey in the slave

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trade, simultaneously positing the peacefulness of agricultural life (Gezo's choice of palm olive production over slavery) as the eventual effect of the state's involvement in the war with the belligerent Oyo.

The idea of sugar-coated versions of history, such as that portrayed in *The Woman King*, carries within itself a promise of a true history, which, as true, should be one. So should be Oyěwùmí's search for a comprehensive theory of Africa in which mishmash should give way to some more orderly theorisations, avoiding the Western "blaxploitations" of Africa, be it in film, history, anthropology, or, more generally, cultural studies. The film does represent, to use Oyěwùmí's phrasing, "the feminist charge to make women visible", which "is carried out by submerging many local and regional categories, which in effect imposes Western cultural values" (78). However, the question that may be asked here is that of finding a way to give a voice to those localities and regionalities from the position of an observer, be it Western or non-Western, which avoids generalisations and universalisation. The question is, broadly speaking, translational, and may be approached via thinking about translation strategies and their choices in order to avoid and minimise mistranslations. Perhaps researchers could accept, at least partly, the position of translators rather than that of tellers of the original, of translators who, as Mona Baker puts it, "are alert to the gender issue and to the violence of colonialism" (287).

Artistic expression is also a form of translation. Art can be treated, as Candice P. Boyd—an Australian artist-geographer—proposes, as a vehicle for knowledge translation and exchange. What she calls "arts-based knowledge translation" posits art as a "valid and powerful tool for translating knowledge—whether that knowledge be originally created through arts-based practices or by other means" (2). This kind of approach to art and knowledge "can be applied across the spectrum of academic disciplines regardless of the type of knowledge being translated" (9). Art objects do not only carry certain aesthetic qualities; they also transmit "'felt knowledges' so that they might be 'felt' again" (92). Though felt knowledge cannot be an object of any scientific accuracy, it may well be treated as an incitement to inquire into some more stable footing of the feeling carried by translation.

The story told by Akpo in Venice does not bring any certain kind of knowledge about Benin, about its history and social and political complexities concerning gender roles, power, slavery, or colonisation. The tapestry is a translation of a complex original whose map is a palimpsestic layering of its past, which is also palimpsestic. It does not constitute a singular object but brings in what Eric Taxier proposes as a brief insight into Graham Harman's concept of allure: "a nonliteral experience of an object's displacement from its qualities that draws attention to a deeper reality" (599). Harman himself explains the senses of allure in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, alluding to a present absence of sorts: "What we find in allure are absent objects signaling from beyond—from a level of reality that we do not currently occupy and can never occupy, since it belongs to the object itself and not to any relation we could ever have with it. Allure is the presence of objects to each other in absent form" (245–6). In an interview with Lucy Kimbell, Harman links allure with allusion in the context of the impossibility of fullness of expression:

> We are substantial forms, meaning that each of us has a definite structure that can be alluded to or approximated, but never exhaustively described or expressed. This scares many people because it sounds like a soul. But I see nothing wrong with souls, as long as we don't arbitrarily posit that these souls last forever and go to heaven or hell. (Kimbell 8)

Akpo's tapestry does not present things fully. It hints at what is not there as an object, alluding to something that each of us can approximate. Its ascription to a geographical location, to Benin, is a topographical orientation point that is not a point of destination but a place of transition, a translated place that invites us to trace its origins, which may well be entangled with our own.

Bello's works shown at the Venice Biennale may be read as questioning simple objectivity, even as regards colours. Her installation of four portraits of African women surprises with their blue skins. This exploration of women's visibility, in fact, alludes to the *generality* of blackness of African people and, as she said in an interview, the choice of the colour is in a way quite realistic: "My paintings are interested in the representation of the black woman and her visibility. There are as many colours of Black skin as Black people, and the blue allows me to gather all its nuances since the deepest Black skin colour is almost blue" (Bello and Ghoualmia).

Quenum's series of glass objects titled *L'heure Blue*, which was displayed as part of the Benin pavilion, makes use of the glass window of the Venice Arsenal—the location of the pavilion. The obvious allusion to fragility in the title of the exhibition is accompanied by an allusion to Il Arsenale as the place of building ships at the time of the colonial and imperial sway of Venice, a reminder of "Venice's own role in the history of slavery"—as Quenum herself put it (Baumgardner). The display of glass objects in Venice may also incite one to associate them with

the long Venetian tradition of glass manufacturing, with glass beads constituting a significant colonial product. Glass beads "were used as a form of barter along the trade routes across the African territory. From Venice, they were sent to Liverpool, Amsterdam and Lisboa, and from there to the African and American colonies" (Alternative Venice). This may link Quenum's work with Akpo's tapestry on which women are wearing beads which, most probably, do not come from Venice, but were produced in those territories of West Africa which now encompass parts of Nigeria as well as the Republic of Benin. Glass bead production within this region predates colonial times, and the beads worn by the warrior women in the tapestry may have been home-produced. However, a report from a meeting of King Gezo with a French trade firm agent newly arrived in Abomey informs us that "Gezo would have expected a new French agent to bring gifts such as 'cloth, *verroterie* (glass beads), powder, and arms'" (Regis 15).

Akpo and Quenum's works do not refer explicitly to any incidents from Danxomè's, Dahomey's, or Benin's history, leaving the questions of colonialism and slavery only allusively present, though possible to be deciphered. Unlike the filmic Dahomey in *The Woman King,* in which the camouflage of the slave trade positioned Dahomey as an abolitionist leader, the exhibition only hints at Dahomey's presence beneath the present Benin, which it officially represents. This article was in fact incited by the Benin pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and it seems to be highly probable that the exhibition made Benin a recognisable part of the contemporary world to numerous visitors not as one more place on its maps, but as a voice of a young African state apprehending the fragility of mapping and historicising the world in accordance with a single pattern. Without condemning its pasts, it alludes to a possibility of looking at them through artistic expression, also as fragile and passing, though possible to be interpreted in artistic translations as silenced. If colonialism was a way of silencing indigenous voices, the exhibition, in a way, brings them back not as original ones, but as translated into a language that carries Harman's experience of displacement.

The Venice Biennale's Benin pavilion is a displaced place that foreignises rather than domesticates. The terms "foreignization" and "domestication" have been proposed by Lawrence Venuti in his numerous writings on translation. Domestication constitutes "erasure of the foreignness of the foreign text by rewriting it in the terms of the receiving language and culture" (257). The artefacts in the Benin pavilion avoid domestication and make the foreign not only visible but also felt—the task of arts-based knowledge translation (see above) opening various paths to the knowledge and understanding of the silenced foreign. "Through the exhibition", Nwagbogu said, "we challenge the epistemic injustice of the silencing of indigenous voices all over the world" (Rama). What this statement also addresses is the epistemic injustice of official histories, which tend to institutionalise forgetfulness, as José Rabasa writes in the context of colonial topographies (Rabasa 3). Perhaps the absence of Dahomey kings in Nwagbogu's exhibition also brings to the fore the epistemic injustice of history by way of withdrawing kings and replacing them by way of invoking the *Gèlèdè* celebration of the feminine. Interestingly, the question of the kingly voice and its muffling has been taken up in Mati Diop's 2024 film titled *Dahomey*, in which she documents the return of looted artefacts from France to Benin. The document is partly narrated by King Gezo speaking with a ghostly voice, which Diop describes in an interview as neither male nor female: "we created a genderless vocal texture in deep, metallic frequencies. I wanted a texture with a futurist aesthetic, like a creature in a genre movie that would break with the whole folklore-and-tradition image in which 'African ancestrality' is too often confined" ("Film Afri ca 2024: Opening and Closing Film Announcement"). Gezo, numbered as the 26th artefact to be transported to Benin from France, speaks in the Fon language (Fongbe), and his words "delivered in the low rumble of [his] voice suggest the disorientation of emerging from 'the kingdom of night' into a place far removed from the country I saw in my dreams" (Rooney). Though King Gezo seems to be absent from the Venice Biennale, the presence of the Queen Hangbe tapestry brings in a certain historical disorientation by mixing the themes of royalty, colonialism, and slavery with the empowerment of women, thus also dismantling the vision of the unity of contemporary Benin offered in its president's speech celebrating the return of royal statues. A part of the recent construction of this unity can be seen in the ambivalence of a concrete and bronze arch named The Door of No Return (*La Porte du Non-Retour*) erected in Ouidah as a part of the pan-African Slave Root Project. The arch ends the road leading from the slave market to slave ships destined for the Americas, and it commemorates the enslaved rather than the enslavers.[2]

On leaving the Benin pavilion, visitors passed through Hazoumè's gate-like construction—a heavy installation of plastic petrol containers reminiscent of *Gèlèdè* masks. The installation which, in the catalogue, figures as resembling "a round-shaped vodun sanctuary" suggests not only a return to "the maternal womb of the

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earth" but is also an ecological hint towards the pan-African problem of increasing pollution, which, in Benin, is strongly connected with illegal gas trafficking from Nigeria. It involves the construction of numerous small roadside stalls around the country, along with the traffickers transporting drums of petrol on motorbikes (called "human bombs"). Javier Corso, a Spanish photographer who documented the gasoline smuggling to Benin, titled his photo essay *Essence du Bénin*, thus (mingling the French word petrol with its English sense of core) positing petrol as the "heart" of the state, as the basis of Benin's economic functioning. According to Corso, "both the people and the stability of Benin are completely dependent on an activity which remains strictly off the books" (Corso). The monarchs of old gave way to the rule of an anarchy of sorts, to illicit *essence* traffickers put in motion by the demands of capitalism, who found an allusive reflection in Hazoumè's work, which, in turn, alludes to the *Gèlèdè* tradition and its promise of peace and social accord. As Cyril-Mary Pius Olatunji and Mojalefa Lehlohonolo Johannes Koenane note in their rumination on *Gèlèdè*, a significant aspect of capitalism is a shortage of care: "Yoruba people see the modern capitalist economic system which expects women to toil and struggle with their naturally well-built and more brawny male counterparts as being too harsh, exploitative and unfair to females, as it denies them the care and admiration that nature in its wisdom has bequeathed them as their legitimate right" (Olatunji and Koenane 49).

This image of a historically and topographically displaced place carrying the name of Benin brought to the Venice Biennale addresses the necessity of caring not only about history of powers, but also, and importantly so, about places, however displaced they are—of caring, in the senses of minding, tending, and weighing, the "wheres" of our living.

Conclusion

In the article, I have shown that artworks can allusively supplement official histories. This is relevant especially in the case of African states, whose historical narratives were frequently a reprise of the Western models of history, which posited Africa as an inferior space awaiting development. The Benin pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale reflects both the necessity and the possibility of changing historical imaginings of times and places, so as to reflect the complexities of African realities which evade simple historisations and consider the displacement of the places resulting from the 19th-century Scramble for Africa. Also, King Gezo's voice from Mati Diop's film *Dahomey* seems to be a voice of the allurement of indecision which speaks against the grain of the imaginary female heroism of a masculinized woman in Prince-Bythewood's *The Woman King* in which the straightforward vision of Dahomey's past in fact imposes its reading as an, however unintended, allusion. What I have proposed is a supplementation of history with an allusive kind of knowledge drawn from various artistic works expressing the allure of Africa rather than its superficial realities via allusion, seen as a device of escape from the fixity of colonial judgements and taxonomies.

Notes

1. Hicks does not refer in his book to the French looting of Dahomey, but to the collection of Benin Bronzes looted by the British colonisers from Benin City in 1897 which, as he claims, "holds lessons for many other cases" (16).
2. More recently, in order to increase the tourist popularity of the place, the authorities have decided to build a marina in the immediate vicinity of the monument. This decision triggered large-scale forced evictions. Some of the evictees who were interviewed by Amnesty International said that they had "received nothing for the loss of their home and their displacement".

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