Objects, Anthropology, Coloniality: Critical Detours

George Paul Meiu

A striking conundrum animates some of the more nuanced debates about the relation between anthropology and coloniality: namely that anthropology is at once the product of the age of empires, indeed a field ideologically inconceivable *outside* it, *and* a domain of discourse that has critically interrogated imperialism and pursued the possibility of social life beyond its oppressive power. To be sure, the idea of an "outside" of power and coloniality, as politically appealing as it may be, is not unproblematic; indeed, it resonates in striking ways with seductive fantasies of escapism so central otherwise to late-capitalist consumerism. Nevertheless, as a starting point, paying attention to this ambiguity in the relation between anthropology and coloniality may also open up new ways of thinking *through* and *with* objects. And, in turn, particular kinds of engagements with objects may offer new ways of tackling anthropology's coloniality. What kinds of engagements should these be? To put it bluntly, sheer empiricism will not do. To confront coloniality, it is not — indeed, it cannot be — enough to simply describe objects, their trajectories, or the social actors who make or handle them, as if description alone were untouched by history and the ideologies of power. Rather it is important to also deploy a critical ethnographic and historical imagination to simultaneously interrogate how such dominant ideologies make phenomena appear *merely* describable: how substances and surfaces come to seem stable, fixed, objectified entities; how the apparent concreteness of things comes to feel self-evident; and how processes of objectification also project object-like qualities onto subjects, institutions, worlds.

From religious rituals to political protests, objects have played an important role in efforts to disambiguate power: to pin it down, channel it, tackle it, or imagine worlds through or against it. In anthropology, an obvious example are artefacts which, by their very presence in particular museums, appear to embody the colonial histories that have made their appropriation possible.[1] Another important, though perhaps less obvious example pertains to those texts, theories, or even the discipline itself — all too easily objectifiable at times — of which we speak as inherently tainted by their colonial histories. We often say, for example, that, because the British colonial government in the Sudan enabled E. E. Evans-Pritchard's research, his book *The Nuer* is "colonial" or that, more generally, "anthropology is the handmaiden of colonialism." But what does this mean? Like in ritual, objects or objectifications of various sorts may concretize, condense, and render palpable social and historical processes that are otherwise as ambiguous and abstract as they are materially consequential. But the objects' promise to disambiguate coloniality and the workings of power requires further reflection. If our goal is to understand, specify, and confront something called coloniality, then we should want to question presumptions that the colonial is an *essence of things*. A product of colonial modernity, the idea of objects having an essence resonates with what Marx describes as our erroneous perception that commodities "contain" or "carry" their exchange value. This is by no means to deny that museum artefacts, *The Nuer*, or anthropology in general are inextricably tied to colonialism. That would be naïve at best. Rather it is to suggest that tackling the colonial requires deeper epistemological critique.

Postcolonial theorists and anthropologists of colonialism have shown just how central efforts to disambiguate and purify binary categories (e.g., colonizer/colonized; the colonial/the precolonial, Western/Indigenous, etc.) have been as mechanisms of colonial power.[2] So, instead of wanting to hastily distil the colonial from the de- or precolonial, one must start elsewhere. In the case of provenance research, it is important, first, to

place current research with objects in conversation with wider efforts in anthropology to think critically about the field and its practices. Second, it is important to not exceptionalize anthropology in our critiques of coloniality. For, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, anthropology's discursive field is continuous with the global political-economic order that has made it possible.[3]

In what follows I wish to suggest a few "lines of flight" — flights of imagination, that is — for provenance research: a set of themes and questions that, in the future, could inform, broaden, and enrich its analytic discourse. My suggestions pertain to pursuing a kind of analytic imagination that (i) works through *critical detours*, a kind of *thinking around things*; (ii) focuses on the interplay of fixing and unfixing things; (iii) reflexively interrogates epochal epistemes in its own discourse; and (iv) foregrounds the ambiguous relations between objects, subjects, and commodities.

Critical detours

Producing knowledge with material culture is particularly important in the context of provenance research, where unfixing dominant modes of telling history should also prompt rigorous epistemological reflection. Meanwhile, interrogating the colonial entanglements of anthropology, more generally, stands to benefit significantly from a rigorous engagement with the material traces left behind in the discipline's tracks: texts, photographs, field or lecture notes, letters, diaries, and other things. But how might we engage the mess or rubble passed down with the House of Anthropology — that is, with the discipline's established claims to privileged knowledge and institutional autonomy? In engaging such things, including museum collections, I suggested that mere description risks uncritically reifying colonial epistemes. If nevertheless we must start somewhere and the language, concepts, and paradigms we have, compromised as they are, must do for the time being, then we could start with a set of *critical detours*:[4] going around a thing in order to slowly decentre it, to examine the wider processes that make it what it appears to be at any given moment.

Some years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate course in anthropological research methods, when more than half of my class was suddenly interested in undertaking life histories for their assignment. By this, students meant specifically interviewing people about their life, biography, and genealogy. We had read Pierre Bourdieu's (1987) classic essay "Biographical Illusion," which questions the idea of a narratable life, situating it historically with the rise of the Western European bourgeoisie and of the ideal of the bounded, rational subject. But somehow interviewing still seemed to be the obvious method. I wanted eagerly to convey to students the need to decentre methodologically our common-sense idea of this bourgeois subject and its life course. Luckily, I had just read a *New York Times* feature that had been helpful in this sense. It was about a man, George Bell, who, like many others in New York City, had died alone in his apartment. He had no family to claim his body and, by the time he was found, he was already unrecognizable. The only thing that was left of Bell's identity was the signifier of his name — i.e., on his apartment door plate. What the criminal investigators and the journalists then did to find out more about Bell was to put together stories about him from the things he had horded in his apartment. Together, these things told not *a* story, but many stories: contradictory, fragmentary, counterintuitive.[5]

I kept returning to Bell's case over the years because it did more for me than merely illustrate an alternative, more imaginative method for doing life histories. If one does not accept the idea that our subjectivities are defined by an interiority that is simply confessable, narratable, or describable then one may take such imaginative detours through the things in a house in search for subjectivity. In the absence of Bell's voice, these objects — held together as a constellation by the signifying power of his name — were in fact free to tell many, complex stories, not all of which would probably align with how he saw himself. Echoes here of Freud's insistence on the importance of the subject's "other scene" (*der andere Schauplatz*) — those scenes seemingly outside ourselves that constitute what we are, a kind of social unconscious.[6] Building on these psychoanalytic insight, one can argue that the objects in Bell's house are something akin to an unconscious locus of his subjectivity. Such detours through a subject's — or, for that matter, an object's — *other scenes* can help us critically resist empiricist presumptions of what it means to merely describe a person or a thing. In other words, rather than engage a subject or object as if their thinghood was self-evident, we need to also look slightly to the side, for those scenes in which social and historical processes constitute their appearance as self-evident. And ultimately detours also take seriously what is otherwise disavowed, left out, forgotten, fragmented, rendered irrelevant.

What methods of reading, engagement, and imagination are required then to think critically with the debris of the House of Anthropology — museum collections, but also texts, photographs, theories, and ideas passed down among those in this field? What methods can activate emancipatory potentialities in things? And how can we sit with or dwell in the ambivalences of this debris without reproducing the more problematic and exclusionary claims of anthropology, as a discipline? I shall continue precisely with a set of detours around provenance and the issues it researches, raising further questions about what it could further take on in an effort to more deeply interrogate coloniality.

Un/fixing things

Anthropological studies of objects and materiality have long critiqued simplistic ideas of material culture as somehow static and stable, factual and fixed. Objects should never be thought of as immutable, let alone in contexts of mobility, such as those examined by provenance research. Mobility, to be sure, presupposes the perpetual unfixing of things.[7] As things move, they accumulate traces, patinas, layers, the new shaped by and superimposed onto the old. These superimposition of strata of meaning and wear render objects deeply ambiguous. "To uncover new potentials [in museum collections]," Anna Schmid argues, one would have to sustain "the vast depository of knowledge, memory, and imagination" and activate possibilities for "emphatic encounter."[8] This is more than description and interpretation; it is also a way to "free" things from the modernist imperial matrix of their intelligibility. Beyond the corsets of inventory numbers, index cards, ethnological descriptors, and ethnic or regional attributions, things can be and become many other things. Provenance research has shown this convincingly.[9]

But what is, more specifically, the critical potential of such unfixing and how do we get to it? This is not merely about interrogating the old language of museums, but also — importantly — our dominant ideologies of time, history, and memory. Walter Benjamin, for example, finds important attending to objects' ambiguity, contradictions, and multiplicity of perception. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin outlines a set of methods for engaging the materialities of the present by way of revisiting the past. But here things and their pasts must be allowed to signify and affect us beyond the constraints of dominant grammars of historicity. More specifically, Benjamin repudiates a historicity based on linearity, chronology, epochal sequencing, notions of "progress" or "decline," or the pursuit of a "pure" knowledge about the past. Without interrogating such dominant historicity, one can add, we unavoidably also reproduce the epistemic foundations of colonial modernity. Instead, Benjamin explores a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge that springs from fragments, that comes "in flashes," that activates something unexpected in the present, that "awakens" something not previously imagined: "the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been."[10]

And Benjamin is not alone to offer such alternative, critical modes of engagement with things. Consider also, for example, queer theorist Eve K. Sedgwick's insistence that we also need to question established modes of critical reading in academia. According

to Sedgwick, since the 1990s "paranoid reading" has become dominant: a desperate effort to put one's finger on and call out power before suffering its negative effect. Displacing alternative possibilities of reading, paranoid reading is based on a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that makes it difficult "to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker."[11] Instead, Sedgwick calls for a "reparative reading": a way "to use one's own resources to assemble or repair the murderous part-objects [of our worlds] into something like a whole [...] though [...] not necessarily like any preexisting whole."[12] Like Benjamin, Sedgwick proposes that we sit with the fragments of our compromised worlds to imagine new, juster futures through and around them — an unfixing and refixing of things, if you will, that has the potential to activate new kinds of imagination and futurity.

There is, however, another problem to be considered here. If unfixing becomes a key mode of critique, how can we understand the myriad efforts, past and present, to fix the meanings and potentials of objects? As in the case of provenance research, efforts to unfix what things have represented in the inventories of Euro-American museums often works with alternative fixings or disambiguations. In some cases, the turn to a rather crude empiricism — simply documenting how objects have travelled, to whom they belonged, and who donated them — has also meant fixing the identity of an artefact *as a chronology of its trajectory and ownership*. In other words, research is giving objects a narrative life history akin to the bourgeois subject's "biographical illusion" I mentioned above. Debates over museum objects have also often entailed positing fixed identities, essentializing cultures, and dehistoricizing ontological plurality. Such processes, I would argue, far from being politically trivial, extend the dominant paradigms of colonial modernity, often redeployed as late-capitalist consumerist fantasies. Therefore, on its own, unfixing is not enough. We need to understand also the myriad efforts, mechanisms, and contexts through which new fixings happen: efforts to stabilize objects, their value, and meanings against an ambiguity that seems inimical to political claims.

Epochal epistemes

Taking on the problem of objects, anthropology, and coloniality today, one would have to also reflect on how political economic shifts related to late capitalism have transformed (i) the meanings and mechanisms of history, historicity, and memory; and (ii) the politics of identity, belonging, and autochthony. Both of these shifts are central to understanding what makes provenance research intelligible and possible now. But they may also enable those involved in provenance research to interrogate in what ways their work might uncritically reify these epochal discourses and imaginaries.

First, with late capitalism, we see — globally — a move away from modernist ideas of History — with capital H — as premised on objective Truth, progress, and linearity. Indeed, newly dominant modes of historicity are rather quite paradoxical.[13] One the one hand, we witness, across the world, a refusal of established ("official") histories. Such refusal finds expression in desires to break off with a past perceived as corrupted and constraining. This is evident, for example, in ideologies of migration (i.e., breaking away with a past-in-place that keeps one hostage), Pentecostal "born again" Christianity (i.e., breaking away with the devil who is always in the traditions and customs of the past), but also in myriad iconoclastic moves to topple the material remains of previous regimes and histories (i.e., removing socialist or colonial statues). On the other hand, this repudiation of history exists alongside a global resurgence in memorialization, trauma narratives, and restorative justice projects. From post-conflict remembrance and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to heritage tourism and the consumption of history-as-commodity, Jean and John Comaroff argue, there is urgent need to return to the past as a way to kickstart the future. In these contexts, history is deregulated and privatized: its truth has become a matter of subjective witnessing and testimony but also of judicialization (i.e., ultimate verdicts on history are passed in courts of law). Museums, talk shows, and the media, the Comaroffs argue, valorise personal confessions as historical truths, in turn, producing a cacophony of vernacular memories that drown out the possibility of critiquing systemic structures. And so, history also becomes identity — a means to claim rights, recognition, and reparations.

Second, late capitalism has animated new economies of culture, ethnicity, and belonging that have normalized notions of identity associated with multiculturalism, ethnonationalism, and commodity consumption. With growing mobility and migration within and across boundaries, we witness numerous calls for a "return" to autochthony, belonging, and identity — efforts to close off national, regional, or cultural "borders," and distinguish "natives" from "foreigners."[14] We witness also myriad efforts to brand, commodify or incorporate autochthonous culture or ethnic identity, often in the absence of other forms of capital. These are hardly contexts in which cultural difference is depleted. Quite the contrary. Anthropologists have shown that the marketization of identity is also an opportunity to regenerate collective life, customary forms of leadership and attachment, and difference as branded market distinction.[15] This wider political economy of identity, culture, and belonging has, among other things, also made intelligible and important in the present claims to the restitution of museum artefacts. What must be explored further here is precisely this shared predicament of a global political economy in which a particular grammar of identity has become dominant.

Provenance research has the potential to interrogate these wider epochal shifts as part of its explorations of objects, their origins, and claims for restitution. It is not enough, as I see it, to trace the history of an object without also understanding the wider historical shifts and discursive grammars that make claims to restitution possible and intelligible, including the positionality of the provenance researcher as such.

Subjects, objects, commodities

Finally, it is important that provenance research does not uncritically reify two other sets of *a priori* conceptual separations: (i) the distinction between subjects and objects; and (ii) the distinction between objects and commodities. I will illustrate these two points by means of one more ethnographic detour.

During my research in northern Kenya, in the town of Maralal, I came across a social category of masculinity called "plastic boys."[16] Plastic boys were young men who, having moved to Maralal after they or their families had been displaced by armed cattle rustling, began collecting traditional artefacts from the region's pastoralist autochthons and selling them to tourists in a small "Curio Shop." Locals deployed the term "plastic" to underscore the presumption that, like foreign plastic commodities, these men did not belong to the region; like plastic substance, they would not grow, reproduce, or build social value; and, like plastic pollutants, they could be "toxic" for local life worlds. These ideologies marginalized plastic boys, but the men themselves took pride in their collective name: they imagined themselves to be malleable like plastic, better able to navigate the hardships of the present. Nevertheless, plastic boys had existed as a social category since the 1980s and most locals would point out that they never stood a chance to profit, accumulate wealth, and achieve respectability. Some locals put this predicament upon the fact that plastic boys sold calabashes, wooden containers and stools, and other local traditional household artefacts that were said to contain the *latukuny* — smell, sweat, or dirt — of their original owners. For Samburu, for example, such objects were bodily extensions of their owners and oftentimes multiplied their agency. Calabashes, for example, could substitute their owner's bodies, *in absentia*, in rituals and blessings, but could also curse their owners, if they neglected them, failed to put milk in them or let them crack. Long story short, plastic boys were said to be "eating" — that is, profit from — people's bodily extensions, a kind of unpropitious cannibalism, as it were. When I raised

this criticism with plastic boys, they often blamed Samburu of being "backward" and "superstitious" and pointed out that Samburu themselves had sold them these items.

Note here how, first, the boundary between object-subject is unstable. For many Samburu, calabashes *are* both objects *and* subjects. For plastic boys, however, calabashes must be mere things; a distinction that they perform simultaneously with their identity as rational, school-educated men, different from "backward" Samburu. Meanwhile, many locals discursively objectify these young men through the idiom of plastic, denying their ability to grow, reproduce, or prosper. Second, if the distinction between subject and object is blurry, so too is that between object and commodity. It is not simply that calabashes as subject-objects exist *prior* to their monetized exchange, but local criticism of such exchange (selling one's calabashes) is itself a *response to* — and thus a dialectical extension of — the logics of commodification. Life-giving subject-objects like calabashes become what they are precisely because they must be protected from, say plastics and market transactions. Things then are messy indeed and they require us to linger in their messiness, carefully teasing out the intersecting logics at play.

If things are more than what we say they are or know them to be then they also, inevitably, bring the subject into question. To me, there cannot be a theory of objects without a theory of the subject. What concretely is the relation between subject and object here? Both Marxists and psychoanalysts would have said that there is no subject-object separation outside our active efforts to set ourselves apart from things, so that processes of objectification are always also processes of subjectivation. "What do we call a subject?", Jacques Lacan asks: "Quite precisely, what, in the development of objectification, is outside the object."[17] Collectors — such as Alfred Sarasin, Paul Wirz, the Zahn brothers, and others documented in the chapters of this book — all *performed subjectivities* through collecting and donating artefacts (sometimes for distinctions and decorations) and the performance of subjectivity objectified things and possibly was affected by them in particular ways. Key here also is the subjectivity of the researcher: how do we, as anthropologists, in our critical engagements with provenance or decolonial critique *perform* subjectivity by, in turn, objectifying, fixing, or stabilizing the objects we need to document?

I mentioned before the desire to fix and disambiguate objects as a condition for political claims. To me, this desire resonates strongly with the logics of commodity branding and advertising that seek to fix upon objects fetishistic qualities, seductive properties, and ultimately exchange value. In short then, not only are subject and object dialectically produced but objects must be thought of critically in relation to the commodity, the key historical paradigm through which we come to know their objecthood in the present. Again then, unfixing objects does not necessarily get us out of trouble. Doesn't the late-capitalist commodity thrive precisely from continuously reinventing itself — commodifying its limits, that which it presents as "outside" itself, indeed as an "escape" from its own alienation? Isn't surplus value not derived precisely from the imagined authentic "outside" of the commodity, the authentic non-commodity, as it were? We need then a more critical engagement here with immanent theories of the commodity to understand our engagement with objects not only in provenance research, but also more generally in tackling the relation between anthropology and coloniality.

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I imagine future research on the relation between objects, anthropology, and coloniality as needing to take on the uncomfortable steps of deferring the enjoyment of categorical certainties and disambiguating revelations. I imagine such research as moving in long, nebulous circles, around its foci to disentangle how objects and objectifications centripetally reflect the political economic contexts in which they are deployed and centrifugally shape these contexts, often in unexpected ways. Such engagements presuppose both unfixing things, reading them against their dominant signifying structures, and understanding how such signifying structures reproduce a sense of fixity in them. They also presuppose attending to the wider fields of practice in which the distinction between subjects and objects, commodities and other things is not always that clear. Such engagements with things could ultimately also become a way to "free our imagination," as Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina puts it, a way to confront the normative colonial paradigms of thinking, which often amount to the opposite: a "bankruptcy of imagination."[18] But, as with any detour, our analytical imagination must *return* to the object it has pivoted around, to bring home the flights of imagination — contextualization and critical interrogation — it has pursues. And it is precisely in this dialectic between imagination and the concrete that must start with the kind of careful, rigorous, and meticulous attention to objects that the essays in this volume illustrate. Across its diverse engagements with myriad things, this book prompts cutting-edge questions that, in decades to come, shall inform work in anthropological provenance, always with an eye between the concrete and its wider conditions of possibility.

1 Consider, for example, the volume edited by Witz, Minkley, and Rassool 2017.
2 Key texts attending to the role of ambiguity and processes of disambiguation as part of colonialism include Bhabha 1994, Pels 2008, and Stoler 2002.
3 Trouillot 1991.
4 For a discussion of detours, as used ethnographically, see Meiu 2023, 33–34.
5 *The New York Times* 17.10.2015. The Lonely Death of George Bell. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/nyregion/dying-alone-in-new-york-city.html (06.07.2025).
6 Freud 1913.
7 Jallo 2023.
8 Schmid 2023, 34.
9 Consider, for example, the work of Niklas Wolf 2023, who shows how Vodoun objects — always pointing to various elsewhere, to myriad pasts — can hardly be understood as monolithic or even "cultural" in the narrow sense of ever having had one cultural meaning. "Vodoun," Wolf argues, "can hardly be thought of as hermetically closed or being geographically or medially definite, but rather must be read in the form of intercultural hermeneutics" (151). And so, for Wolf, Vodoun shrines become true "archives." Such archives can never be static for, their very power rests upon their capacity to awaken in the present unsuspecting moments, events, or encounters of the past, of other places. This is precisely what happens in ritual: "The performative — and temporary — activation of the material culture […] is thus expanded by a dimension of producing permanent knowledge, so the shrine itself can be read as an archive and history book […] an archive of memory" (154).
10 Benjamin 1999, 458.
11 Sedgwick 2003, 124.
12 Ibid. 128.
13 I based this paragraph on Comaroff; Comaroff 2012, 133–152.
14 See, for example, Geschiere 2009.
15 See, for example, Comaroff; Comaroff 2009 and Meiu; Comaroff; Comaroff 2020.
16 I analyze the material I draw upon in this paragraph elsewhere, including in Meiu 2020, 222–235.
17 Lacan1988, 184.
18 We Must Free Our Imaginations, without date, YouTube Video, 6:05, uploaded by Binyavanga Wainaina, 21.01.2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uMwppw5AgU.