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Humanities

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Satirical Analysis

During the Age of Exploration, as Western “explorers” gave their language and religion to unwilling native inhabitants, they took thousands of items from every corner of land they reached. After those items were taken, they were then shipped to the Western countries the explorers originated from. The once-honored relics were transferred around until they became home decor and museum exhibits for Western viewing pleasure. The repatriation of these items has become a lifelong goal for individuals such as Chika Okeke-Agulu, a Nigerian art historian and African art professor at Princeton University, and Rayna Green, the Cherokee director of the American Indian Program at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History. In 2021, Okeke-Agulu gave an interview where he called for the repatriation of stolen artifacts (linked at the bottom of the page); four decades before that, Green, a poet and essayist, gave a speech about the museum policies regarding the collection of native items and bones in a speech titled “The Museum of the Plains White Person.” Although Okeke-Agulu manages to convey the unjustness of Western museums maintaining stolen artifacts, Green’s “The Museum of the Plains White Person” is able more effectively reach a broader audience through the subtle criticism of museum policies via *reductio ad absurdum* and irony.

It is nearly certain that the claims made in Okeke-Agulu’s interview will be understood by those who agree with him; but for those who don’t, his message would likely fall on deaf ears.

In order to get through to those deaf ears, Green uses *reductio ad absurdum* to make sure the opposing side listens. In his interview, Okeke-Agulu explicitly calls out the logical fallacy museums state. Museums state that by retaining various artifacts, all individuals will be able to access and view them. Okeke-Agulu highlights the fact that access for “all individuals” is not applicable to those who live in the artifact’s country of origin. No matter how sound his logic is, Okeke-Agulu’s arguments will never get through to those who need to hear the message the most since they hold an opposing viewpoint. In contrast, Green’s “The Museum of the Plains White Person” repeatedly uses *reductio ad absurdum* to convey the irrational policies museums employ. As Green describes a hypothetical museum, she derives plans for it from current museum policies. By placing white people within the exhibits, she guides people in power to realize how ridiculous it is to use someone’s culture as entertainment. It is commonly thought that Americans have no culture; therefore, it is amusing to a white individual to visualize a museum exhibit with their “culture.” But while these white individuals think about their food and clothing in a display case, there is a chance they connect a white display case to a native display case. At first, a few similarities would be found until it is realized that Green’s proposed white museum and current native displays are one and the same. Of course, there is no guarantee that this connection occurs, but by creating ideas that are identical to museum policies, Green draws on the ego of museums and museum officials, which in turn allows for a message to at least be heard.

Throughout the interview, Okeke-Agulu's rage is front and center; in one instance he goes as far as outright stating his anger. He does this as he wants to ensure that his words cannot be misinterpreted. But even though he clearly states his message, by the end of the second question, most of the audience will have stopped listening. On the other hand, the repeated use of irony in “The Museum of the Plains White Person” allows a broader audience to infer its message. In

their mind, museums see themselves as saviors who have been maintaining the culture of natives as they hold onto native artifacts. Yet the ironic thing is that by preserving culture in a display case, museums deny that group access to their culture. Green capitalizes on this irony throughout her speech as she uses sarcasm to allow the audience to infer that she does not mean a single word she is stating. She states that she is worried about the culture of white people dying out and that she is very interested in white people's culture. Even without the pitch and tone that normally implies that words are sarcastic, it is easy to see how Green's words are not meant to be literal. Since she is not outright stating her claim, museum officials are less likely to disagree; this results in more individuals listening which in turn conveys her message to more people.

Until every item is returned, the push for repatriation will not stop. Both Chika Okeke-Agulu's interview and Rayna Green's "The Museum of the Plains White Person" argue for the return of cultural items to their location of origin, but Green's writing is able to reach a broader audience through the subtle criticism of museum policies via *reductio ad absurdum* and irony.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-nov-10-2021-1.6243906/western-museums-need-to-return-stolen-artifacts-to-get-on-the-right-side-of-history-says-art-historian-1.6244222>

According to most politicians, colonialism is a policy of the past. The policy of taking over already settled land began in the 15th century during the Age of Exploration. As Western explorers gave their language and religion to the unwilling natives inhabitants, they took thousands, if not tens of thousands, of items from every location they landed in and shipped them to the Western countries the “explorers” originated from. In their new locations these items became home decor and museum exhibits for those who wished. Although hundreds of years have passed since the beginning of colonialism, many ethnic groups are still trying to recover their culture’s artifacts.

The words from Okeke-Agulu have been stated time and time again by countless repatriate advocates; yet time and time again, it is seen that museums have made no movement toward returning their artifacts.