Africa Atlanta

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It is a pleasure for me to participate in *Africa Atlanta*. Before I offer some remarks in response to Dean Royster's challenge that the West and Africa look at each other through different eyes, I want to briefly share with you the history and mission of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art where I have the privilege and joy of serving as director.

At the National Museum of African Art, we celebrate our shared ancestry through stellar exhibitions, effective educational programs, and diverse events that both instruct and inspire our visitors. It is the only national museum in the United States that is focused on the traditional and contemporary visual arts of Africa and its diaspora.

Fifty years ago, on June 3, 1964, Warren Robbins, a retired Foreign Service officer, opened the Museum of African Art, the forerunner of our National Museum of African Art. The site of Robbins' museum was a house on Capitol Hill in which the great abolitionist and feminist Frederick Douglas had once lived.

Robbins continued to buy more houses on Capitol Hill to house his substantial collection of African art, along with some African American and European art. In 1979, Robbins asked the Smithsonian to accept much of his collection of African art as the founding collection for a National Museum of African Art. Congress agreed to this proposal and the museum had its "second birth." In 1987, the museum moved to its current location on the National Mall.

When Robbins opened his museum in 1964, he had never been to Africa, but he had a deep respect for the peoples and cultures of the continent and he believed that African art could play a role in increasing cross-cultural communication between Black and White Americans. Today, that same belief in the power of art to bring people together motivates the work we do at our museum.

The National Museum of African Art is a part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest research and museum complex that consists of 19 museums, 9 research centers, and the National Zoo. And the Smithsonian has a presence in over 100 countries. I am proud to say that today Dr. G. Wayne Clough is in the top leadership position at the Smithsonian. He is well known in Atlanta as the former President of Georgia Tech.

I turn now to offer remarks about Africa Atlanta. *Africa Atlanta* offers us the extraordinary possibility for "Africa and the West to cease looking at each other

via unchanged eyes." This is the challenge put before us by Dr. Jacqueline Royster, Ivan Allen, Jr. Chair in Liberal Arts and Technology, and Dean of the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts at The Georgia Institute of Technology. If only wishing could make it so. How extraordinary it would be if we could erase from our collective memories the very nature of the early, prolonged, and to some extent the current relationships between peoples of the west and the African continent and her diaspora.

The transatlantic slave trade that took place across the Atlantic Ocean from the 16th through the 19th centuries involved some of the most horrific treatment of human beings in the history and herstory of the world. Through direct capture by Europeans and through being captured by Africans and sold to European slave traders, African women and men, girls and boys were shackled, put into the bottom of ships in conditions of almost indescribable filth, and transported as cargo to various parts of North and South America and the Caribbean. In the financial interest of slave owners, African people were forced to labor under inhumane conditions on coffee, tobacco, cocoa, sugar and cotton plantations; in gold and silver mines; and in rice fields.

The forms of brutality that enslaved people were subjected to by their Western masters and mistresses are beyond shocking. The rape of enslaved Black women by their "masters," the separation of enslaved children from their parents,

the lashes of a whip at the hands of an overseer on the back of an enslaved man lead one to ask how such brutality could have been carried out by one set of human beings on another. A vivid expression of how the brutality of enslavement was intertwined with the rawness of economic greed is captured in a practice whereby in order to punish a pregnant enslaved woman, she would be forced to lay on the ground, placing her abdomen in a hole so that the future source of free labor that she was carrying would be protected while her back was exposed to receive the overseers' whip.

Great Britain banned the African slave trade in 1807, but it was not until the 1860s that it ended in Brazil and Cuba. It was on January 1, 1808 that southern US congressmen joined with congressmen from the north in voting to abolish the African slave trade. However, the widespread trade of slaves within the south was not prohibited and the children of slaves automatically became slaves themselves. Thus, there was a self-sustaining enslaved population in southern states.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, sometimes called "The Scramble for Africa," took place at the request of Portugal. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck called together the major western powers to end confusion over the control of Africa. Before that conference, eighty percent of Africa was under traditional and local control. After that conference, Africa was divided into fifty irregular countries that lacked rhyme or reason but instead reflected the greed of

European powers. Part of the Congo Basin became a personal kingdom for Belgium's King Leopold II, and under his rule, over half of the region's population died.

The colonization of Africa by the west that was motivated by the desire of Europeans to exploit Africa's natural and human resources, and the uprooting of African people's spiritual values by western missionaries led to a situation where Africans could say: When the White man came, we had the land and they had the Bible. Now, they have the land and we have the Bible. By the time the movements for independence swept across the African continent, beginning in 1957 with Ghana's independence from Britain, many of Africa's traditional cultural practices had been weakened or destroyed.

In order for western people to subject African people to the brutality of enslavement and the injustices of colonialism and imperialism, they had to create a mythology of their own racial superiority and the irrevocable inferiority of African people and people in the African diaspora. Those were the untruths through which western people looked at Africans. And how have the people of Africa and the African diaspora looked at the peoples of the west? Surely in a number of ways—ways that the oppressed have throughout history and herstory looked at their oppressors: with fear, disdain, hatred, dismay, and even envy.

Given what the people of Africa and the west have been in each other's lives, what is required for Africa and the west to cease looking at each other through unchanged eyes? While I cannot claim to have a definitive answer to this question, I want to make two basic points.

First, if the people of Africa and the west are to start out on the complex and difficult journey of learning to see each other through different eyes, they must be convinced that there is an advantage for "each side" in doing so. When we look at the South African process of reconciliation, we gain insight into how enormously challenging it is for people who have been oppressors and the people who have been oppressed to actually conclude that life will be better for all if they can work on a different and more just way of seeing and understanding each other. It is far easier for oppressors to protect the economic and psychological advantages of having power over the oppressed. And it is tempting for the oppressed to imagine and yes, to desire simply exchanging roles with their oppressors.

The second point is this: It is extremely difficult and yet it is ultimately possible for human beings to engage in the transformative power of human empathy. The simplest way to say what human empathy is about is to describe it as walking in someone else's shoes. Must I be Jewish to understand and feel the horrors of the Holocaust? The answer is no. Through human empathy, I can understand and feel the horrors of that experience. I am not a paraplegic, but can I

not through human empathy can I not come to some understanding of what it is like to be almost totally immobilized? I believe that through serious study and human empathy, it really is possible for White people to come to some degree of understanding of Black people's experiences; for men to come to a better understanding of women's realities; for heterosexual folks to better understand what it means to be a gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender person.

As difficult, indeed as impossible as it may sound, I believe that through the transformative power of human empathy, we human beings can come to better understand each other; yes, to see each other through "new eyes." Listen to these compelling words of James Baldwin:

> You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.

Is there a role that museums in the west have played in perpetuating untrue, distorted, harmful and destructive notions about Africa and the diaspora? The answer is a definitive "yes." A simple way this was done was by the use of words such as 'primitive' and 'exotic' to describe African people as they were portrayed in ethnographic, historical and art museums. In museums in Europe and the United

Sates, there is a long history of promoting untrue and distorted notions of Africa and her people by simple acts of exclusion. When a museum describes itself as presenting the fine arts of the world, but there are no art works-- or very few--from Africa, what does that say? Could it be that an expression of disrespect of the people and cultures of Africa by museums of the west occurred when these museums became sites where master works of African art that were the "spoils" of European colonialism and imperialism were placed?

Among the well documented cases of this practice is the British Punitive Exhibition against Benin in 1897. Benin was crushed, and its exquisite art works were stolen. This disrespect of the Oba, his royal court and the Edo People of Benin City, Nigeria is well documented. It happened when Britain competed with the French, Germans, and Belgians to grab as much of Africa as they could. Between 1880 and 1902, Britain seized Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, the Sudan and what was then Rhodesia; Britain also established possession of South Africa and controlled eastern Africa from the Cape to the Suez Canal.

There is an infamous photograph of British soldiers sitting in the Royal Palace where they are smoking and smiling as if to say: Look what we've got! Before them, on the ground, are treasures of 16th century Benin art: brass plaques that decorated the pillars of the Oba's palace and art works of queen mothers and other ancestors, all cast by the complex lost wax method. While some of these

treasures ended up in private hands, most were taken back to Britain where they can be seen today at the British Museum. This looting of Benin played a major role in making African Art visible to Europeans.

There were also, of course, the very troubled events that occurred in the Congo where, at the hands of King Leopold, some of the worst atrocities of colonialism and imperialism took place. Into the Royal Museum for Central Africa - Tervuren-Belgium were placed some of the finest works of art created by people of the Congo. Today, Belgium and the rest of the nations of the west must bear witness to the injustices of the past and explore the possibility of a different future. The "Kongo Across the Waters" exhibition begs us to think about how and why the exquisite works from various Congolese cultures are in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, as well as whether or not those expressions of the cultures of the Congo should be returned to where they have come from.

At the National Museum of African Art, as should be the case at any art museum, we carefully adhere to the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import and Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This UNESCO Convention is the first international instrument dedicated to the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural property. It was adapted in Paris at the 16th General Conference of UNESCO on November 14, 1970; and it came into force on April 24, 1972. Today, 125 states are Parties to this

Treaty. Of course the question that looms in front of all of us who are privileged to work in museums is this: what about cultural property acquired before the UNESCO Convention came into effect in 1970?

There is a third way in which museums in the west have been complicit in perpetuating false and destructive images of Africa and her people. Namely, in museums throughout Europe and the United States, we see few, if any, African and African diaspora museum professionals. The number of people of color from any part of the world who are in museums in the west as directors, curators, conservators, archivists, and other professionals is very small. The number of African women and men in such positions in smaller yet.

Africa Atlanta presents us with a definitive opportunity to take at least some steps on that very long journey to "stop looking at each other through unchanged eyes."