

The universal in the bush

by

[Nadia Yala Kisukidi](#)

Every time [the dead] saw us, they made derogatory noises showing they hated us and that they were also furious to see us alive.

Today, in France, universalism is used for any circumstance. The constant reminder that there are irreducible features of human life, independent of any local and cultural conditioning, often with only one kind of purpose, that of going to war against communitarianism, or against bad identity, multiculturalism, neoliberal culture narcissism, religious fanaticism, the veil and Islam, the alleged racism of anti-racists, (inclusive) writing, words (intersectionality, "racialized"...), the United States, and expressions of joy during soccer finals. The scenes are multiple and disparate. And in each of them, the term "universal" is waved like a flag. We must fight against the danger of dislocation, against the supposed threats of separation.

However, the idea of universalism is exposed in another scenario, which may seem less subject to media passions, that of the arts and culture. Places of art are of the mind - *the best shared thing in the world*. To be human is to always be it fully ; and humanity, as we have thought it since Descartes, is one despite the differences. However, for more than two years, the world of arts and culture in France has also had to grapple with the poisonous word that separates and divides. The debate over the restitution of works of art looted during colonization introduces the worm of separation into the world of the mind. Returning to each what belongs to them. The immaterial essence of humanity is not shattered. To do so is to prohibit oneself from producing statements of shared truths. Worse still, it is to surrender the narrative of a common emancipation. Maintaining tribal impulses against the persistent elevation of work and culture.

However, the terms “universal ” and “universalism” sometimes get stuck in the throat and dislodge. Empty of its content, dragged into the multiple controversies about identity, not sparing the art world, what remains of modern tradition is mobilized as a magical invocation. The lexicon of universality is then lost in an immense bush, like the drunk in Amos Tutuola's novel, consolidating the codes of

hate speech or repeating, unconsciously or not, identity tropes. In the bush, beings and things are *taken for what they pretend to be when in reality they are not*.

We know it: our time is a time of recovery and detours. The words, chewed again and again in the mouth, end up meaning the opposite of what they were forged to do. In France, contemporary use of the term “universalism” is sometimes twisted and skewed. Of course, some would say that literal meaning and usage should not be combined. But instead what needs to be shown is how the multiple and contradictory uses of the idea of universalism effectively inform its equally multiple meanings. From an ethical point of view, universalism is an inherently conflicting notion, supporting both discourses of unity and words of disengagement. And in the world of the mind, no matter how immaterial, antagonisms flare up, become politicized, and sometimes become lost. Therefore, one must follow in the footsteps of the palm wine drinker and set a path in the very dense bush, “an endless bush”, where “universalism” sometimes uncoils, sometimes detours, witnessing violence and a political hope that confronts and does not dialogue.

Universality and inhospitality

"So we began walking through a new part of the bush, but you have to consider the fact that there was not a single path that we could follow in this part of the bush."

In the bush of the “universal museum”

The ideas of universality or universalism were systematically used to oppose the conclusions of the Savoy-Sarr report from November 2018 on “restitutions”, a report commissioned by the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron, defending the return of African heritage to its place of origin. The restitution policy was criticized for breaking an ideal, that of the “universal museum”, a heterotopia in which cultures can peacefully dialogue and where the human spirit can regain its unity.

In 2002, nineteen museum institutions in the Northern Hemisphere drew up the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.” This declaration was intended to give a common voice to museums. Its goal was, *“to reiterate the importance of universal museums in the modern world, which should constitute emblematic spaces of a new age of enlightenment, the only one capable of allowing for a comparative cultural analysis of works of art”*. Geoffrey Lewis recalls, in *Les Nouvelles de l'Icom* (The News of the Icom-

International Council of Museums) from 2004, that the main objective of the declaration was to “*ensure better immunity against requests to restitute objects belonging to the collections of these museums*”. The universalist argument was used as a preventive measure to block requests to restitute works of art.

The interest in this declaration goes well beyond the restitution debate and allows for a certain understanding of the universal according to at least five guidelines. First, by making the museum the home of the universal, where cultures discover their uniqueness by engaging with one another, this statement appeals to a whole philosophical and intellectual history that is rooted in the encyclopedic and emancipatory ideal promoted by the Enlightenment. Second, “universal museum” implies an entire aesthetic philosophy: a museum is universal insofar as it ensures the “*universal admiration*” of works of art. Such museums allow for the only true aesthetic experience, that of the beautiful, that is, that of “*what it is universally pleasant without concept*” (Kant). In this affirmation, the idea of the universal is also developed at the axiological level. Being exhibited in these museums is an assurance of value, making it so the objects and works are included in the world heritage of humanity. Furthermore, the universal of the “universal museum” has a double connotation, quantitative and qualitative; it is universal that ensures accessibility to the greatest number of people. The space of the “universal museum” allows the works to be available to a broad audience from all around the world. Lastly, the “universality” of the universal museum must be understood in an ethical, even political sense: these spaces are not directed “*to the inhabitants of a single nation*” (French, Beninese ...), but to the citizens of the world.

The “universal museum” defines a *particular space* of this world, to house the entire world. It refreshes world unity by depicting the diversity of the elements that compose it. We understand “world” as a group that is formed through a multiplicity of cultures, human productions, and forms of life. The universality of the universal museum is not abstract, it is inscription and welcomes: being of this world and being open to its totality, without exception. The universal museum is an embodied conception of universality, based on the principle of cosmopolitanism.

This principle must be understood in two ways: from the political point of view, it promotes world unity, against the arbitrariness of borders and the murderous nationalisms that divide and fracture it. From a moral, even metaphysical point of view, to return to the analyses of Valérie Gérard, who describes man as a citizen of the world, precisely because he is of the world, of this world.

The universal museum welcomes and upholds living hospitality. To limit it would be to violate it. This museum opens its doors to all human beings, to all objects, wherever they come from. It also reminds us of the nature of all human reality: that of the passage and the journey. Being of the world is, above all, and in an essential way, circular, in motion, never limited and hampered by the borders of the homeland, of the nation-state, that produce exclusion.

In declaring the "universal museum", the statement of the universal is not made by the individual that unduly extends by generalizing its attributes to all others. It relies on a particular person opening up to all others and, accepting to be affected by them, receives them, without distinction.

Places of inhospitality

Faced with this idea of universality, the request "for restituting" works of art looted during colonization appears as a double standard and political regression. To return is to return to the country, to return the particular to the particular. To oppose the ethics of hospitality withdrawal dynamics. To consolidate the arbitrariness of borders. To fetishize places of origin against the movement. And, worst of all, to satisfy the wounded narcissism of repeating ancient memories, those of the law of arms and the colonial past.

The way in which the idea of universality is expressed in the 2002 declaration on the "universal museum" has been reassumed explicitly, translated once again, and reactivated to disqualify, after the Savoy-Sarr report, any policy of "restitution of museum" heritage". The latter is considered reactionary – opposing patriotic and vengeful affections to the transparent consciousness of world unity. There is thus a leap into nonsense, where images and arguments are turned, crumbled and combined in a different way, overlapping fantasies and simulacra and maintaining prejudices and ramblings.

In the bush of Amos Tutuola's novel, the handsome stranger turns into a jumping skull and the dead walk backwards. However, as in *The City of the Dead*, something seems to be wrong with this use of the universal, which is systematically opposed to the very principle of restitution. Indeed, the sophism is easily detectable. To give looted African heritage back to Africa, presently in France, is to take it away from the world. However, as Africa is of this world, returning African heritage to Africans is to take it away! Because if they are from this world, they do not have the power to make the world, that is, they have the possibility of welcoming the whole of the world without exception, of being that particular place where the most different

becomes the most familiar, of affirming the unity of the world by depicting its elements.

In Africa, the whole of the world is not accessible to the citizens of the world, it cannot be admired or contemplated by the highest number of people. Africa's own artistic riches are devalued, they do not mean much outside of the sweet arts trade. Because Africa, par excellence, is the continent of inhospitality.

The arguments against restituting African heritage and the uses of the universal that they invoke establish a rhetoric against restitution. But they also create a discourse on Africa that decrees the inhospitality of the continent. It is impossible for African to engage in worldmaking and to recover and be of this world as such.

These discourses reiterate the narratives that run through what philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe has called the "*colonial library*". These stories helped to forge the conceptual matrix from which a particular idea of Africa could be formed. Africa is the negative of Europe and, in order to save itself from its irreducible difference, it must be converted by its other counterpart, the West. In the universal museum, African objects are rescued from their particularity and become a reflection of the entire world, once relocated.

This universal, which is opposite to the dynamics of restitution, defines a universalism that marks, according to Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "*the position of one who declares their own particularity as universal by declaring: I have the particularity of being universal*". Thus, there are universal particularities and others whose destiny is to remain particular. And it turns out that the former seal the fate of the latter.

To restitute is to return the world to the world –that is, to recognize that all parts of the world have the power to make the world.

At the heart of this use of universalism is a figure of speech: a very peculiar synecdoche, where the part is taken for the whole. The "West/Europe/France" parts signify the whole, that is, the "world". But it is precisely this synecdochical use of the universal that must be questioned. With this, the idea of restitution can acquire a radical philosophical meaning which goes beyond artifacts and objects. To restitute is to challenge this synecdochical use of the universal. To restitute is to return the world to the world –that is, to recognize that all parts of the world have the power to make worlds.

These are not mere formulas, which might seem ugly tautologies. Rather, these proposals should recall the many debates that have taken place in France for more than half a century and that are inscribed in the context of decolonization or post-colonial French history. The debates that have proposed conceptions opposing the universal, where what is at stake, every time, are ways of thinking about the unity of the world that compete with each other and confront each other.

Give the world back to the world

Then we enter my father's country, and no harmful or evil beings appear ever again.

Paris, 1956

The history of debates about the universal rarely comes to the forefront in France. Anyone knowing anything about her, has the impression that each new identity controversy is a vain repetition of problems already solved. It is as if the memory of certain debates has been erased, sadly giving way to the continuous buzz of controversy.

Now, a little over sixty years ago, debates were held in Paris in which opposing conceptions of the universal were explicitly confronted. At the Sorbonne, in 1956, during the first International Congress of Black Writers and Artists.

The Bandung Conference of 1955 was a political event for all non-European peoples. The 1956 Congress was one of its great cultural events, which only preceded the African independences by a few years. In 1956, the "*World Congress of Men of Culture*" was held.

One must read - listen to - the opening speech of this congress delivered by Alioune Diop, organizer of these meetings and founder of the magazine and the *Présence africaine* editions. It can be seen as a response, delivered fifty years earlier, to the 2002 "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums". It involves a selective dismantling of the synecdochical use of the idea of the universal. I would like to highlight four elements of this speech.

First, its institutional dimension. Alioune Diop reminds us, at the beginning of his speech, that the Sorbonne is the place where the black intellectual world meets. Paris, "*the high place of western art and thought*"; the Sorbonne, "*symbol of reason*". The

Sorbonne is an institution in which it is possible to listen to reason, that is, to confront reasons, to question universalism.

Second, its political scope. The black intellectual world of the Sorbonne speaks of culture. And culture is a political issue. To defend black culture is to “*oppose assimilation*”, that is to say to a “*type of human relationship imposed by colonization*”, which does not mean “*isolating yourself in your own culture*”. An expression by poet Léopold Sédar Senghor allows us to summarize this idea of Alioune Diop with a short and scathing formula: “*To assimilate, not be assimilated*”. Refusing assimilation into an outstanding model that is presented as universal is not to defend patriotic retreats, it is to configure other places of hospitality, of welcome, these places not being exclusively European.

This last point highlights the cultural commitment of this text. In order to “*repel assimilation*”, according to Diop, one must ensure, “*the dissemination of works of black culture*”, with such dissemination being the best future opportunity that can be given to these cultures. “*Our heritage, encoded and mummified for Europe's museums and the curious, cannot work properly. The classics of a people must be updated and therefore rethought and reinterpreted with each generation. It must be so with ours*”. Disseminating black heritage, revitalizing it, is to remove it from the way it has been “*codified and mummified*” by museum institutions and ethnologists. Cultural revitalization by law requires restitution. The opening speech of the 1956 Congress makes no mention of the idea of restitution. However, there is an implicit critique of the universality of the “universal museum.” This institution does not allow for the dialogue of cultures since it closes the doors to multiple interpretations. Nigerian sculptor and painter Ben Enwonwu, who was also present at the 1956 Congress, explicitly raised the question of returning looted works of art in his communiqué. Like Alioune Diop, he insists on the problem of the places of interpretation; no African on the continent has the ability to judge, to produce an original network of meanings for African art itself. Furthermore, if exhibiting African works of art in European museums has contributed to revitalizing European art, the mediocrity of European works circulating on the African continent does not allow anything.

Therefore, it is necessary to insist on one last important point of Alioune Diop's speech. For this final point, revitalizing black cultures hit by the “*colonial night*” must achieve “*the exploration of new universes born from peoples coming together*”. This revitalization

supports a new discourse of the universal that conflicts with the idea that Europe can be the privileged subject of its enunciation. The idea of restitution, a condition for all cultural revitalization, embodies a new enunciation of the universal, formulated by the black world and that responds to the political imperative of decolonization.

Diop's words in this 1956 congressional inaugural speech echo the many voices of blackness throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The theoretical and poetic task of such reflections has been to find the synecdoche that lies at the heart of statements with a universal claim and to avoid their political effects. By taking this path, the currents of blackness participated in elaborating a new enunciation of the universal, different from the dominant positions imposed on non-European worlds.

Thus, the assertions of difference and identity of the thinkers from blackness do not give rise to separation. Above all, they seek to multiply the places of enunciation of the universal. To identify other places in this world that may be spaces of hospitality and welcoming for everyone without exception.

Where colonization meant the taking over of the world by a few, the imperative of decolonization demands that the world be returned to the world, that each part of the world have the possibility of welcoming the world, of worldmaking; “*To assimilate, not be assimilated*”, as a corollary of the act of restitution.

Conflicts of the universal, conflicts of worlds

In the context of the 1956 Congress, centered on black cultural matters, another history of the universal was told. This does not oppose the obscurantism of particular claims to the luminous consciousness of the unity of the world, but rather places the irreducible political and ethical conceptions of the universal in conflict. This may seem paradoxical. To understand it, one must return here to Balibar's analyses, based on his reading of Hegel.

There is no enunciation of the universal that is “*absolute, detached from its place, its time, its conditions, and therefore, its determinations*”. The universal does not exist outside of its enunciation. Indeed, the enunciation of the universal is always the product of a

particular discourse, which limits it. And by limiting it, it excludes other individuals. The enunciation of the universal is always conflictive. And the black thoughts that were expressed in the 1956 Congress embodied this conflictive form of enunciation of universality. The universal conqueror of the colonial project, on the one hand, forcing its assimilation by the whole world, the universal parasite of black bodies on the other, placed on the edge of the world.

From a political point of view, the conquering voices and parasitic words do not produce the same narratives and do not give rise to the same divisions of the world. Philosopher Eleni Varikas shows how the experience of the marginalized, of the “*scum of the Earth*”, of those denied the possibility of saying something about the whole world because they do not count in this world, reveals “*a double genealogy of universalism*”. That which tells the story of domination, and that which describes a dynamic of hope that calls for the effective, material, and historical transformation of a particular place in the world or of its totality. This double genealogy determines two opposite ways of worldmaking. On the one hand, the power of worldmaking belongs to the few and excludes all others. On the other hand, it belongs to everyone and tries not to exclude anyone. In both cases, universal enunciations do not communicate with each other and always produce their own gestures of exclusion while being aware of their radical insufficiency. From the political point of view, the enunciation of the universal may be peaceful, but it is neither pacifying nor pacified.

Elaborating a discourse with universal claims always requires that we ask ourselves: “Who is speaking?” The content of a discourse claiming to be universal cannot be specified until the subject, the places, the flesh, and the history from which it is enunciated have been identified. Behind the question of the universal, there is always the question of identity, that is, the identification of the narrating subject taking the initiative of initiating the narrative and configuring a world. Reflections on universalism stumble upon constitutive and insurmountable difficulty, on the fact that the universal is always limited by the situation of the person stating it.

To appreciate the full dimension of this difficulty is to understand that the political question of our time cannot be a: “Must modern universalism be rehabilitated against identity assaults?” But more simply, and perhaps more radically: “In what kind of world do we want to live?”