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"Inventorying is Reckoning": Joacine Katar Moreira talks to Lucas Lixinski

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UNSW Law & Justice
UNSW Sydney NSW 2052 Australia

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Joacine Katar Moreira and Lucas Lixinski, "Inventorying is Reckoning": An Interview with Joacine Katar Moreira

Dr Joacine Katar Moreira describes herself as an accidental politician. She is a dual national of Guinea-Bissau and Portugal. In 2019, she was the first racialized woman to head a party list in a Portuguese legislative election, and she was elected to the Portuguese Parliament. Drawing from her background in history, heritage management, development studies, and african studies, she was the first Member of Parliament to openly talk about the restitution of cultural objects from Portugal to territories it once colonized in Africa (Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and St Tomé and Príncipe).

In this interview, she discusses her background, tactics and strategy for restitution and reckoning with colonial history, and the roles of diplomacy and law in this space. The interview has been condensed, edited, and translated from Portuguese.

Lucas Lixinski – How did you come to this issue of restitution of colonial cultural objects?

Joacine Katar Moreira – I am an academic first, and only accidentally a politician. I entered politics to help a friend get elected, and ended up elected myself. When I entered Parliament, I drew heavily from an activist perspective that feels more natural to me. This perspective is anti-racist and feminist. My intention was not to solve the issue, because I knew I would not be able to do it quickly, but rather to start a long-delayed and much-needed national conversation about a reckoning with our colonial past.

As an academic, I remember being in conferences with museum directors and other cultural sector stakeholders. One conference in particular stuck with me, when I was presented with an enslaved person's collar, a deeply confronting and upsetting object. This collar was recovered in Portuguese soil in the early 1900s, found by an archaeologist and Director of the Portuguese ethnographic museum who described it in emotionally charged terms. The object then vanished for the next six decades. It was briefly shown to a researcher in the 1950s, and disappeared again, not to come back to the limelight until 2017. It was inventoried then in very plainly descriptive terms (simply as a "slave's [sic] collar"), without any mention of its use, or the context of enslavement. In Portugal, we are taught that Portugal was only a go-between of the traffic in enslaved persons between Africa and the Americas, and that there were no enslaved persons brought to Portugal. This collar is incontrovertible proof of the falsehood of that narrative, and its story was "inventoried away", to protect a comfortable national narrative of a peaceful "civilizational mission" to which there was no resistance (a version of history I was taught as an undergraduate student, too).

This anecdote shows Portugal's collective resistance to question colonialism and to admit to the violence of its colonial history. We never spoke about African anti-colonial resistance during

Colonialism in my degree in Modern and Contemporary History, for example. But we did learn extensively about anti-fascist resistance in Portugal and about Decolonization (the two being intertwined moves, since the fascist Salazar regime fell in Portugal as a direct consequence of the success of African Decolonization despite aggressive Portuguese fascist military intervention to stop it). it at university. In fact, there was only one course on African history in my undergraduate degree, an elective, which insisted on simply describing African peoples in almost ethnographic terms, rather than engaging with the colonial encounter. This conversation needs to change, and I wanted to drive this change through a conversation about colonial objects. Since becoming a politician, however, I have experienced my expertise being hollowed out. My politician status has been weaponized to undercut my claims to expertise in this area.

LL – How did you get the conversation started in Parliament?

JKM – I brought the issue forward as a proposal not for substantive legislation, but as an amendment to the national budget bill. My thinking is that, if I could get it into the budget, it would need to be seen through; if Parliament adopted a standalone piece of legislation on the matter, it would still need additional legislative action in order to fund any program, etc. So, I entered two initiatives on the budget bill: (1) a budget line for a program on decolonizing knowledge in schools; (2) and a line for a program to decolonize the culture sector, built into the Ministry of Culture's budget. This latter line had three sequential steps (and here I quote from the text entered in the legislative record): (1) to allocate resources to create a multidisciplinary team to "Decolonize Culture and the Arts", so as to "recontextualize Portuguese history in museums, exhibitions, performances, and teaching materials, in order to stimulate a critical view of its enslavement colonial past and the violence perpetrated against other peoples and cultures, recognizing its legacy and influence in current society"; (2) to allocate resources to create a working group in the Ministry of Culture "to undertake the national inventorying of all the works, objects, and heritage brought from former Portuguese colonies and that are in possession of Portuguese museums and archives so as that they can be restituted or reclaimed by the states and communities of origin"; and (3) to create "exchange program scholarships of long duration (one to two years) for curators, conservators, musicians, dancers, singers" to bring their culture to Portugal.

Nonetheless, as you might expect, there was a lot of opposition. Often in the Portuguese Parliament, when other parties want to show support or boost for an initiative or proposal, they enter their own similarly worded initiatives or proposals. Otherwise, they isolate (and therefore silence) the proposal. Here, no other party entered similar proposals, and there was a lot of backlash in media and elsewhere. Even pro-restitution advocates were either silent or opposed my proposals, saying restitution should not be done in the way I proposed.

I intentionally pushed the envelope this this tactic, knowing well that people would one day come back to it. My inventorying proposal was eventually picked up by the Culture Minister in 2022, for instance, and is now underway (even if the body to oversee the decolonization of the culture sector is largely composed of anti-restitution actors).

LL – How does Portugal compare to other countries in Europe engaged in similar debates?

JKM – Portugal lags other European countries. Whenever any conversation on the topic starts, people raise all sorts of obstacles to stagnate the debate. Part of the explanation for this lagging is that Portugal was one of the last European countries to "release" its colonies in Africa, so this history is still settling into the public consciousness. But also people in Portugal want to avoid discussing restitution because they do not want to reopen a conversation about national identity. All of that said, in Portugal we have a type of collective selective hearing, in which we only listen inside our echo chamber of those we deem "peers", and tend to replace the voices of racialized persons (too "other") with those of white persons. For this reason, experiences elsewhere in Europe can be very valuable in moving the conversation along here.

LL – There is much emphasis in Portugal on the "Lusophone countries" (that is, Portuguese-speaking) as a source of cultural relations and even some sort of unity. How do you see this emphasis on Lusophony in the context of restitution of colonial objects?

JKM – Portugal used to go to the United Nations during the peak of the UN's decolonization activities to say that territories in Africa were not colonies, but "overseas provinces". This idea of the "overseas" (*Ultramar*, in Portuguese) has long been leveraged to avoid scrutiny of colonial histories. In the UN, it was an attempt to avoid any scrutiny and push towards decolonization. In Portugal, we still rely on that narrative to tell ourselves that there is no reckoning to be had. And Lusophony helps, because it creates this illusion of a harmonious relationship with all territories Portugal once colonized. But Lusophony is used primarily to achieve commercial objectives, rather than cultural or intercultural relations. The latter are just a platform or conduit for the former. The focus here is on circulation of capital, not the circulation of persons or ideas (let alone cultural artefacts). As result, Lusophony tends to privilege an elite focus on this soft diplomacy, which stymies more progressive agendas. Lusophony is a series of pacts among elites. This diplomatic-elite focus creates the impression that African countries are not seeking restitution. But, as I see it, it is elites in those countries that do not want it, because they would rather focus their efforts on the next commercial contract, and expend their social and political capital only on those actions – which, incidentally, perpetuate colonial economic patterns. So, the institutional involvement of diplomatic actors seen through this elite prism, on both sides, is actually to stop restitution, even if people on the ground feel differently. Portuguese diplomacy is very effective in ensuring no formal restitution requests come through. But all eyes are now on inventorying, which should open the floodgates to prompt formal restitution requests.

LL – Before we get to inventorying as a specific technique or tactic, I want to talk about a few other framing issues about restitution. In conversations about restitution, there is often a sense that the returning country wants to make sure the object is well-cared for in the country to which it returns. What is your view of that sort of conditionality?

JKM – Gandhi was once asked by British colonial officers about what would happen when the British left India, and whether he, or Indians themselves, would be able to govern the country well. His answer was that for the time being (that is, before the British left), that might be a British problem; but, once they left, it was an Indian problem. The same logic applies here. It is not for European countries to decide what happens to objects once they are returned. These conversations are red herrings to stall and even attempt to altogether prevent restitution. Yes,

there should be conversations about the fuller reparations that come with restitution, and those can include some support in Africa to help them implement their own decisions about these artefacts. But it is not for European countries to have a say in what happens or should happen to objects being returned.

LL – How do you see the involvement of African voices in the debate in Portugal?

JKM – In Portugal, my sense is that the government has involved some African voices. Unfortunately, those voices are sometimes under-qualified in the specific dynamics of history, the cultural sector, and museums in particular. This lack of qualification can make them more compliant with Portuguese wishes, and yields more conformist results. More people from the African diaspora should be involved in this work, which was one of the goals of my proposal for the budget bill.

LL – What do you see as the role of law and legal arguments in restitution conversations?

JKM – I tend to avoid legal questions. I lack expertise in this area, even if I see the legal aspects as fundamental. At the same time, I am mindful that the law can be used to both speed up and delay restitution. I am also mindful that legal argument can often fail if brought out by African nations and peoples, because they are countered by non-retroactivity of international treaties, the alleged legality of the purchase of the works, etc. While there are plausible legal responses to all these arguments, the focus on legality often work as pinpricks to empty the balloon of the conversation about restitution. A conversation about restitution needs to move beyond the binary of lawful/unlawful. Context and circumstances of acquisition of these objects matter, and the law cannot always provide satisfactory answers to a conversation that is fundamentally an ethical one. One cannot discuss legality without discussing justice. Enslavement was once lawful, for instance. But it has always been unjust.

LL – How does the debate on restitution fit within broader conversations about reckoning with a difficult past?

JKM – Restitution is part of a much broader decolonial effort. But, to do it, we need to decolonize methodologies as well, not just epistemologies. Colonial methodologies turn minorities into objects. We need to peer into the background assumptions we make about knowledge (that is, the methodologies we use to produce it). Doing so will free us from our assumptions about what should happen to these artefacts once they return to African countries and peoples, for instance. It will allow us to see more about the violence of how they were collected. It will allow us to see Portuguese history not as one of peaceful civilizational mission, which is an European way of constructing knowledge and seeing the world, but rather for what it is from the perspective of those being colonized.

LL – In Portugal, much of the effort has been on inventorying of national collections (and your own legislative action prioritized it), rather than restitution per se. Could the insistence on inventorying first be a delaying tactic to avoid restitution?

JKM – There is a lack of information about acquisition everywhere, no objective account of the extent of colonial expropriation. Poor inventorying is often attributed to poor management or negligence within museums. I see it as a deliberate strategy of invisibility instead, and museum negligence or omission in this area as being underpinned by a blindness caused by conscious or unconscious racism. The act of identifying artefacts is itself radical in this context.

Under Portuguese heritage legislation, one of the main acts of protection of an object is its inventorying. It shows that the Portuguese state is caring for the object. The lack of inventorying and cataloguing of colonial objects in Portugal shows that, contrary to one of the anti-restitution arguments, Portugal is not caring properly for these objects. Further, from the perspective of the imbued meaning and social practices of the object, bad cataloguing, in failing to acknowledge those aspects, hollows out the artefact.

To know the quantity and origin of artefacts is an indispensable basis for restitution action. In many ways, too, inventorying is just as important on its own as it is as a step for restitution. Inventorying is an important part of reckoning with the past. Just returning the pieces in crates would be insufficient, we need an admission of colonial violence and extractivism. Portuguese institutions inventorying these objects forces them to come to terms with the full extent of this extractivism, it renders the violence visible within Portugal, on the public record in Portugal, and before the eyes of the Portuguese people. Further, this inventorying can expose the ongoing racial capitalist dimensions of the taking of these objects (the income of museums and other cultural institutions on the basis of these collections, for instance), in ways that could be ignored if we moved straight to restitution.

Inventorying is necessary, not as a delaying tactic for restitution, but because it had never been done before, so restitution talks are a non-starter without inventorying. I expect inventorying to be partly used as a delaying tactic, but African peoples have already waited for a long time, we can wait a bit longer.

LL – What do you see as the role of media and other social sectors in this debate?

JKM – The media needs to be closely involved in the debate, since at the core of it is changing collective consciousness. We cannot do that just from inside museums, useful as doing so is. A broader reckoning requires a broader conversation. Portuguese society's greatest problem with this racial reckoning is not that they do not want to discuss it at all; rather, it is that they only want to discuss it in their own terms, which shores up, repeats, and reinforces narratives of benevolent colonialism. We need a bigger confrontation, and media can help by bringing history and the lives of these artefacts to the forefront.

LL – Any final thoughts on this topic?

JKM – As I wrote for a friend's creative writing collective project on this matter, in Portugal, "all that is golden has been stolen". Colonial cultural takings are all around us here, and we need to reckon with this history. Inventorying is an important step not just for African nations where these artefacts rightfully belong, but also for the transformation of Portuguese society, a key step to enable fuller reparations that are long overdue.