‘BANYOLES LOVES YOU EL NEGRO, DON’T GO!’: AFFECT, COMMODITIES, AND THE REPATRIATION OF EL NEGRO

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ABSTRACT

In 2000, El Negro of Banyoles became the first African body to be repatriated to Africa from a European museum. Many who have written about the El Negro controversy and repatriation have focused on the efforts of Dr. Alphonse Arcelin, the man credited with sparking the controversy and working to see the repatriation through. I argue that Arcelin’s efforts must be understood in relationship to a complex set of political and symbolic processes specific to Catalonia, where El Negro was displayed. The Olympics of 1992 provide the conditions of possibility for the local struggle over El Negro’s body to become an international affair. Banyoles residents’ attachment to the body sustains the controversy and fuels the production of a wide variety of commodities that symbolically link the display of El Negro to the image of Spain. In this paper, I show how Banyoles residents’ attachment to the body of El Negro and the Spanish government’s desire to disarticulate Spain from the shameful display of the body clash repeatedly to produce the controversy. El Negro is not simply a case of racism manifested, denounced, and denied; El Negro became a symbol around which various forms of affect congealed in the critical historical juncture of 1992. I hope that by examining the controversy in light of wider historical and political processes and in terms of affect for the body I can offer a deeper understanding of a controversy that was much more than just another case of racism.
Dedicated to my Mom
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Thanks to my parents and brothers who support me in everything I do. To Dan for showing me Barcelona and helping me stumble upon El Negro’s story. To Barry, Maurice, and Tim, the best committee ever! To Paquín y los Díaz for teaching me Spanish. To Kristen for getting me through the first year. To Angeles for teaching me more than you know. To God who makes all things possible, and loves me through each of you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION—THE BODIES OF EL NEGRO

“The Fifth Centenary of Columbus' discovery of the Americas, 1992 also commemorated the fall of Granada to the Catholic Kings, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the publication of Nebrija’s Castilian Grammar—the first modern European grammar. 1992 was the year of the Maastricht Treaty, binding Spain into Europe, and it was also the culmination of the Socialist decade, in which much of Spain’s economic and social infrastructure was transformed. Three major events were staged as showcases of Spain’s modern transformation—the Expo in Seville, the Olympics Games in Barcelona and Madrid as Cultural Capital of Europe.

“1992 was also the centenary of the Bases de Manresa, the first embryonic declaration of modern Catalanism, and a point to late-twentieth-century devolution.”


On October 4, 2000, the skull and a few bones of El Negro of Banyoles were buried in Tsholofelo Park in Gaborone, Botswana. El Negro was a stuffed African, first displayed in Paris in 1831, then in Barcelona in 1888, then in Banyoles, a small town in Catalonia, from 1916 until 1997. He was the first African to be repatriated from a European museum, provoking South Africans to reclaim Sara Baartman’s body two years later. The repatriation of El Negro began with the efforts of Dr. Alphonse Arcelin, a Spanish citizen of Haitian descent who was practicing medicine in the Catalanian town of Cambrils. In 1991, leading up to the general elections, the national Spanish daily El Pais published a series of articles about the main towns in Catalonia. Dr. Arcelin happened to
read the article on Banyoles, a town famous for being the home of Spain’s largest natural lake, and a stuffed African on display in the Darde Museum. Dr. Arcelin, who had been involved in local, regional and national Spanish politics since 1982, immediately began campaigning to have the stuffed African known as El Negro removed from display. Arcelin met with strong local resistance to any removal of El Negro from display, even a temporary one.

Most other accounts of the El Negro controversy describe Arcelin as the main factor in effecting the repatriation of the stuffed African. I depart from these accounts in that I see the controversy as a complex set of historical processes and political relationships that mediate the efforts of Arcelin. It is not only Arcelin’s ardor, but also the event of the 1992 Olympics, that made the El Negro controversy possible. In other accounts, it seems that the El Negro controversy is the story of one man, Arcelin, who tried and failed repeatedly to bring about El Negro’s repatriation, but who finally succeeded through hard work and steadfastness. Here I want to avoid such a lens—the repatriation of El Negro is not attributable to Arcelin’s adherence to the protestant work ethic.

As is clear from the epigraph above, Arcelin launched his campaign amidst an extraordinarily rich convergence of historical and political processes. In 1992, Spain entered the European Union and intended to demonstrate that it had “caught up” with the rest of Europe. The Spanish government hoped to use the Olympic Games in Barcelona to demonstrate that Spain was a fully modern, civilized, and model democracy. At the

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same time, Catalan nationalists hoped to disrupt the Games that they perceived as a Spanish nationalist project once again aimed at suppressing regional cultural diversity within Spain. The Games increased long-standing tensions between the Spanish government and Catalonia. This tension was most marked in Banyoles, where El Negro was displayed. In this context, El Negro became a symbol for Catalan independence, and nationalist sentiment congealed around his body, making the residents of Banyoles extraordinarily resistant to any demands for his removal or repatriation.

The residents of Banyoles also maintained an attachment to Francesc Darder, the naturalist who gave El Negro as a gift to the town. Their affect for Darder extended to El Negro. The nationalist sentiment and adoration of the iconic Darder combined to fuel a proliferation of commodities derived from the form and image of El Negro. These commodities linked Banyoles, and Spain, to the display of the stuffed African. Regardless of the fact that many voices around the world deemed the display to be racist, for Banyoles the symbolic linkage between their town and the stuffed African was increasingly profitable, as it brought fascinated and infuriated tourists alike to their city. For the Spanish government, the linkage was shameful and antithetical to their political project of establishing an image of Spain as a modern, civilized, model democracy. The longer the controversy continued, the more newspapers retraced this linkage that, by 1996, the Spanish government was desperate to erase.

It was not the efforts of a lone Arcelin, but local affect that sustained the controversy by producing commodities as resistance that continually provided fodder for newspapers, which constituted yet more commodities. These news reports retraced the symbolic linkage between El Negro and Spain and raised the stakes for the Spanish
government who hoped to end the controversy as quickly and discretely as possible. But at every impasse, local affect for El Negro translated into resistance to his removal and fueled the production of commodities that once again retraced the shameful symbolic linkage that Spain hoped to erase. By 2000, the linkage had become so troublesome that the Spanish government paid the Banyoles town council, who had consistently opposed the idea of repatriation, the equivalent of $1 million for the body of El Negro. By now it is clear that the repatriation was not simply the achievement of one man. Rather, it was the result of a complex set of political and symbolic processes that mediated Arcelin’s efforts, which now only appear as one factor among many.

Before we proceed I must clarify the ways in which I will use the terms body and bodies of El Negro. The “body” of El Negro that other writers have written about is what was displayed in a glass showcase at the Darder Museum: I call that body his physical body. But unlike other commentators up to this point, I do not perceive El Negro’s story as a series of solid, discoverable sets of facts about his physical body. El Negro does not have a body, but bodies. Each discursive construction in which his image is conjured constitutes a body of El Negro, whether it is a newspaper article, a museum catalog, a plaster mold, an Easter chocolate, or a postcard. These reproductions are not simply inauthentic imitations of the real El Negro, for as soon as they are produced they bear upon the meanings and values of the physical body.

This assertion of El Negro’s bodies is necessary for understanding the way his physical body is always already discursively constructed. The physical body never existed independently of the discourses that signified through it. These discourses gave meaning to its black skin and value to its name, whether “The Betchuana,” “The Black,”
or “The Bushman.” Even in El Negro’s first known appearance in writing (1831), he traveled to Europe accompanied by a letter from Jules Verreaux, the French naturalist who supposedly stole and stuffed the African, to the renowned ethnologist Georges Cuvier. The letter sensationally detailed how Verreaux had risked his life in acquiring El Negro (then “le Betjouana”) and how rare, and therefore valuable, this taxidermic object truly was. Cuvier apparently had enough Africans in his collection and turned down the young Verreaux’s offer. Nonetheless, the ineffectual letter illustrates that El Negro’s physical body is fundamentally entwined with and constituted through the discursive constructions of it. These discursive constructions do not lead us back to El Negro’s origins, as all previous commentators would have it, rather they offer us insight into the historical moment from which the constructions themselves originate.

In chapter 2, I focus on the discursive constructions—the bodies of El Negro—that circulated at the start of the controversy in 1991. The first is a museum catalog written by Francesc Darder who displayed El Negro in Barcelona in 1888; the second is a narrative that circulated amongst residents in Banyoles; both are origin narratives. In Darder’s museum catalog, two French taxidermists take El Negro from his grave somewhere in the “extensive region” of Southern Africa. In the oral narrative, Francesc Darder finds El Negro near Kilamanjaro. The museum catalog affirms the theft of El Negro’s body, while the oral narrative bestows rightful ownership to Darder and thereby frees him of any wrongdoing. Through this narrative, residents manage questions raised by the obviously mutilated body of El Negro and maintain Darder’s iconic status.

I recognize that there are two other places, beyond the museum catalog and the origin narrative, where El Negro appears in discourse prior to 1991. However, these other
documents do not contribute to the discursive constructions of his body at the moment that the controversy begins. The first document is the aforementioned letter from Jules Verreaux to Georges Cuvier in 1831, but this letter is illegible in some parts, and only recently have a few people made reference to it. It contains no more information than the second document, which is the earliest newspaper article that mentions El Negro. The article appeared in Le Constitutionnel, a French newspaper, also in 1831. It describes El Negro displayed in Paris and summarizes Jules Verreaux’s graverobbing narrative that fantastically relates how he acquired El Negro. I do not include the 1831 article in the pre-1991 part of my analysis because it is only after the beginning of the controversy that a Spanish journalist rediscovers the article as debates rage in the international press over El Negro’s origins. Only then does the article from 1831 play a part in the controversy, not as a factor that fueled the controversy, but as a piece of information that is brought to life as a result of the controversy. Even then, the knowledge of this article spreads unevenly, as is evident when Neil Parsons, considered to be one of the most knowledgeable historians concerned with El Negro, admits to not having known about the 1831 article until February 14, 2000—a full nine years after El País journalist Jacinto Anton found it in Paris.³

In chapter 3, I describe how local residents’ wide-ranging affect fueled a proliferation of commodities early on in the controversy—from t-shirts, to chocolates, to bumper stickers, all bearing the image of the stuffed African. The Olympics of 1992

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brought large numbers of tourists and news reporters to Catalonia and thereby provided the possibility for these commodities, especially newspapers, to fix the image of El Negro to the image of Banyoles. I argue that these commodities are the specific means through which El Negro comes to function metonymically for the town. Simultaneously, these commodities also fixed the image of El Negro to the image of Spain. As a result, the Spanish government, concerned with projecting the image of a fully modern, civilized, European nation, pressured the town council of Banyoles to repatriate the body. For the Spanish government, stemming the bad publicity was worth $1 million. For the Banyoles town council, unconcerned about Spain’s image, surrendering the town’s main tourist attraction, made profitable by that same bad publicity, only became possible with the offer of $1 million. Throughout the controversy, the town council maintained its resistant position in accordance with its decision in 1992 at the start of the controversy—it voted unanimously to keep El Negro on display. When the Spanish government offered $1 million for the body of El Negro, the town council voted unanimously to hand over El Negro for repatriation.

It should by now be clear that I do not focus on the recurring arguments over whether or not the display of El Negro was racist. Other commentators have outlined these laborious exchanges already. To understand the El Negro controversy only as a battle against racism is to oversimplify and mystify the outcome. Though the display of El Negro was indeed an act of racism in the eyes of many, the repatriation of El Negro did not indicate in any way the accused racists’ acknowledgment of their purported racism. Through the repatriation of El Negro, the Spanish government was not working

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4 see Davis; Parsons and Segobye.
to eradicate racism in Spain as much as it intended to eliminate the appearance of racism in Spain. Racism is widespread in Europe; I do not intend to use El Negro’s story as an example to prove what is apparent to anyone willing to look into the matter. What I hope this account highlights is that racism is not reducible to simple ignorance or backwardness, but rather racism is the product of complex historical and symbolic processes where various forms of affect converge in struggles that are often much more intricate and interesting than a battle over ‘racism’ as such. In many accounts of El Negro, commentators framed the display of El Negro as a manifestation of that force racism, both greater than and anterior to the display. I want to present the controversy over El Negro without smothering and obscuring its particularities by labeling them simply as yet another instantiation of that seemingly universal force permeating the postcolonial spatiotemporal matrix—racism.

I close chapter 3 with an analysis of journalists’ accounts of El Negro’s burial, juxtaposed with his erasure from the Darder Museum in Banyoles. These accounts rely on the 1831 article for their historical basis; I show how this document tells us more about the moment in which El Negro was displayed than it reveals about the historical origins of El Negro. This section functions as a preface to the Chapter 4 in that the journalists accounts foreshadow the current difficulties of writing about El Negro in his fragmented state of existence: as a part of the repatriation, Spanish authorities dismounted El Negro, removed his skin and stuffing, and sent only his bones to Botswana. These accounts write in the gap between the fragmented physical body of El Negro that, in the words of Jacinto Anton, “ya no existe” (no longer exists) and the
various discursively constructed bodies of El Negro that survive and go on being produced with every telling of El Negro’s story (including this one).

In chapter 4, I offer some theoretical reflections on the fragmentation and erasure of El Negro. His skull and a few of his bones are buried in Botswana; a journalist saw his “grave goods” stored at the Darío Museum in Banyoles some time after the repatriation; another journalist reported that his skin is somewhere in the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid, though not on display. I traveled to the National Museum and experienced it as both museum and mausoleum, as what I call an “immemorial” to El Negro. Finally, I argue that the skin of El Negro should be repatriated along with the molds of his body taken by three sculptors in 1997.
CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS

When Dr. Alphonse Arcelin sparked the controversy over El Negro in 1991, the oldest available document concerning the stuffed African was a museum catalog written by Francesc Darder, dated 1888. Francesc Darder was a Catalan naturalist from Barcelona who was somewhat (in)famous in Catalonia. He was a veterinarian and the founder and first director of the Zoological Park of Barcelona. Eventually, he became an expert in taxidermy and even prepared skins for study. He was a collector of human skulls, stuffed animals, wax masks made from sufferers of syphilis, and other curious objects. Around 1883, he began embalming bodies and selling them to schools, museums and hospitals.5 Darder set up his Grand Museum in Barcelona to house his collection that grew steadily as he regularly made trips to Paris to purchase exotic objects and deformed specimens.

The 1888 museum catalog comes from the Grand Museum in Barcelona. Darder describes El Negro as “El Betchuanas,” a “celebrated and interesting type, unique in the world,” “a native of one of the four divisions of the Cafre family which lives to the west

5 Davies, 34.
of Southern Africa.” Darder twice reiterates that “El Betchuanas” is “unique in the world” in order to assert his rarity, and therefore significant value. The fantastic origin of the body also surely contributed to its value. According to the catalog, “French taxidermist M. Edouard Verreaux…was in the burial of a Head of a tribe, celebrated with splendour.” Edouard and his brother Jules “agreed to take the body from the grave when the family [sic] and the friends of the dead man would have left and take it to the Cape of Good Hope in order to prepare it, like it is today. The daring adventure of the Verreaux brothers ended in a great success.”

The museum catalog affirms the theft of El Negro’s body. Of course the word “theft” does not appear in the narrative and cannot appear there, because the narrative extricates any sense of belonging related to El Negro. At the burial, El Negro is the “Head of a tribe,” a title that clearly indicates that he had political and perhaps familial ties to a group of humans. In the next sentence, however, “the family and the friends of the dead man” leave (my emphasis). In this short space, the narrative deprives El Negro of all ties of kinship—as “the dead man,” he ceases to belong. One cannot steal what belongs to no one. The narrative in the museum catalog produces ownership rights that legitimate Darder’s possession of the body. When Darder donated his private collection, including “the dead man,” to the small town of Banyoles in 1915, the town acquired the property rights to El Negro, still known as “El Bechuanas” at that time. Though the museum catalog accompanied “El Bechuanas” to the newly created Darder Museum in

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Banyoles and clearly delineated the stuffed African’s origins, over time new narratives about his origins would circulate amongst Banyoles residents.

Banyoles residents came to see Darder as a mixture of Charles Darwin and Santa Claus.⁹ Five years before Darder donated his private collection to Banyoles, he had attempted to introduce a fish species into the lake and started what would become an annual fish festival in Banyoles. In 1911, the local residents adopted Darder, who was originally from Barcelona, “in recognition of his work on fish repopulation.”¹⁰ Darder rose to iconic status. It was the town’s fascination with and reverence for Darder, the eccentric and generous naturalist, that partially generated their attachment to the body of El Negro at the start of the controversy in 1991. El Negro was a gift from Darder the Darwinian Saint Nick, and comments made about the display of El Negro immediately reflected on Darder, whose iconic, even saintly, image Banyoles residents intended to maintain.

In one sense, it was not El Negro, per se, that Banyoles residents clung to, but rather an image of Darder, “an adoptive son” of their town, and the image of the town itself. As one journalist pointed out, the sentiment pervaded Banyoles and the rest of Catalonia that anything that had been in Banyoles for so long could not possibly be bad, or racist, or inhumane.¹¹ When Arcelin called the display of El Negro racist, by extension he denounced not only the display, but the museum, its founder Francesc Darder, and the town that had adopted him and cared for his macabre collection for over seventy years.

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¹⁰ Davies, 38.
As soon as the controversy began, journalists wrote a variety of origin stories for El Negro, some of them taking the newspaper’s “profound fictiveness” (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term) to its further possible extent. Journalists used the 1888 museum catalog to construct a history of El Negro. These histories stretched back variously to 1916, 1888, 1880, and 1831, and even further. Journalists were not discovering these histories, but creating them. For this reason I have held off analyzing these disparate discursive constructions, so that I can come to as close as possible to estimating what discursive constructions of El Negro circulated at the start of the 1991 controversy.

Contrary to what was written throughout the controversy, there is no strong evidence to suggest that El Negro was exhibited at the 1888 Barcelona Universal Exposition. When reporters covering the controversy saw that the catalog was dated 1888, they assumed that it had come from the Exposition. Therefore, at the start of the controversy, Banyoles residents did not place El Negro within a storyline stretching back, at least, to 1888, as journalists covering the controversy would later do. This may help to explain how Banyoles residents, as one journalist claims, could have perceived El Negro primarily as a man beyond temporality, “a doll without history,” without identity—a legendary character rather than a human who had lived a life prior to becoming a museum object. The journalist even goes as far as to say that through the arts of taxidermy the Verreaux’s “hid the human being” that was El Negro, and Banyoles

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13 Miquel Molina, quoted in Davies, 183.
residents were therefore “incapable” of seeing this human being, although it was “right in front of their noses.”

But El Negro was not entirely without history, or at least not without a narrative of his origins. Numerous stories about El Negro circulated in Banyoles prior to 1991. One of these stories held that Darde found El Negro, already dead, near Kilimanjaro. Stories like these did not arise due to a lack of information about El Negro, for the 1888 catalog was available in the Darde Museum for the duration of El Negro’s display there. These stories are not a consequence of Banyoles residents’ simply being unable to see the human in El Negro, as the journalist cited above would have it. The humanity of El Negro did not go entirely unnoticed by residents—children sometimes left food for El Negro or took off their jackets and gave it to him so that he would not be cold. This at least indicates that these stories about El Negro’s origins are the product of a more complex tension between simultaneously perceiving him as a human body and consuming him as a museum object.

I have already discussed how El Negro perceived as a gift from the iconic Francesc Darde produced locals’ attachments to the body. Later, I will discuss the ways in which El Negro perceived as a dead body also contributes to the production of affect. Throughout my analyses of the perception of El Negro, we should keep in mind that what I call perceiving El Negro entails actively constructing El Negro. These constructions require work, an example of which is the aforementioned story where El Negro is already dead when Darde finds him, a tale that erases the fact of theft from El Negro’s history, justifies Darde as El Negro’s proprietor, and thereby absolves Banyoles as El Negro’s

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inheritor. This tale that produces innocence then feeds back into the image of Darder as a sort of saintly icon and once again increases respect for and fascination with him, which becomes fascination with and attachment to El Negro.

The story where Darder finds El Negro, already dead, gives some insight into the work entailed in negotiating the tension between perceiving El Negro as a human being and as a museum object. This work repeatedly objectifies El Negro who silently offers gazers a steady stream of communication; he communicates his fragmented and scarred humanity through his nails, his hair, his lifelikeness that led children to offer him nourishment and protection from the chill air of the museum. In other words, El Negro was not simply passively perceived in the Darder Museum. Rather he interacted with those who looked upon him. He called upon them to generate origin narratives about him.

In her book, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Katherine Verdery shows how corpses interact with their living counterparts and have particular potency both as solicitors of affect and as effective political symbols. According to Verdery, dead bodies “evoked the awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with ‘cosmic’ concerns, such as the meaning of life and death.” This evocative feature of dead bodies, their links to the sacred and cosmic, contributes to their ability to generate affect. Dead bodies have an “ineluctable self-referentiality as symbols: because everyone has a body, any manipulation of a corpse directly enables one’s identification with it through one’s own body, thereby tapping into one’s reservoirs of feeling.”

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15 Verdery, 31.
16 Ibid., 32.
17 Ibid., 32-33.
Arcelin, or the respect felt by a man who wrote an editorial in resistance to the repatriation. But surely for those who had positive emotional experiences when encountering El Negro, and many did, this visceral imprint created an attachment. The controversy made clear these attachments that residents expressed through a proliferation of El Negro commodities in an attempt to hold on to El Negro in the face of his possible removal or even repatriation.

Dead bodies bring about emotional and physical responses, and in doing so they ask questions. Dead bodies compel one to ask where one has come from and where one is going and therefore "lend themsevies particularly well to politics in times of major upheaval." The eve of the Barcelona Olympics certainly qualifies as a time of major cultural upheaval, as Spain looked forward to finally becoming fully European. The Olympics were a part of a Spanish national project meant to show that post-Franco Spain had "caught up" to the rest of Europe "and was now the 'very model of a European democracy.'"

Spain intended to display its 'model' status in 1992 through three main events: the promotion of Madrid as European City of Culture, the Expo '92 World Fair in Seville, and the Barcelona summer Olympics. The nationalist Spanish project of the Olympics clashed with Catalan nationalists who hoped to Catalanize the ceremonies of the Games, to use them to publicize their very own "difference." In Banyoles, a Catalan nationalist stronghold, the clash was particularly drastic. Local nationalists resented the naming of Banyoles as an Olympic subsite, and during the Games, tension was so high in the small

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18 Ibid., 31.
19 Kelly, 34.
20 Kelly, 34; also see Hargreaves, chapter 5.
town that the Spanish government deployed the Guardia Civil, fully equipped with tanks and helicopters. Catalan nationalist sentiment congealed around the body of El Negro and deepened any extant attachments Banyoles residents had to the body due to childhood memories or adoration for the iconic Francesc Darder.

In this tense political atmosphere, Banyoles residents saw El Negro as a sign of their independence, while “sources in Madrid hinted that barbarism still raged in the provinces.”\(^2\) The Spanish government, with considerable stakes in proving Spain to be a most modern and civilized place, disavowed this vestigial “barbarism” during the Games as something that belonged to Catalonia, not Spain. But by 1996, years of publicity fueled by the affect of Banyoles residents had repeatedly linked Spain to the display of El Negro. The Spanish government could no longer simply disavow the display and move on.

CHAPTER 3

LOCAL AFFECT, COMMODITIES, AND REPATRIATION

“‘El Negro’ is Exhibit No. 47 in the Darder Municipal Museum of Natural History, no photographs allowed. A wood-framed glass box and small padlock protect the stuffed African man, the one whose corpse was plucked from the grave on his burial day in 1888 by two French physicians with more head than heart. ‘El Negro’ is small, no taller than 5 feet, no heavier than 90 pounds. His glass eyes with the whites showing are the only unreal things—and the only things that look real. The exhibit shares the room with two tanned human hides, four fetuses in formaldehyde, three mummies and more skulls than they use in Indiana Jones movies. Before arriving at the showpiece ‘El Negro,’ you run the gauntlet of countless marble eyes and dry-rotting fur in a museum that will never be mistaken for the Smithsonian. There’s the stuffed two-headed calf, and the twin cows joined by a fifth leg that juts straight up like a frightened cat’s tail. There’s a chimpanzee skeleton, a water buffalo with football stitches on his hide and countless other goodies from nature’s bag of cruel tricks. It’s one part science, two parts Ripley’s...The stuffed Great Dane might have been drawn by Picasso...Museum founder Francesco Darder bought ‘El Negro’ from the Frenchmen in 1917 to augment his strange collection. Teacher Judi Oshowole, a Nigerian living in Barcelona, says the bushman is larger than he appears, a sad symbol of the callous attitude some Spaniards have toward blacks. ‘We don’t get jobs or houses or respect. We do get hassled by the police, who stop us constantly to check our IDs,’ she said. ‘Imagine if a stuffed white man was on display. ‘El Negro’ needs to go.’”

*The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) 26 Jul. 1992

In 1991, Arcelin wrote a letter to the mayor of Banyoles, Joan Solana. In the letter, he demanded that El Negro be removed from display and threatened to organize African nations in a boycott of the Olympics Games if his wishes were not carried out. A local newspaper in Catalonia published fragments of the letter. Surely, it was due to the
Olympics Games that the letter held such importance; a boycott of the Olympics by African nations would have been an economic and political disaster. Solana responded to the Arcelin’s letter and said that the display of El Negro was not racist in any way and that the body could not be removed because it was an important part of the town’s heritage. Another official in Banyoles’ local government backed Solana by saying that El Negro was a part of not just local heritage but of the town’s contemporary popular culture absorbed by children in school.  

Arcelin then contacted the Olympic commissions of African nations as well as the Organization for African Unity and the International Olympic Committee. The IOC pressured the town to remove El Negro from display, but Banyoles residents resisted. The Olympics, widely perceived in Banyoles as a Spanish nationalist project, had increased already existing tension between the Spanish government and Catalonia. In response to IOC pressures, the town council of Banyoles voted unanimously to keep El Negro on display.  

Carlos Abella, a town councilor underlined the strength of feeling expressed in the decision—he called the council’s ruling “irrevocable.”

It is at this moment that local residents’ affect produced a wide variety of commodities in the form of El Negro. This affect, as I have already shown, was an extension of affect for Frances Darder, combined with nationalist sentiment that congealed around El Negro, who became a symbol of Catalan independence. In support of the town council’s decision, Banyoles residents produced buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts that read “Banyoles loves you El Negro, Don’t Go!” (Parsons and Segobye,

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248). In an eerie echo of the Final Solution, the town council manufactured lampshades bearing the image of El Negro. Matchboxes and easter chocolates in the shape of the stuffed African were also on sale around town. One upscale gift shop even worked a silhouette of El Negro into its logo. Through these commodities, as well as the newspaper reports they provoked, El Negro became metonymically linked to the town of Banyoles. Overnight, El Negro became, in the words of Arcelin, "a symbol for the town of Banolas and its number one tourist attraction."\(^{24}\)

These commodities, as they fixed El Negro to the image of Banyoles, also fixed El Negro to the image of Spain. For Banyoles, the publicity surrounding El Negro during the Olympics was profitable. Visitors to the Darder Museum skyrocketed to 70,000 in 1992, and in one estimate tourism in the small town increased 500 percent.\(^{25}\) For the Spanish government, the display of El Negro was always a source of shame. 1992 marked the year that Spain entered the European Union and was attempting, partially through the Olympics, to show itself as a model of civilization, modernity, and democracy. This irony of interests between Banyoles and Spain would become more apparent as the controversy wore on.

Though the publicity concerning the El Negro controversy was profitable for Banyoles, a boycott of the Olympic rowing events that were to take place in Banyoles would have been economically disastrous. Arcelin had threatened to organize African nations to boycott the Olympics in general, and if he did not succeed this, then he would organize a specific boycott of the rowing games that were to be held on Banyoles' lake.

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\(^{25}\) Ibid.
In reaction to Arcelin’s threat, Catalonia’s president Jordi Pujol “persuaded local nationalists in Banyoles to defer to the [International Olympic Committee]’s wish and not exhibit a ‘desiccated negro’ in the local museum during the Olympic Games.”

After the Olympics, El Negro went back on display. Arcelin continued to fight for the removal of El Negro; Banyoles residents continued to react with expressions of their attachment to the body; journalists continued to cover the story and in doing so continued to link Spain to the display of the stuffed African. In 1993, Arcelin tried to present a motion to the socialist party in Catalonia, but Banyoles Mayor Joan Solana resisted his efforts. Solana threatened to resign from the party if the issue of El Negro was even discussed. Eventually, in early 1994, party members discussed Arcelin’s motion, but did not approve it. Once again, it was local attachment to the body that prolonged the controversy.

Spain soon became insolubly linked to the controversy over El Negro, and the Spanish government could no longer simply avoid the issue by blaming it on the “barbarian” provinces. In October 1996, Before the United Nations, the government of Senegal denounced Spain for allowing the display of El Negro and sent a letter to Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. Up to the moment of Senegal’s protest, the controversy had not so negatively impacted the image of Spain that the Spanish government felt compelled to intervene. Within a week Senegal’s protest at the UN, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote a letter asking the regional government in Catalonia to find a solution to the matter. The town council of Banyoles responded in newspaper interviews

26 Hargreaves, 136.
27 Davies, 192.
28 ABC “Senegal denunciará a España ante la ONU por el africano disecado del museo de Bañolas,” 18 Oct. 1996.
indicating that they had no intentions of even “contemplating the possibility” of removing El Negro from display.  

Once again, local residents poured out support for the town council’s resistance to the removal of El Negro. They wrote a number of editorials in national papers that revealed their affection for El Negro. One man wrote an editorial in which he responded to charges of racism. He, like many other residents, asserted that there was no difference between El Negro and the many skeletons displayed in museums throughout the world. However, his editorial was not simply a denial of racism, but rather a direct expression of affect. After denying charges of racism, he wrote that he had seen El Negro on several occasions and that the stuffed African always inspired respect in him. 

As the affect surrounding the body intensified so did the pressure to remove the body from display. In April 1997, UNESCO sent the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs a memo that officially prohibited the display of El Negro. UNESCO offered three options for resolving the matter: cremation, burial (in Banyoles), or repatriation. Solana took issue with the wording of the memo and refused to comply with UNESCO’s demands until certain inaccuracies the memo contained concerning El Negro were corrected. While UNESCO made these corrections, Solana took the opportunity to produce yet another body of El Negro, one that was much more permanent than the

30 see Furriol, Eulalia. “Adios al guerrero: The body of a black warrior is being returned to Africa after long years on show in Spain. Some people want him to stay.” The Guardian. 23 May 2000.
32 Costa-Pau, Marta. “La UNESCO dicamina que el bosquimano disecado no vuelva a ser exhibido jamás; propone la incineración, la inhumación o la repatriación.” El País. 4 Apr. 1997.
chocolates and t-shirts that had been made in his image, one that was perhaps more permanent than even El Negro’s physical body.

In December of 1996, Solana had denied the petition of three sculptors who wanted to make a bronze sculpture of El Negro’s body. Within weeks of the UNESCO dictate in April 1997, Solana allowed the sculptors to make molds of the body. Xicu Cabanyes, Mauro Rubio, and Jordi Bosch took 30 hours to complete the two molds—one of El Negro’s front side and one of his backside. They covered his skin in liquid silicone, as not to damage it, before applying a layer of polyester. According to Solana himself, he had two motives in authorizing the creation of the molds. First, in the case that El Negro was buried in Banyoles or repatriated, the molds could be used as a coffin or protective container for the delicate physical body of El Negro. Second, the cast would be necessary if Banyoles decided to restructure the Darder Museum and include reproductions of the most controversial pieces that had been displayed there. When asked if they would make a bronze sculpture of El Negro as they had previously intended to do, the sculptors avoided comment and simply said that “what is important is that Banyoles now has the mold.”

The possession of the mold gave Banyoles the power to remake the physical body of El Negro in a way that none of the discursive constructions of his body had done up to that point. Even after the t-shirts faded, the chocolates were eaten, the bumper stickers had peeled off and the lampshades were thrown out, Banyoles would have the power to make new bodies of El Negro that could be placed anywhere.

A statue of El Negro would constitute yet another body of El Negro, but in a different way than the other commodities produced from his form and image. In her

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34 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
book, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Katherine Verdery treats statues as an integral part of dead body politics and shows “how thin is the line separating bronze from bone.” According to Verdery, “the fates of statues and dead bodies have been thoroughly entwined”.

“First, torn-down statues have often seemed to observers like dead people, as in the following comment on the removal of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka and KGB, from central Moscow after the failed coup of August in 1991: ‘[Dzerzhinsky’s] statue…dangled from a crane, as if from a noose.’ Dzerzhinsky’s ‘execution’ in Warsaw was similarly lifelike. Second, some statues have been treated rather like actual dead bodies, their empty pedestals becoming places of pilgrimage or otherwise manifesting religious or magical resonance. In Yerevan, Armenia, for example, those who took down Lenin’s statue placed it on a truck and drove it as they might the body of a deceased person, round and round the central square, as if in an open coffin. Bystanders tossed onto it pine branches and coins, as they would for the dead.”

I quote Verdery at length to illustrate the point that statues occupy a discursive position different from other reproductions of physical bodies. Though photos, t-shirts and newspaper articles constitute discursively constructed bodies of El Negro, they do not intrude upon the discursive space of the physical body the same way that statues do.

Verdery asserts that statues “symbolize a famous person while in a sense also being the [physical] body of that person.” It is no wonder that in the repatriation of Sara Baartman, South Africans demanded that the Musee de l’Homme return not only Baartman’s physical body, but also the plaster casts taken from it. South Africans did not, however, request every photo or drawing or magazine that reproduced Baartman’s image. Reproductions such as these, while they constitute multiple discursively constructed bodies of an individual, remain, in certain ways, separate from the physical body whose

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36 Verdery, 12.
37 Ibid., 13.
38 Ibid., 12.
39 Ibid, 5, emphasis in original.
meanings they mediate. Statues, however, refuse to perform such a mediating function and, as the examples pointed out by Verderay above show, come to occupy a discursive space previously reserved for the physical body. Verderay illustrates this sharing of discursive space when she describes the assorted statues of postsocialist Europe as “bronze corpses.”40 Later, I will argue that the mold of El Negro should be considered a part of his physical body, as it was in Baartman’s case, and that future repatrations should ensure that these casts are handled in a way that the community receiving the physical body sees fit.

By September 1997, it became clear to many involved in the controversy, including Arcelin, that the repatriation of El Negro (his physical body, at least) would take place in November of that year. Once again, local residents responded by expressing their affect for the embattled body of El Negro. That year, Carnaval posters that circulated in Banyoles bore the image of El Negro carrying cocoa on his head, like the “negrito” that is the mascot of the popular Cola-Cao drink.41 The resemblance between the Carnaval poster and Cola-Cao advertising was so striking that when Arcelin protested the poster, he was joined by the company that produces Cola-Cao, though they might have protested for different reasons.

Cola-Cao is a chocolate powder, the packaging of which often bears the image of Africans carrying cocoa, and whose jingle is sung by a “negrito del Africa.” It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Cola-Cao as a commodity in Spanish popular culture, as tienda.com, a website that deals in Spanish products explains:

40 Ibid., 6.
“The joy of all the children of Spain is available through Tienda! Since I did not spend my childhood in Spain, I must admit that I cannot sing the Cola Cao song by heart - but I am working on it! If you were born in Spain, as are many in the Tienda community, I bet you are humming the song right now. Cola Cao appeared in the Spanish marketplace in 1946, but its popularity grew fast in 1950 when the manufacturer introduced a radio soap opera commercial which featured a song - “Yo soy aquel negrito, del Africa tropical.” From that moment on sales exploded until now 100 million pounds of Cola Cao are produced annually --- more than a kilo of Cola per Spaniard each year! Cola Cao is no longer a food product, it has become part of what is the culture of Spain --- much as are Maria cookies and the black Osborne bull that stands on hilltops throughout the country. Cola Cao is an integral part of the Spanish way of life.”

The Carnaval poster made El Negro yet another character, like the “negrito” and the cartoonish pickanninies on the packaging of Conguitos chocolate candy, in an extensive web of commodity racism in Spain. However, I wish to highlight here the choice to link El Negro to Cola-Cao specifically, a product that is particularly evocative in terms of eliciting affect through consumption or even consumption of its advertising.

In an obituary for the composer of the “Song of Cola-Cao,” a Spanish journalist remarks that “an entire generation grew up drinking this cocoa for breakfast, in the afternoon or before going to bed.” The journalist writes that Cola-Cao took advantage of the shift from radio to television advertising by creating commercials that included real images as well as animations that dramatized “the entire history of the negrito that had come to form a part of our lives.” Playwright Miguel Murillo even wrote a play entitled “Yo soy aquel negrito,” where the “negrito” is the master of ceremonies who guides the audience through a series of scenes that nostalgically depict decades past of Spanish

44 Ibid.
life. The Cola-Cao negrito is not simply a character from an advertisement, but an active image that aids in accessing the pleasurable reminiscences of childhood, much like El Negro who, in the words of Banyoles town councilor Cares Abella, formed “part of the popular culture of the town, absorbed by children in school.”

One Spanish journalist pointed out that many of people who were resistant to the repatriation of El Negro were over 30 years of age and had probably “visited the Darder Museum as children.”

The Carnaval poster that links El Negro to the larger-than-life character of the Cola-Cao “negrito” further indicates Banyoles residents’ strong affective ties to El Negro’s body even after five years of controversy. The pairing of El Negro and Cola-Cao was not so logical only due to their shared racist dimensions, as Arcelin would have it. The pairing is logical due to the affective reactions that both El Negro and the “negrito” have the ability to evoke. This pairing also marks, once again the irony of interests running throughout the controversy. While Spain hoped to resolve the issue as quickly as possible, eliminate El Negro from the visual environment, and lessen the number of news reports linking Spain with the stuffed African, Banyoles continued to reproduce visible bodies of El Negro that generated news reports, kept widespread attention on the small town, and retraced the shameful symbolic linkage between Spain and the display of El Negro.

Needless to say, the repatriation did not occur in November 1997 as many had expected. Abel Matutes, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs who was charged with

resolving the El Negro controversy, encountered continual resistance to the repatriation. In May 1998, he received a petition from a group called “Friends of Banyoles Museums.” The petition listed 6,500 signatures of people opposed to the repatriation. Signers of the petition requested that El Negro remain in Banyoles not on display, but at the disposal of researchers. As a result of this resistance to the Spanish government, the controversy continued to make headlines linking Spain again and again to El Negro. Perhaps this is why the Spanish government increased Banyoles’ incentive to hand over the body. In 1998, the Spanish government began discussing the recovery of valuable relics that had been stolen from Banyoles, objects that had become so expensive on the international art market that the small town could not afford to buy them back.

In 1999, the controversy reached a crisis level for the Spanish government when they were once again denounced by a Senegalese diplomat before the United Nations. The Organization of African Unity followed with their firmest condemnation of the Spanish government to date when they characterized the display of El Negro as “a serious attack on human rights.” These criticisms in the international political arena were disastrous for Spain’s fledgling image as a model democracy. Still, it seemed that the Banyoles town council intended to maintain their stance they established early in 1992, when they voted unanimously to keep El Negro in Banyoles. But in 2000, the Spanish government would make an offer the small town couldn’t refuse.

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48 “Un escrito con 6,500 firmas solicita que el ‘Negro de Banyoles’ no sea repatriado; la carta ha sido enviada al ministro Matutes.” 27 May 1998.
After the almost repatriation in 1997 and more pressure from the international community, the Spanish government finally made some headway in their negotiations over the body of El Negro. On February 8, 2000, all the municipal groups of Banyoles agreed to repatriate El Negro. However, the announcement had to be ratified by an official vote in the town council, and there was still no agreement as to what form the repatriation would take. Residents of Banyoles once again expressed their affection for El Negro through commodity production, attempted to prevent the repatriation, and in doing so prolonged the controversy.

The day after the municipal groups of Banyoles expressed support for the repatriation, Banyoles residents reacted with plans to produce a replacement body of El Negro. Xicu Cabanyes, one of the sculptors who helped make molds of El Negro in 1996, announced plans to create a bronze sculpture of El Negro. The sculptor would work for free, and donations would pay for the required materials. He had reason to be confident that he would receive adequate donations from the local population—Cabanyes and other supporting artists had already gathered 1,000 signatures in favor of the initiative.52 Upon completion, the sculptor would place the bronze corpse of El Negro not in a reconstruction of the Darder Museum as had been discussed in 1996, but in front of the Darder Museum or in some other public space.53 The purpose of the statue would be to conserve the memory of El Negro and, in the words of Cabanyes, to commemorate “the many years [El Negro] spent living with” the residents of Banyoles.54 Cabanyes’ description of El Negro, a dead body, having “lived with” the residents of Banyoles

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.

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indicates the intense affection for El Negro and the active role residents perceived him as playing in their local culture, history, and daily lives.

Other expressions of attachment to El Negro in reaction to the municipal groups’ support for the repatriation also made news reports. The same week that Cabanyes announced his plans for the bronze sculpture of El Negro, a woman holding a huge sack waited an entire morning in front of the Darder Museum. Apparently, in the words of one journalist, the woman hoped to use the sack to kidnap El Negro on his way out of town.\(^{55}\) Other residents of Banyoles reportedly offered storage units and garages where El Negro could be hidden, so that the Spanish government would be unable to acquire the body regardless of any agreement it might reach with the town council.\(^{56}\) The “Friends of Banyoles Museums” once again expressed their opposition to the repatriation in a press release and in a website launching an internet campaign against the repatriation. The website echoed Cabanyes’ description of a “living” El Negro when the “Friends” argued that El Negro should remain in Banyoles because it was “his home.”\(^{57}\)

This local resistance succeeded in generating more newspaper articles linking Spain with El Negro and influenced the actual form of the repatriation. In order to limit the amount of reportage on the repatriation and burial, the Spanish government orchestrated an anti-publicity campaign. As soon as the Banyoles municipal groups had expressed support for the repatriation, they reported that they had been pressured by Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs to offer this support. Even the previously very vocal

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\(^{56}\) Ibid.

town council, possibly under pressure from the Spanish government, prohibited its officials, as well as the curator of the Darder Museum, from making any comments on the repatriation.\(^{58}\)

In April, 2000, the town council, in spite of the spirited resistance of many Banyoles residents, and in spite of its own resistance throughout the controversy, ratified the decision to repatriate El Negro. The vote to repatriate El Negro was unanimous, just as the vote in 1992 to keep him on display had been unanimous. The damage to Spain’s image had become so significant over the course of those eight years that the Spanish government grew willing to sacrifice a large amount of money to end the controversy. The town council agreed to the repatriation under the pretext that the display of El Negro was bad for the town’s image, but this excuse was an instant reversal of the position it had maintained for the previous eight years—that El Negro belonged to Banyoles as a part of their local culture that attracted tourists. Though El Negro surely continued to attract tourists, the attraction was not so profitable that the town council could refuse the Spanish government’s generous offer of 200 million pesetas (\$1 million) in exchange for the body of El Negro.

The money that bought the body of El Negro was to be divided in three parts. 60 million pesetas were to be spent in the recovery of valuable relics that had been stolen from Banyoles. Negotiations around these objects began in 1998, as I mentioned earlier, in the wake of the near repatriation in 1997. Another 60 million were to be spent to restore an old monastery in Banyoles. The remaining 80 million were to be utilized for

the remodeling of the Darder Museum. All three of these projects—the recovered relics, the restored monastery, and the new Darder Museum—would become tourist attractions that would generate revenues far into the future. The local affect that fueled resistance to the repatriation did not ultimately succeed in preventing the repatriation. Rather, it led to a proliferation of commodities that linked Spain to the shameful display and provided the impetus for the Spanish government to make an offer profitable enough for the obstinate town council to accept. Local affect, instead of stopping the flight of El Negro, seems to have made his repatriation possible.

On the eve of the repatriation, El Negro’s numerous bodies circulated in the form of photos, newspaper articles, postcards, t-shirts, and other commodities I have already mentioned. The names for El Negro in these discursive constructions varied and included but were not limited to “The Bechuana,” “The Bushman,” “the stuffed African,” “the black Botswanan mummy,” “the desiccated Negro” and simply “El Negro.” In some accounts he was reportedly stuffed in the early twentieth century, in others the late nineteenth, yet in others the early nineteenth—one report from 1992 reads “the body was stolen by two frenchmen in the early 18th century.” Journalists speculated about where and when he lived, whether or not Jules Verne based a character on him, if or if not Scottie Smith or the “Great” Farini stole his body, which tribal wars he might have fought in, and along many other tangents that are difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate with the currently available evidence. The single commonality amongst these disparate discursive constructions of El Negro is that in each of them he appears as a stuffed body,

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as a taxidermic object that mimics a real man. This proliferation of depictions of El Negro complete with blackened skin, glass eyes, spear, shield, and feathers produced the expectation in Spain and Botswana that his physical body would return in the form in which he was displayed.

In 2000, sometime between the decision to repatriate El Negro and the actual repatriation, the Department of History at the University of Botswana constructed a website that is one of the most comprehensive resources on El Negro. This website, along with the bodies of El Negro mentioned above, contributed to expectation that El Negro would return in full physical form, including his display objects. The website organizes a wealth of information and suggests that the goods displayed with El Negro in 1831, the “bag with small glass beads, seeds, and small bones,” were probably originally buried with him. These university historians’ expert opinion reflected and reinforced widely-held beliefs in Botswana that El Negro’s display objects were his burial objects.

However, I argue that we have no reason to believe that these objects were buried with El Negro. Nothing in the 1831 description indicates that these objects were buried with El Negro. Yet, these objects communicated meanings to the French public of 1831; whether or not these objects were truly his grave goods is of no consequence in terms of their ability to communicate meanings. These objects were meaningful in 1831 because they reinforced circulating imperial narratives about the backwardness of African economies. To support my argument, I offer the example of Angelo Soliman, an African.

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who lived most of his life in Europe, but was nonetheless stuffed and displayed in the 18th century much the same way El Negro would be in the 19th. Through this example I show that we have no reason to believe that any objects displayed with El Negro were originally buried with him. Nevertheless, biographers of El Negro, such as Davies, and many others in Botswana, continue to perceive the display objects now stored in Banyoles as the “grave goods” of El Negro.

In Imperial Leather, Anne McClintock discusses the myth of first contact. Embodied in 19th century British advertising, the first contact myth portrayed a European bringing civilization to Africans through a commodity, such as soap. In this first moment of contact, pure European civilization met (im)pure African primitiveness. As a part of the grand narrative of capitalist progress, the first contact myth required the disavowal of colonized economies. Imperial publics indulged in the notion that items such as “brass rings, false pearls, bugles (small glass beads), looking glasses” and other trifles were what interested primitive Africans. Of course, the merchant ships coming back to Europe from Africa were filled with all manner of curiosities and trinkets demanded by European consumers, but by “defining the economic exchanges and ritual beliefs of other cultures as ‘irrational’ and ‘fetishistic,’ the colonials tried to disavow them as legitimate systems.”

El Negro’s supposed grave goods include the proverbial glass beads—fetishes proving the backwardness of Africans before more civilized notions of value generated through capitalist exchange. Though Caitlin Davies, author of The Return of El Negro, hoped to learn more about El Negro by examining the objects displayed with him, these

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62 McClintock, 228.
objects only offer insight into the historical moment in which he was displayed. It was only after 1991 that the objects displayed with El Negro became his “burial objects,” or his “grave goods” as Davies calls them. Nonetheless, prior to 1991, the display objects of El Negro were extremely meaningful. The case of Angelo Soliman reinforces my point.

Angelo Soliman was reputedly the son of an Eritrean prince. Sometime between 1733 and 1734, Soliman, only seven years old, was abducted in a tribal feud and sold into slavery. After arriving in Italy, he was baptized and given the name by which we now refer to him. After some time as a servant “in the house of a wealthy and apparently also kindhearted marquise,” he caught the attention of a Prince Lobkowitz, who made Soliman his permanent companion. The Prince hired a teacher for his new servant, and Soliman learned German in a mere 17 days. Soliman accompanied Lobkowitz nearly everywhere it seems, on his travels, and even into battle.  

After getting married in church in 1769, Soliman went into the service of Prince Franz Liechtenstein, nephew and heir of Prince Lobkowitz. In 1783, Soliman became a freemason; he joined the recently founded “True Concord” lodge, the same lodge to which Haydn and Mozart belonged. In 1783, he retired and lived without any major illness until a stroke at the age of seventy. He died in 1796 and was buried on November 23rd in “the cemetery of Währing (then a little village outside the city walls of Vienna).”

One can only assume that Soliman, having lived a life of seventy years, the majority of which were spent living in Europe, did not wear feathers and beads as he walked his daughter through the streets of Vienna or toasted Mozart on the opening of a new opera.

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63 Seipel, 3.
64 Ibid., 3.
Nonetheless, these were the objects the Viennese placed upon his body when they displayed his corpse.

Within a couple months of Soliman’s death, none other than Emperor Franz II demanded the flaying of the African’s body. The sculptor Franz Thaller prepared Soliman’s body in the coach house in the courtyard of the Imperial Library. He mounted Soliman’s skin “onto a wooden model in such a way as to imitate the appearance of Angelo Soliman in a life-like manner.”65 Soliman went on public display, and his only daughter, Josephine, immediately began writing letters demanding his removal, repeatedly and insistently asking “for the skeleton and the skin of her father to be handed over to her for burial.”66 Despite several petitions in 1796, the only response she received came from the archbishop of Vienna who, at least in his written response, sided with Josephine. We do not know the full extent of her or his efforts, but we know that in spite of them Soliman stood on public display for the next ten years.

At this point Soliman bears resemblance to El Negro due to the fact that he was skinned, mounted, and displayed. The resemblance goes further and indicates the significant currency of imperial narratives surrounding glass beads, feathers, and other such trinkets as indications of African primitiveness. Soliman was

“shown in standing position, the right foot moved back and the left arm moved forward; he wore a belt around the loins and a crown on his head, both made from alternating red, blue and white ostrich feathers. Arms and legs were each decorated with a string of white glass-pearls and he wore a large long pleated necklace.”67

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65 Ibid., 2-3.
66 Ibid., 5.
67 Ibid., 3-4.
Even the room, in which Soliman stood in a glass case, resembled the curious arrangement of the Darder Museum’s Room of Man. It was “decorated in the style of a tropical forest with shrubs, pools of water and reeds. It contain[ed] a waterpic, a tapir, some musk-rats and several singing birds.” This strange assortment does not rival the Darder Museum’s “Room of Man” with its stretched human skins and jars containing human fetuses, but the setting nonetheless places Soliman in frozen Nature, where the Viennese gazing at him could almost believe that they were the first humans to encounter the pristine scene, that they were in some way experiencing first contact, even though the mythical African man wearing his typical beads and feathers had walked amidst these same Viennese only months before.

It should be clear by now that there is no reason to believe that the display goods described in the 1831 article are the grave goods of El Negro. Nevertheless, the belief that these were the goods originally buried with El Negro, a belief generated and reinforced through newspaper articles and the University of Botswana website, contributed to specific expectations concerning the repatriation. In traditional burial rituals in Botswana, burial objects form a part of the body of the deceased. The public of Botswana expected to receive El Negro as he had been displayed, including his display goods—without them, the repatriation was incomplete.

The Spanish government did not concern itself with returning El Negro intact, but instead, consistent with its anti-publicity campaign, aimed to perform the repatriation in a way that generated the least amount of news coverage as possible. Through the

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68 Ibid., 4.
repatriation, the Spanish government responded to charges of racism and disrespect for human rights leveled by African nations. The Spanish government hoped to quiet these protests but also feared “that the rest of Europe would not understand” the decision to repatriate El Negro and “would interpret it as a sign of weakness.”70 The Spanish government was caught in a double bind. On the one hand, the repatriation helped the Spanish government prove that Spain had become fully civilized and modern and left behind its backwardness. On the other hand, the repatriation made Spain the first European nation to give in to Africans’ demands for the repatriation of an African body. The Spanish government’s response to this conundrum was to make the repatriation as silent an event as possible. It achieved this by transforming the intact El Negro that Botswana expected to arrive into a pile of bones and making it virtually impossible for journalists to directly cover El Negro’s exit from Spain.

The Spanish government did not even respond to journalists’ requests that it facilitate the media’s coverage of the repatriation.”71 In September 2000, the Spanish government removed El Negro from the Darder Museum at 11:00 p.m. “as if he was a valuable and sought-after microfilm from a spy movie.”72 Stored in a box, El Negro rode all night in a truck to the National Museum of Anthropology. A week after this midnight trip took place, Pere Bosch, mayor of Banyoles, announced to the press that El Negro was already gone.73 It is possible that the Spanish government removed El Negro at night to avoid the woman who had waited for El Negro with a large sack in the morning, but what

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
is more likely is that it was a part of their effort to limit any coverage of the actual removal. After the removal, possibly under pressure from the Spanish government and despite substantial local support, the town council revealed that it had no plans of making a bronze replica of El Negro from the molds taken in 1997. However, Banyoles residents remained attached to El Negro’s image and determined to keep reproducing it. A week before the burial, a postcard bearing the image of El Negro in the Darder Museum appeared in front of the town hall—many rushed there to make photocopies.

At the National Museum, museum officials dismounted and deconstructed El Negro. Then they sent only the skull and the few bones of El Negro to Botswana. To send him as he had been displayed would have been politically incorrect to say the least, as journalist Jacinto Anton put it. A secretary general in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it would have been not only incorrect but downright humiliating to have sent El Negro to Botswana as he had been displayed in Banyoles, “stuffed like an animal.”74 However one characterizes it, to have sent El Negro back in the form in which he was displayed, in the form in which Botswana expected him to arrive, would have surely generated a storm of publicity. Other countries have repatriated bones. The Spanish government did not want Spain, already known as the last nation to exhibit a stuffed human, to also become known as the first nation to repatriate a stuffed human.75

Journalists’ accounts of El Negro’s burial in Botswana make clear the difficulty of writing about El Negro in his current fragmented state. The physical body of El Negro no longer exists as it did in the Darder Museum, but the discursively constructed bodies of

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El Negro—the newspaper articles, the posters, the photos, the bumper stickers—live on. However, the fragmented physical body whose meanings these bodies mediate is now an absence. A line from one of Jacinto Anton’s articles in El País marks out this discursive space between the absence of El Negro’s physical body and the presence of his discursively constructed bodies: “El Negro no longer exists, but perhaps the legend will survive him.”76 The discursively constructed bodies of El Negro constitute “the legend” referred to by Anton. Of all the accounts of the funeral, Jacinto Anton’s article was the most powerful attempt to navigate the discursive terrain that the ghostly El Negro now inhabits.

In his account, Anton wrote as much about what was absent from the funeral as he did about what was present. He noted the disappointment of the Batswana who expected to see the body they had heard and read about: the physical body of El Negro dressed with feathers, shield and spear. Anton described the blooming acacias and jacarandas and a giant scarlet bird that flew over the park “as if the spirit of Africa’s prodigal son” had finally returned to enjoy the beauty of his homeland.77 All that was needed to complete the funeral as a typical image of Africa, in Anton’s view, was the hunter Allan Black who wore a hat covered with the tales of 14 man-eating lions. He remarks upon the Bushmen who are not there, even though by the time of the repatriation many considered El Negro to be a member of one of the many ethnic groups that fall under that category. Finally, the absence Anton perceives all around him is embodied in a man, who is present, leading the funeral procession.

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77 Ibid.
The man’s name is Emmanuel M. Mogomela, but to Anton he “resembles the ghost of El Negro.” He wears an impressive tribal outfit, including a cap made of leopard skin and a belt made from the tale of an antelope: “Laughter is heard: the man is a well-known lunatic that is said to be a descendant of all the Tswana tribes and is accepted in all parts of the country as a friendly lunatic.” It is difficult to avoid waxing poetic as one looks intently into the laughter-filled gap between El Negro’s multitude of discursively constructed bodies and his fragmented physical body. In my conclusion, I offer some theoretical reflections arising out of my experience of Madrid’s National Museum of Anthropology where, as Jacinto Anton has recently confirmed (it seems he is still haunted), the skin of El Negro is stored, hidden from public view.

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78 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

FRAGMENTATION, ERASURE, ABJECTION

“In his Lettres of 1796 the critic and theoretician Zuëtremere de Quincy contrasted the pleasure of viewing art in Italy, where it was part of everyday life, with viewing it in a museum, a place he described as a ‘waxen desert, which resembles a temple and a salon, a graveyard and a school.’”

Victoria Newhouse, Towards a New Museum, 47.

“We often forget that the Louvre and the British Museum are also cemetery-museums, since we can see there, in particular, the mummified bodies of Egyptians, not to mention innumerable empty tombs and funerary objects. While the Musée de l’Homme, in the Place du Trocadéro, in Paris, is really one of the few cemeteries where (apart from the catacombs) one can see so many skeletons and mummies.”


El Negro’s grave in Botswana is being overgrown by grass and the letters on the grave marker are peeling off. 79 The Darder Museum has been closed, its collection absorbed into a newly built museum devoted to the ecology of the lake of Banyoles. The new museum does not include any reference to El Negro. In light of the fact that money exchanged for the body of El Negro funded the construction of the new museum, it seems he paid for his own erasure.

In May 2004, I received a travel grant to do research at the Darder Museum in Banyoles, to analyze the space where El Negro had been displayed for so long. I arrived

in Barcelona only to find out that the Darder Museum was closed for renovations, and would be closed until sometime in late 2005. I kept looking for traces of El Negro anyway. I found an El País article by Jacinto Anton from April 2004. I learned from the article that El Negro’s skin was being stored in the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid, though it was not on display. Even the director of the museum claimed that she had not seen it, though she had been told that it was in the building, and had been since the repatriation.

A few weeks later, I traveled to Madrid to see the National Museum of Anthropology. Because I knew his skin was stored there, I felt as if I was going to see one of El Negro’s gravesites. He already had a memorial in Botswana where a few of his bones are buried, and his burial objects were in storage in Banyoles, hidden from public viewing; in a sense, they were buried there. When I reached the National Museum in Madrid, I immediately noticed something it had in common with Darder Museum: it had recently undergone renovation. As I approached the building, I saw long, thin marble slabs laying against the front steps that led up to the imposing façade—a row of pillars with ionic capitals that made it resemble a courthouse or a Greek temple. The slabs were broken into four pieces; if put back together they would read “Museo Nacional de la Etnología.” I immediately began taking photos of the almost poetic stack of stone, fragments from a tarnished academic discipline. I wanted to take a picture of the discarded sign on the ground and the new one reigning on the façade that read “Museo Nacional de Antropología.”

As I struggled to fit both of the signs in the viewfinder of my camera, a security guard stepped out and said “Que haces?” I told him I just wanted to take a few pictures of
the building, and he shook his finger at me. I said “Por qué?” and he replied with a calm yet authoritative “Porque.” In Spanish, the spoken word “porque” conveniently means both “why” and “because.” I did not get the picture I desired, however one of the museum’s brochures happened to include a photo where the Museo Nacional de Etnología sign is still in place above the columns, while a huge banner that reads Museo Nacional de Antropología covers one side of the building’s front. The photo was not as intriguing as my photo with the stack of stone slabs would have been, but at least the irony was still there.

Inside the museum, visitors are allowed to take photos as long as a flash is not used. Over time, the bright light of flash bulbs fades the colorfully-dyed fabrics, paintings, and photos on display. After paying admission in the foyer, I was confronted by a blue sign that maps the museum: the Philippines and Asia are on the ground floor, Africa is on the first floor, and America is on the second. Beside the map hung a huge reprinted photo of the Central Room of the museum, the way it looked from 1910-1940. The image almost spoke aloud for the museum as a whole: “I am older than you,” it said to me. At the bottom of the stairs that lead to Africa and America is a bust of Dr. Pedro González Velasco, the founder of the museum. Dressed in a slick marble bowtie and jacket, his stone face is stern, symmetrical, and white.

Dr. Velasco is considered by many to be the “father” of Spanish anthropology. He referred to the museum as his “temple,” where he housed thousands of specimens and founded the Spanish Anthropological Society in 1859. One of the Society’s six main goals was to examine the “aboriginal races of the Spanish Peninsula and of the Balearic

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80 Martín-Márquez, 216.
and Canary Islands," and their intersection with the rest of the races that have populated those areas "up to our day." However, not everyone in the society agreed about how to accomplish this goal.

Francisco Fernández y González, a chaired professor at Madrid’s Central University and a founding member of the Society, "proclaimed the cultural superiority of Spain by highlighting Spaniards’ incorporation of a flourishing Arabic civilization, which had superseded all other European cultures of the time." Yet,

"few of his Spanish contemporaries [were] amenable to accepting Arabs and/or Muslims as somehow constituent of their own identity; indeed, racist invective against North Africans had dominated public discourse and the popular presses as a result of the Spanish-Moroccan War of 1859-60. The cultural diversity with which Spaniards were confronted as they attempted to consolidate a national identity in the second half of the nineteenth century was not always easy or comfortable to assimilate; much of it would be rejected or suppressed. The association with Africans was potentially a source of great apprehension, for it appeared further to corroborate the ‘black legend’ that had for centuries attributed ‘uncivilized’ qualities to Spaniards, such as barbarous cruelty, ignorance, and indolence; the geographically marginal inhabitants of Spain were not in fact Europeans; rather, they were as ‘black’ as the legend itself."

Over 100 years after the beginnings of the Society, Spain would still be working to overcome this "black legend" from which the old saying derives: "Africa starts at the Pyrenees." Recall that when the controversy began, the Spanish government tried to disavow the gruesome display of El Negro by hinting that "barbarism still raged in the provinces." 1992 was to be the year that Spain caught up with Europe, ceased to be haunted by the "black legend" of its Arab-African-European hybridity, and showed itself to be fully modern and civilized. The display of El Negro was antithetical to this project,

81 Ibid., 216.
82 Ibid., 218.
83 Ibid., 218.
84 Ibid., 205
and when the Spanish government tore the skin from El Negro and placed it in storage at the national museum in 2000, “Spain” proved itself no more “civilized” than the “barbarous” province that had displayed El Negro.

In the National Museum, where El Negro’s skin is stored, there was a statue of Sarah Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus. It was housed in the Cabinet of Curiosities beside other statues of African men and Asian women, ancient mummies, a “giant” skeleton, and death masks of Maoris. This cabinet was meant to display not simply the objects in it, but rather the room itself was presented as an historical object, as a feature that was common in ethnological museums up until the early twentieth century. A four-page brochure introduced the room and the objects in it, accompanied by small wall plaques and information cards posted by the “skull with syphilitic lesions,” the “skeleton of a giant,” the “mummy from the Canary Islands” or the “portrait of Dr. Velasco.” The portrait itself was also informative, for it displayed the norm from which all the queer objects in the cabinet deviated—a healthy, educated, white male. A portrait of his daughter, Concha, hung on the wall as well in order to, it seems, indicate that his sexual life was also “normal.”

I later learned that the relationship between Velasco and his daughter was more bizarre than I could have imagined that day as I moved silently from one ghastly display case to another. The current curator of the National Museum, Pilar Romero de Tejada, wrote a history of the institution, in 1992 of course, wherein she attempts to suppress what she calls the “black legend” that has always been associated with Velasco. She recalls the black legend only to disprove it. But Martín-Márquez’s closer reading of the sources selectively cited by Romero de Tejada offers a compelling account of Velasco’s
strange treatment of his dead daughter Concha. According to the black legend, when
Concha died from typhus at the age of 15, Velasco “proceeded to behave as if she were
still alive: he sat her at his dining table, accompanied her on daily carriage rides through
the Retiro Park, and even escorted her to the opera.”
At some point he embalmed her
and buried her. Eleven years later, several days after the inauguration of his temple-
museum, Velasco exhumed her body and placed it in a glass case in the altar of the
museum chapel (Martin-Márquez, 207). However, Concha was not the only preserved
corpse to be housed in the National Museum, even before El Negro’s brief stay in 2000.
In Romero de Tejada’s history of the museum, she also “attempts to cast doubt on a late
nineteenth-century catalogue of holdings.” The catalogue lists “two individuals of the
black race, man and woman, preserved with their natural skin.” Where are these bodies
now? Are they hidden in the same space El Negro is hidden? Regardless of what physical
space they now occupy, we might say that these skins occupy a similar discursive space
as El Negro, a space that is hidden, disavowed, reserved for the utterly abject.

In the wing opposite the cabinet of curiosities was a temporary exhibit entitled
“Fruits and Castes Illustrated” that contained two sets of 18th century casta paintings, one
from Mexico and the other from Peru. These paintings depicted the racial types that
proceeded from mixtures of Indians, Spaniards, and Africans, and were meant to also
delineate the personalities of these persons. One set of paintings actually had twenty
different classifications for the various hybrid persons that proceed from racial
intermixture. But this is only the beginning of the complexity. To understand the

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85 Ibid., 206.
86 Ibid., 205.
87 Ibid., 205.
historical meanings of these paintings in the Spanish American colonies, one cannot use the static term “race” that so often circulates in critical discourse today. One must have an understanding of castidad, or status, and raça, or lineage, as Magali M. Carrera argues in her book *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings*. I point this out because many visitors, like me, will not have an understanding of the complex social dynamics of New Spain, and the paintings will succeed in reinforcing biologistal notions of race, despite the fact that they are displayed as a way of seeing and knowing from another time and place.

After seeing these two first floor exhibits I decided to head toward the stairs that would take me to the far off lands of Africa and the Americas. I passed the museum floor map in the foyer as my feet entered the uncharted territory of the staircase. As I sailed up the stairs my shoeships dodged whirlpools; I pushed away sexy but deadly mermaids and barely ducked the snatching maw of a sea monster. I awkwardly bumped into a man from Peru when I reached the top of the steps (distracted by the perils behind me, I did not look where I was going). He forgave me, and we began to discuss the paintings as well as the way the Americas were represented on the second floor. He taught me an old but still commonly-used saying from Peru: “El no tiene de Inga, tiene de Mandinga.” According to my new friend, people in Peru still say this whenever a Peruvian lays claim to a European lineage that would make them better than another who is the product of racial intermixture.

After some flashless photos and a few laps around the Africa floor, I went back downstairs to contemplate again the skeletons and paintings on the ground level. I realized that the National Museum is a reverse memorial for El Negro—what I call an
immemorial. As an adjective, immemorial means “extending back beyond memory or record.” As a noun, I use it here to mean an unintended memorial, a place where remembering takes place without specific prompting from the place itself. immemorials are unmarked graves, places where one knows human remains rest, though there is no headstone or plaque to confirm the presence one feels when passing over that haunted section of grass, or sand, or concrete. But an immemorial is also more than merely an unmarked grave. In the case of the immemorial of the National Museum, memory is utilized not to re-member, or re-connect with the past, but rather to sever the past from the present.

Recall three aspects of the National Museum that I have already mentioned: first, the fragmented sign that read “Museo Nacional de Etnología,” replaced by a sign that said “Museo Nacional de Antropología,” second, the cabinet of curiosities, a permanent installation displayed as a period room that embodied a way of seeing and knowing from an-other time, and third, the set of casta paintings, also a display of racial visual regimes of an-other time and an-other place. At first I thought that the switching of the sign was meant to erase the tarnished legacy of ethnology. But if that was the case, why include a cabinet of curiosities, a room that was “typical in ethnological museums up until the early twentieth century”?

In the cabinet of curiosities, it was not just the skeletons of giants and the syphilitic skulls that were being othered—in displaying that room as a piece of the past brought forward to the present, the museum was othering itself. The museum was managing its own past through abjection, placing those ghastly objects at the limit of itself to perform the work of constructing the present museum in the eyes of the viewer.
The cabinet of curiosities is abject because it is both a part of the National Museum and not a part of it; it only exists as a part of the National Museum by virtue of being anterior to it and utterly different from what the National Museum is today. The set of casta paintings reinforce biologicist notions of race when the viewer is unaware of the peculiar markers of identity in New Spain. Through the cabinet of curiosities and the casta paintings, the National Museum constructs itself in the present as a museum that is now free of the Eurocentric and racist displays of its past, though the selfsame museum contains these Eurocentric and racist displays, in an abjected mode.

In the current moment, when museums struggle to maintain their collections despite a lack of funds, even as groups from all over the world lay claim to those same collections, El Negro’s repatriation is a significant event. He was the first African to be repatriated from a European museum. Two years later, partially owing to the repatriation of El Negro, Sara Baartman was repatriated from the Musee de l’Homme in Paris back to South Africa. But we must ask, was El Negro’s repatriation successful, if his skin is still in Madrid? The Spanish government should send El Negro’s skin to Botswana to be buried with his bones and also hand over the molds of his body taken in 1997. Then the repatriation of El Negro can begin to qualify as complete.

Anthropological museums are currently in a state of flux, and I praise the National Museum for making an attempt to deal with its past, both the beauty and the horror. Museums are now coming into a moment when they must not only produce histories of diverse human cultures, but also histories of museum cultures themselves, of their displays, of their means of gathering objects, of their entire repertoire of reality production. I have offered here a contemplation on the fragmented state of El Negro in
the setting of one of his shapeshifting immemorials, where the concrete environment is silent, where ghosts speak to those who know their names. I hope El Negro will be remembered as someone who silently demanded the museum question its own authority; I hope he will be remembered in spite of his immemorials that place him behind us. I think he will still have questions for us far into the future, that is, if we are willing to sit at one of his unmarked graves, and listen.
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