Spring 2023

Communal Appropriation: Considerations of Heritage and Cultural Preservation

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2023

Approval of the Dissertation Committee

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Claremont Graduate University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Cultural Studies. We certify that we have read this document and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts.

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2023

Abstract

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While cultural appropriation is widely taken as a negative phenomenon that should be avoided, aspects of cultural appropriation are desirable for cultural preservation and heritage. These aspects can expand upon a museum's function by fostering an authentic connection to the community that would enhance the exhibition of cultural artifacts with authenticity, sustainability, diversity, and accessibility. This paper interprets auto-ethnographical visits to two sites, the Watts Tower Community Center in Los Angeles, CA, and the Fairfield House in Bath, England as a way of understanding community appropriation. Both the Watts Tower Community Center and the Fairfield House are inhabited by black and ethnic minority communities that have adopted and claimed their respective sites as locations for cultural activities outside of the intent of the original site's founder. I argue in this essay that community appropriation is a phenomenon that can be used as a way of cultural heritage that destabilizes traditional values and troubling aspects of current cultural preservation. In this essay, I aim to close a gap in our understanding of cultural transmission, preservation, and community efficacy.

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Part 1

Introduction: *Considering Cultural Appropriation*

> These days in Watts a work of art [the Watts Towers], like anything else, carries a racial identification. People in Watts now ask a question that no one would have thought to ask ten years ago, when the first art classes were being organized at the towers: "How can black children be inspired by something built by an Italian?"
>
> – Calvin Trillin, The New Yorker, 1971

> 28 March was 60 years to the day that our esteemed elder Mrs McFarquhar arrived in England from Barbados. She is the long time organizer of initiatives in Bath as well as the founder member of Bemsca [Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizen Association] at Fairfield House [Museum]. She brought cake for all of us to share, a beautiful gesture from a beautiful lady. We salute you Mrs. McFarquhar, and thanks for everything you does.
>
> – Newsletter Spring 2022, Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizen Association

Cultural appropriation is bad. The two words beside each other recall images and examples indelibly pressed upon our existing ideas: sports teams that use Indigenous Tribal names, TikTok dance steps stolen from a young black woman, and the phenomenon of Rachel Dolezan. Cultural appropriation, as illustrated in current consciousness, happens when an aspect of a culture is misused by a group that cannot claim an authentic relationship. Cultural appropriation is a relationship of power that exacerbates inequities and marginalization (Scafidi,

2005). The controversy around TikTok involved the exploitation and gain made for the white appropriators over the black creators. Yet when we examine appropriation as adaptation, when we remove, complicate, flip, or thicken our understanding of inequitable structures and practices by considering aspects of mythmaking (Barthes, 2013), cultural nationalism (Andersen, 2013), and cultural ownership (Callison, 2016), we can find that community involvement (Abu Baker, 2012) can have the opposite effect of current portrayals of appropriation, by creating connection, identity and giving marginalized communities places of authentic heritage and preservation. Because contemporary concerns (Zucker, 2022) about cultural equity impact art and historical sites, issues of appropriation and decolonized cultural preservation are salient. Cultural sites should foster the values of stewardship and trust while at the same time strengthening and connecting authentically to their respective communities as a critical component of their mission.

Two cultural sites, The Watts Tower Community Center in Los Angeles, California, United States, and the Fairfield Museum in Bath, UK, offer a unique approach to cultural heritage. Both sites are community centers serving their populations as primary missions. These missions are consistent with the function of each site museum and place of preservation. Instead, the connection to the community enhances the exhibition of cultural artifacts with authenticity, sustainability, diversity, and accessibility. Both sites have histories of communities that have appropriated and adopted cultural artifacts, ideas, and figures for communal use. This appropriation is not connected to ideas of power or hegemony. Instead it is a way of survival and interconnectedness by communities to historical artifacts.

I visited both sites in the summer of 2022. At the Watts Towers, I was able to walk around the Towers, watch a documentary about the Towers, play the piano in the adjacent Watts Arts Center, and talk to the staff members. I even was invited to return to participate as a poetry

teacher. At the Fairfield house, I was greeted with the same sense of warmth and acceptance. I was served tea in the main hallway, given a private tour and talk with the director, and invited back for lunch.

My paper will explore my own ethnographic experiences, the histories of these sites of both sites, and the theoretical frameworks of nonwestern ideas of cultural heritage as anti-artifact to argue that community involvement appropriates, adopts, transmits, and preserves culture with authentic accessibility. However, I do not want to defend the act of appropriation in this essay. Cultural appropriation is very bad indeed. But I do want to argue for ideas of communal appropriation, a type of cultural adoption that is experienced by community involvement. This adoption creates experiences of shared identity, authentic social bonds, and dynamic cultural recognitions across transnational borders as an alternative decolonized form of cultural preservation worthy of future emulation.

Part 2

Theoretical Framework: *Mythology, Community, and Collective Efficacy*

To unpack issues of appropriation, it is necessary to think about appropriation's basic premises. Roland Barthes, in *Mythology* argued that myth is a cultural phenomenon that has purposes. Myths perpetuate ideology by naturalizing and exemplifying basic concepts. For example, in the chapter "The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat", Barthes discusses how Jules Verne, in his quest to conquer infinity and make the world definable to man, uses the image of the ship, the Nautilus, as a means of illustrating control tangibly. Barthes says

> The basic activity of Jules Verne, then, is unquestionably that of appropriation. The image of the ship, so important in his mythology, in no way contradicts this. Quite the contrary: the ship may well be a symbol for departure…. The Nautilus, in this regard, is the most desirable of all caves: the enjoyment of being enclosed reaches its paroxysm, when, from the bosoms of this unbroken inwardness, it is possible to watch… the outside vagueness of the waters… (68-69)

For Barthes, mythology is a phenomenon that contains meaning-making through symbol use. In the image above, the ship is the symbol of an idea. Verne wants to contain and solidify the vastness of space for man. His ship is a literary device created to do this. The ship's descriptions contain markers for the overarching ideology and cultural concept of control. There is more, however, for the ship itself can be anything, a literary trope, an image, an idea, or a cultural artifact.

Barthes connects mythmaking with semiology to argue that the relationship between the sign (the object or image) and the signified (the meaning) is intentional. For Barthes, myth

upholds the status quo and the power dynamics of ideology. Myth is the glue that creates tangible and intangible examples of how ideologies insidiously manifest themselves in the world.

> It thus appears that it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its strangehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth (134).

For Barthes, because the qualities of a myth are so integral to ideological control, the cure for a myth is another myth. While this may seem reductive, this idea makes sense. The creation of myths is integral to our epistemological experiences in the world. By including mythmaking as an aspect of appropriation, appropriation can be disentangled from notions of inherent hieratical characteristics. Mythmaking is a tool, and appropriation analyzed in this framework is also a tool that can be wielded by both those who have a stake in ideological control and those who do not. Furthermore, cultural artifacts can be turned into myths and thus used to illustrate ideological ideas, interpret ideologies, and reinterpret and disrupt ideological control.

However, there is another critical consideration for these ideas. Barthes believed that the collective society, the nation, creates myths to uphold and dismantle ideologies. However, who creates the myths? Nationalism is another way we can think about the "owners" of the myths. Nationalism itself is challenging to define. Anderson discusses the history of nationalism as an aberration of Marxism in which the fervor and devotion become detrimental for proletarians because it works to create within them a new type of bourgeoise (3,4). Nationalism, then, is a different type of appropriation, one in which mythmaking serves the particular purpose of modifying artifacts in such a way that they become ideologies. This, in turn, creates a hierarchy.

Hierarchy repeats inequitable colonist and hegemonic structures when added to mythmaking and appropriation. Therefore, the type of collective society that engages in mythmaking of resistance cannot be nationalist.

Jean-Luc Nancy gives a fascinating definition of a type of community. He includes in this definition ideas of resistance.

> Distinct from society (which is a simple association and division of forces and needs) and opposed to emprise (which dissolves community by submitting its peoples to its arms and to its glory), community is not only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence. It is constituted not only by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities: it is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community.

Here the collective society is a community that is nationalist only to itself. Communal bonds are defined and solidified within the community instead of for a nation or state.

A community can be further defined as a group of people who come together through shared experiences, a sharing of activities, and a shared identity (Abu Baker, 2012). This sharing of actions, values, and expressions creates a sense of belonging and connection. However, it is essential to recognize that these shared identities are not necessarily place-bound as many different markers, such as age, gender, sexuality, race, or religion, can form shared identities. Shared identities are dependent on social bonds and intrinsic connections that these social bonds make. What constitutes a particular community is not fixed. Instead, a community is

characterized by ever-shifting dynamic forces and cannot rule out unique aspects of why individuals identify with each other. Considering this dynamic quality and combining it with arbitrary mythmaking, it is apparent that communal groups can attach themselves to objects, ideas, and cultural artifacts at will.

For marginalized groups, such as African Americans, this ability to mythologize can function as a social bond and a means of maintaining self-esteem inside ideologically oppressive systems. Charles Mills gives an excellent example

> The coercive arms of the state, then- the police, the penal system, the army- need to be seen… working both to keep the peace and prevent crime among the white citizens, and to maintain the racial order and detect and destroy challenges to it so that … nonwhites are incarcerated at different rates and for longer terms. To understand the long bloody history of police brutality against blacks in the United States, for example one has to recognize it not as excesses by individual racists but as an organic part of this political enterprise. There is a well-known perception in the black community that police- particularly in the jim crow days of segregation and largely white police forces- were basically an “army of occupation” (87)

Here we have an example of a community facing marginalization and threat. This community uses a myth as a way of working against ideological control. In the example, the myth is the police. First, "the police" is a myth of ideological control, for the police are synonymous with protection and maintenance. Nevertheless, the police exist as another myth. For the black community, the police are a force of occupation. This second myth corrects and reifies the first, effectively working against the ideology of control and coercion.

One last idea introduced to help reconcile these concerns is collective efficacy. To have efficacy means to have the ability or power to influence a change or effect. Efficacy as a term carries with it a connotation of singularity. However, Lani Guinier argues for a type of efficacy that is collective and communal. In her essay, she illustrated how collective efficacy is superior in achieving democracy to our current reliance on elections because it does what elections cannot; collective efficacy mobilizes "citizens [to] hold their representatives accountable to a political or public agenda" (Guinier BE 4), changes electoral politics to uphold democratic values, and empowers citizens to participate in government. Collective efficacy is so practical because the collective, the community, is bound to its own sense of shared identity. This gives the community a purpose of looking out for its well-being and creating goals for its own sustainability.

Understanding issues of a community in relation to collective efficacy and nationalism shows clearly that the community is an agent that does seek to control as it makes myths that challenge ideology. Can't this be used, then for cultural preservation?

Part 3

Cultural Sites: *Intangibility, Heritage, and Current Issues of Preservation*

Museums and cultural sites are tasked with addressing current and contemporary issues, not just their own place within the larger museum space but likewise their place within the local and wider communities they inhabit and desire to hold resonance with. The destabilization of the traditional museum has been an ongoing process for quite some time, but the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the process and made many museums have to confront how they maintain attendance, staff and audience equity, and authenticity in meeting those goals.

According to Laura Zucker, the two most pressing concerns that arts organizations are facing include the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and issues of cultural equity. These two issues illustrate the necessity of historical cultural sites and arts organizations to be relevant to current issues and concerns beyond economic support and continual funding or revenue streams. Laura Zucker is the director of Claremont Graduate University's Center for Business Management and the Arts. During her talk at the LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes in June, she spoke passionately about the global issues of arts organizations both in Los Angeles and England. Her talk highlighted the quality of adaptation that museums, cultural heritage sites, and arts organizations needed to thrive. For Zucker, continual funding and economic support are interrelated to the two major concerns, together creating a situation that can threaten a cultural site's survival. Of note in Zucker's talk is how cultural sites and museums are dependent on community support due to their nature of interdependence on public access and surrounding environments.

Concerns about cultural equity impact art and historical sites in other unexpected ways, as well. Museums have broad impacts upon the public that include perceptions of differences

(saying the unsaid) and affiliation (generating a sense of belonging). Museums should foster the cultural values of stewardship, trust, and strengthening of communities as a key component of their mission. Frameworks for reimagining a museum cannot be generic as well as cultural values should be specific to the relationship between the museum or arts organization and the community it serves. To achieve cultural equity traditional values and historical practices need to be destabilized (*Making a Difference,* 6-7). In Los Angeles, communities that are traditionally overlooked rightfully fight for a seat at the table, as museum and art audiences crave authentic, non-colonial representation. Grappling with these issues, museum and cultural site stakeholders are being asked to align their visions to support these concerns. It is an exciting time, yet there are no easy or simplistic solutions to what exactly historic, artistic, and cultural sites can and should do. In reviewing and assessing a cultural site it is imperative that we look carefully at what a site would need to bring to a community that reflects current cultural values and understanding of diversity in the most authentic way possible for that particular community.

One way to examine the different ways that cultural values can be expressed is to analyze some history on the idea of heritage. According to Vecco, heritage was originally conflated with ideas of property or goods. Yet even as legal degrees such as the Hague Convention of 1954 protected cultural heritage, its definition was only expanded to include monuments and sites, not intangible values. Intangibility did not appear until the 1982 Burra Charter, which expanded the protection of heritage to include social value. Because these ideas are relatively new, Vecco argues for a "next step" in the recognition that "conservation can no longer be based on an object's intrinsic quality" (2010). This is an essential consideration because it leads the way to think about cultural heritage as not functioning through the veneration of an artifact but

functioning around the artifact. In other words, this means that the artifact is not central to activities of preservation; rather, the artifact sits in a lateral position to the community itself.

Non-western notions of cultural ownership can have their roots in Indigenous ways of knowing. According to Camille Callison, Loriene Roy, Gretchen Alice LeCheminant, Indigenous wisdom is created through the stories and beliefs that inform values. Goals, objectives, and data are also different in that Indigenous knowledge are concerned more with the ontological understanding of the world rather than Western notions of categorizing. Indigenous knowledge seeks to discover interconnections that create multiple relationships between different subjects (29-31). How, then can these kinds of cultural traditions be preserved? A community or collection must become central to cultural preservation and heritage.

Another exciting idea is that of non-western museum heritage. Matthew Magnani, Anni Guttorm, and Natalia Magnani completed a study of the Sami, Indigenous people who live in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Their findings revealed the importance of museums and the need for change.

> Shifting practices in heritage have emerged in parallel with novel forms of public engagement. Museum collections and archives provide valuable sources of information to fuel vibrant indigenous cultural revival programs around the world [10]. For some peoples, museum objects bear witness to ways of life and thinking that disappeared or changed through histories of colonization…. Despite these positive changes, indigenous communities face difficulties in accessing their own cultural heritage held in museum collections. Additionally, and increasingly, populations live far away from their traditional homelands and cultural centers. In many other cases, objects are kept in foreign institutions or by private collectors.

> Even when community members reside closer to relevant museums, contact is typically limited by conservation and time constraints, not to mention the opacities of language and practice that exist for those outside the museum world. (163).

Museums and cultural sites still provide valuable connection for cultural heritage. There is a need for inclusive and novel practices, though, that can contain these complexities.

One last example of a museum that was created by its community not as a site for artifact collection, but as a cultural center that explicitly served the community. Malcolm McLeod illustrates a narrative of a new museum built in 1995 by the Asante (Ashanti) people. The museum was paid for by the people themselves and designated as a spot for tourism revenue. But the actual use of the museum was a cultural heritage site for senior Asante members to teach their history to the younger generation who were divorced from cultural connections due to school. While an exhibition of Prempeh II artifacts would cover the ground floor, a more extensive collection was rejected. The objects chosen for the museum were functional. The museum did contain fiberglass effigies of Permpeh I and II, and Opoku Ware II, which became very popular as a primary function of this museum was the veneration of former kings. (456-460). The cultural space served its community authentically with deep respect for the heritage and meaning-making of its particular community.

Part 4

Autoethnographical Interpretations: *The Watts Towers and The Fairfield Museum*

I imagine there was a sound he
must have heard in the background in his
head Mr. Rodia, Simon, the neighbor
the immigrant, the Italian, the old man
climbing the spires and reworking rebar
in his backyard in his head with his
own caught hands a sound that
turned on itself to twist in made
up structures like jazz like gyres like
long notes of inner compulsions that
make sense only to the players the
outwardly spin up of a conspicuous beg
of attention from this ghetto from this
heaven from this height the figure of
one note one tiny man making
architecture music where climbers
and listeners baptize themselves alike
in the hot sun of the structures in the
persistent scale in the baptism all now
wanderers themselves dizzy I imagine
this intertwining this wiggle the tower
and ache for it in my ears standing there
at the bottom looking up we are always
climbing no? we are always escaping
the pain of aloneness to build to make
music our found objects ourselves our
sounds the meanings of our spires like
we are Rodin too lost climbing but
understood but necessary gathered
reworked like jazz made concrete like
towers of melodies like twisting towards
heaven chords

Figure 1: Artwork located outside of the Watts Tower Arts Center that imitates the art styles and motifs and collage found in the Watts Tower.

"I used to climb the towers when I was a child. My father played jazz for the Community Center, and I'd be outside climbing those towers" says Martin Wilcotts, one of the administrative staff at the Watts Tower Arts Center Campus. Wilcotts squints down at my classmate and myself during our tour of the Watts Towers. Wilcotts is tall, hair shaved on the sides and loced on the top, with a slight rueful grin that makes me wonder about his relationship with his father. I imagine him climbing those impossible spires alone as a child. Later Wilcotts shows me a picture of his father on the phone and adamantly refuses to show appreciation for jazz music. He's a drummer after not, he persists in telling me twice, not a pianist; he did not follow in his father's footsteps. Our tour guide is another interesting character. Howard Marshall Jr is an art teacher with over 30 years of association with the Watts Tower Arts Center. Howard is full of anecdotes

and enthusiasm, and I found myself during the tour talking about the feeling of the space, the way art and music dance around each other, how the light is impossibly bright at the towers, playing perhaps with our emotions and perceptions. Marshall insists I come back to arts center teach a poetry workshop. We sit inside the arts center and my classmates plays the piano. Not only is she allowed to play uninterrupted, but she is also invited to play and welcomed by the staff. I talk to Marshall, listening to his stories, realizing that at the heart of this place is not only the intersection of music and art.

The Watts Tower is in the Watts neighborhood in the southern basin of Los Angeles. The very name Watts brings to American minds the Watts Uprising, south-central Los Angeles's notorious reputation of low income and high crime, the Jordon Downs Housing community, and films shot in Watts such as Training Day, and Menace II Society. Yet these initial impressions stamped in the cultural memories of Americans overlook the enigma of the Watts Towers and its relationship with the neighborhood it inhabits. The Watts Tower has no easy classification. It is described as folk art, history and architecture. Its creator, Simon Rodio has not quite answered as to the purpose of the structure. Nor does the tower match the stereotypical view of current understandings of the neighborhood which embraces it. This accepted, loved, and cherished by its residents. Looking further into its contradictions can give us a testament to how historical artworks can be persevered (Shrank, 20).

Born Sabato Rodia in the village of Ribottoll and called Simon or Sam by his neighbors Rodia himself was a mystery. Rodia worked as a labor specializing in cement and tile. He bought the plot of land at 1765 E. 107th Street in 1921 before the neighborhood of Watts was part of Los Angeles. He bought the land specifically for its triangular shape. He began building the tower with found materials. Building the towers become his obsession causing his third wife to leave.

Yet Rodia became a figure in the neighborhood, with many of his neighbors donating the materials he would repropose for his structure.[1] One can already imagine the community's hand in the very building of the towers. Women at the window watching Rodia move through the streets with his metal and glass buckets. Children bringing broken pottery and glass. The acceptance of Rodia's obsession first tolerated, then accepted, then expected as they slowly rose taller and taller upwards. Rodia himself, only said that he wanted to build something big.

The structure itself is also a contradiction. Built by a laborer without formal schooling or a team of laborers, Rodia himself alone took salvaged steel that he bent using railroad tracks into shapes. From these shapes he wrapped wire mesh around the steel and covered the structures with layers of cement mortar that he died. He decorated the towers with porcelain, tile, glass, seashells, and mirrors. Rodia assembled the structures in place, climbing the towers without scaffolding. This is very impressive considering there are 17 structures in the towers with the tallest structure being almost 100 feet tall. Today the structures are a testament to his methods as they were found to be sound, passing a stress test performed by the city in 1959 that showed they were capable of withholding more than 17 thousand lbs of pressure (this fact is told and retold by several members of staff during our tour who turn the city into an unnamed enemy, punctuating the tale always with a look upon the tower with pride). Now the Towers are considered a historic site designated a National Historic Landmark and a California Historical Landmark in 1990. It is interesting to reconcile this designation with a city that wanted to previously tear the tower down. The Towers are known for being a historical site for folk art, with significance being placed on the history of the materials used, as well.

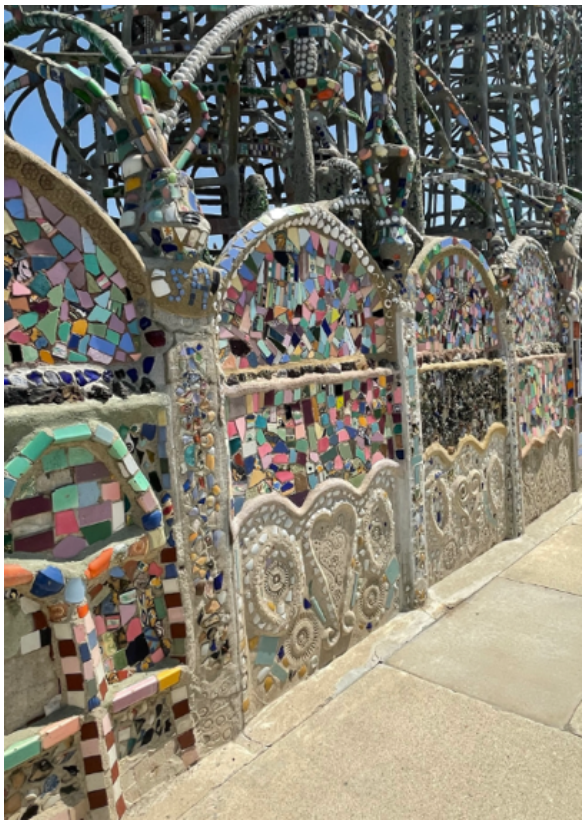

Figure 2: Mosaic design-work located throughout entire structure of tower.

However, the Towers relationship with the community is betrays the richness of its historical complexity. Howard Marshall Jr describes The Watts Towers Arts Center as a type of guardian and watch tower of art and culture that is a gift to the community. This history, not reflected by cultural arts preservation descriptions reflects how Rodia's structures were experienced by the residents who lived alongside it as it was built. In 1954 Rodia, after falling at the age of 74 stopped building on the towers. Rodia went to live with his sister, giving the deed of the property to his neighbor, who then sold it to Joseph Montoya, who then sold it to Bill Cartwright and Nick King. This was the beginning of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers, a group of individuals who fought (and won) against the city of Los Angeles who wanted to demolish them due to safety issues. The Committee moved on from that victory and built the Watts Tower Arts Center. But the community and the music and the towers solidified with a man

named Charles Mingus who as a boy growing up in Watts, watched Rodia building the tower, succeeding and failing and succeeding again. Mingus inspired by Rodia's work would go to be considered one of America's greatest jazz composers.

When Rodia finished his towers in 1954, he gave them along with the deed to his neighbor, Louis Sauceda. Mr. Sauceda sold them to Joseph Montoya for $1,000.00 six months later. Immediately after Bill Cartwright and Nick King purchased the Towers in 1959 from Joseph Montoya for $3,000.00, they founded the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, saved the Towers from demolition, and started preservation efforts. The Watts Community considered the Watts Towers part of their heritage and called upon the new owners to also invest in the community. Thus, the Center began. Later the Charles Mingus Youth Art Center joined the complex as an area staple with classes and festivals carrying on that tradition of art and music with by and for the community.

Figure 3: Quilted artwork that depicts Watts Towers as a backdrop with musician Charles Mingus

During my tour of the Watts Tower Arts Center, I felt that space seemed so sparse. The walls of the Arts Complex were covered with artwork that showcased the Tower or local musicians such as Charles Mingus and Nipsey Hustle. There wasn't a cohesive theme to what was being displayed on the walls though. I couldn't track a particular art movement or historical era. Rather I felt as I had entered a community center that was more concerned with displaying its own members and its own history that situating itself into the larger context of the artworld. A display case proudly holding a diorama of the Towers and a newspaper article announcing the winners of a local contest. A black piano sitting conspicuously off the center of that bare room as if watching us stark against the light-colored hardwood floors. And outside the door rising up the three highest spires of the Rodia's Towers as if I had entered a place of fantasy. We students are directed to watch a film, *The Tower Documentary* by William Hale from 1957 that takes us through the building of the Tower and Simon Rodia himself smiling wrinkled and impossibly lonely climbing those towers like a man without a country.

I imagined I might have been
Like him Him Majesty who
Walked these paths who might
Have though he too
wouldn't be
let in the museum the English garden
the manicured
Grecian stone walls that harkened
back to a complicated history
all the way over here an ocean here far over
from anything that could possibly connect
to our own dark skin but when I knocked when he
built when he prayed and I hoped
when they saw me
when they welcomed him Haile Selassie, the foreign
exchange student who shyly askeds if she could, if he could
if they would in their
accents thick
and rich voice welcome us
let us in

honor us with tea
and time when they sat me down
and talked with me
told me about how His Majesty wanted this place for us

Figure 4: The front of the Fairfield House, unmarked entrance.

The very next week, after visiting the Watts Tower Arts Center. I find myself sitting in the dining room playing cards with an elderly gentleman who has a little difficulty speaking. This man smiles at me a lot, although I never catch his name. He is affectionally treated by staff members and I learn that he is over 90 years old and has been coming to the Fairfield House Museum's Senior Citizen community program for many years. I am on an impromptu visit. I am on a tour of Museums in Bath, English and I feel lonely and out place. I keep thinking about how cold and insular the museums are here. I do not feel a connection with any history here in Bath, I

am the only black person on the tour, and secretly I am starved to interact with someone who looks like me. During a talk, I learn about the Fairfield House Museum, the former home of an Ethiopian Emperor, now used as senior citizen community center. This museum is not on our tour so, I sneak away, hail an Uber and go visit unannounced.

The Fairfield house lies innocuously in the middle of a residential neighborhood surrounded by high trees and green house gardens at the end of long gravel driveway, easy to miss and slightly difficult to find. I am glad I took an Uber instead of walking, as my driver knows the place and is completely nonplussed that I want to go there. The Fairfield House does not look like a museum, nor does it proclaim itself and it cultural history in any kind of signage. On the porch there are flyers for events but even they seem muted, and I cannot be completely sure I am the right place. I knock on the door prepared to be turned away, and two minutes later I find myself with a cup of tea in their dining room with my new friend, waiting to speak to the director.

The Fairfield House has a unique history. This museum began as a personal gift from the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to the city of Bath in recognition of Bath's hospitality. His Imperial Majesty purchased the property in 1936 for His family, staff, and other Ethiopian refugees as they fought for Independence of Ethiopia. Although His Majesty returned to Ethiopia five years later the house was used by members of the Ethiopian Royal family and other evacuees and refugees. Left empty for several years, the house was refurbished for a visit from Emperor Haile Selassie in 1954. His Majesty in turn gifted the property to the city of Bath for the use as a home for aged people. Fairfield House has been used since 1994 by Bemsca (Bath Ethnic Minority and Senior Citizen Association) as a daycare center for the elderly (Sobers, 38)

Figure 5: Displayed portrait drawings of community center members, dining room.

The director of Bemsca, Pauline Swabby-Wallace peeks in on me three times before she finally comes in to sit with me. She makes sure I have tea, that I am comfortable, and that I know she will be right back. I'm not quite sure I will get to talk to her as she seems very busy, but I spend my time talking with a gentleman who came from Barbados to the UK more than seventy years ago. His accent is so thick I miss every sixth word, and his hands shake, but he smiles and laughs outright when I say I am from "the states". He has a great great grandson in the United States in New York, and he thinks my school Claremont is somewhere near enough I can look up his family. I find myself nodding and smiling and laughing with him. I never catch his name. Pauline finally shoos him off (at this point I feel I am a bit of a celebrity, and a small crowd of seniors are gathered around me).

She tells me about this place, first welcoming me to the home. She begins the talk by listing the names members of the community. She tells me about the changes that the program had to make during Covid, and how much this museum is a home. During the worst of the pandemic the staff reached out door to door to men and women who attended the center to check on them. I listen and cannot help but feeling emotional as she talks about the members who had passed away. We both drink tea and I am struck by the fact this interview feels more like a visit with aunty than a visit to a museum.

Figure 6: Prominent display of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, stair landing

After we talk, I am taken on a tour and shown the museum's collections. Along the dining room wall is sketches of many of the men and women who have been a part of this community. I am taken upstairs and shown artifacts of the Emperor Haile Selassie. I notice how all the cultural workers refer to Haile Selassie as His Majesty. They hold him up as a mythical

figure who despite religious differences deserves the utmost veneration for what he did for them. After the tour I'm asked to stay for lunch, but I'm worried that I need to join my classmates and I reluctantly leave. I will be flying home the next day, but I cannot forget the warmth and acceptance that was freely given to me during my visit.

Both sites engaged in what I consider communal appropriation. Neither site had any kind of extensive collection. Yet both sites had firm and explicit functions within the community. The Watts Towers Community Center held classes for children, and the Fairfield House served the elderly and the aged as a day center. This function rather than an artifact centered and gave each site its purpose. Both sites, also had strong sense of cultural heritage and perservation, as the cultural workers openly canvased for volunteers and welcomed those who showed interest. This welcoming was to a community and a practice of shared values and identity. Finally, both sites had mythical figures. For the Watts Tower, the Towers themselves served the function of pushing back against the ideological pressure of discriminatory city government. The Towers were seen as heroes that the city could not take down. For the Fairfield House Haile Selassie served as the grand hero who gifted them his house. Finally, both sites appropriated these mythical figures, as both the Towers and the Emperor Haile Selasse never contained an intention of cultural significance.

While the racial demographics of the communities at both sites were black, both sites existed in vastly different cultures, nationalities, and ethnicity. If anything, the only commonality between the individual communities were their place of marginalization within their respective society. Thus, the similarities of how both sites enacted cultural preservation could not be assumed due to cultural similarity. Rather community marginalization, the absence of hegemony, and the use of mythmaking as ideological resistance created similar situations. It is of note that

while the artifacts of the myths were venerated the central function of both sites included communal bonding and connection. The sites were warm, the cultural workers friendly. I felt a strong sense of belonging and acceptance. These are powerful feelings that cultural sites should consider as they think about who they serve and why.

Part 5

Conclusion: *Considerations of Communal Appropriation*

Communal appropriation as a phenomenon can create experiences of shared identity, authentic social bonds, and dynamic cultural recognitions. While communal appropriation as a theoretical idea has a foundation in the concerns of mythology, collective efficacy, one of its most important contributions is how it fosters an authentic connection to communal bonds based on appropriated histories or artifacts. The two sites that I visited were situated as living monuments that served their neighborhoods explicitly. Communal appropriation can give way to a type of cultural transmission that functions as heritage and practice that can then be based on community bonds. This allows cultural preservation to move beyond artifact preservation alone.

Communal appropriation has the ability to protect intangible cultural heritage in consideration of nonwestern philosophy. Material heritage is not a universal phenomenon. Other cultures do not uphold or place values to material artifacts to the same degree. Rather it is the society or community that creates the value that should be placed on any object (Vecco, 2010). Communal appropriation can allow equitable representation of different forms of cultural heritage that may call for preservation through practice, ceremony, ritual, and community value. This authenticity and ability to contain a multiplicity of cultural expression can and should be used to as a valid form of cultural preservation.

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