

PRELUDE

On Motivations

In 2011, the Getty Museum hired James Cuno from the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). As preordained by neoliberalism, his primary contribution at the AIC had been dismantling the education department and replacing the staff with volunteers. During his tenure at the AIC he wrote a number of books against repatriation and in favor of the elevation of the encyclopedic museum—a rhyme scheme, if you will. When he was hired as the CEO of the Getty Museum—an institution previously embroiled in its own criminal negligence of provenance—the Getty prepared a press release stating that, while it had been noted that Cuno’s personal views on repatriation are “liberal,” he would abide by the museum’s official policy, which we could surmise was less “liberal” (or more ethical?) than his own.

Much as one would expect, on joining the Getty, Cuno took apart the education department, replacing educators with volunteers (who, in turn, needed to be trained and replaced often, which turned out not to be as cost effective as Cuno had initially laid out). This was done to relieve the endowment deficit, as the endowment had dipped from \$5 billion to \$4 billion. It is not clear how much this “dippage” had to do with the operations budget, but nevertheless, the budget for the departments of education, building, foods, and services were cut to ease anxiety.

The utilization of unpaid, *free* educational volunteers in lieu of wage laborers and public accountability with regard to education under the guise of community service—a liberal good misappropriated to serve the interests of a private institution—is part and parcel of the maintenance of neoliberal institutions. Here, the rhetoric of inclusion and expansion comes at the cost of labor expropriation and property entrenchment, together with the disavowal of colonial history and a hostility toward reparations. That the Getty continues to maintain its operations through both its refusal to pay workers and its refusal to repatriate objects is unexceptional to the general practice of the neoliberal schema.¹

I was officially at the Getty to acculturate myself to the world of museums and gain professional experience, coaxing myself into the violent flexibilities demanded by the neoliberal academic “market.” I was personally there to learn more about the politics of provenance research and institutional provenance claims. As an eager student of Marxist feminism, but also as an ethnographer of sorts, I attended all the town hall meetings and budget proposals. I took copious notes. When Cuno declared in the same meeting both that the Getty is the “richest museum in the world” and that volunteers make up fifty-four full-time positions, I wondered if there would be a secondary meeting afterward for its IWW-aspiring members. When scientists were brought in to discuss the optimal temperature for artworks to live in (i.e., the best refrigerators in the world), I understood that all of this was the backdrop for how colonial theft becomes normalized, and how repatriation and redistribution is narrated as cannot be.

Thus I, of course, attended all the acquisitions meetings where newly purchased items were shown and told. I was particularly surprised by the acquisition of the Knoedler Gallery archives, not because the Getty had bothered to purchase them, but because of what the presenting curator deemed to be their importance. It was discussed how, in the sales books, we could see that Henry Clay Frick was buying and returning paintings as if he was shopping at a department store. Cue laughter. It is indeed funny and peculiar to trace through acquisition records the figures of union busters, robber barons. In this book, I work to display these figures’ desires and efforts to extract, to destroy, to segregate, along with the desire and effort to memorialize themselves through collections.

But my desire to research capitalism, colonialism, philanthropy, patronage, and expression has roots deeper than graduate school. I was raised by parents who grew up in a Korea full of white missionaries, and who then wanted to become missionaries. Having this goal, our family was dependent on the charity of wealthy Christians, the desires of churchgoers and their pastors. This is to say, we grew up very poor, and they remain very poor. My personal understanding of poverty was the act of waiting for the rich to decide whether we were a cause worthy of support.

Since my parents never owned a home and most likely will never own very much, all my memories of growing up in Korea, and then at times in the United States, revolve around staying in the homes of wealthy Christians as they vacationed elsewhere. To say we moved a lot would be an understatement; we moved endlessly. In Canada, the apartment we lived in was owned by a Christian organization and was supposedly free. This

meant poorly kept, rodent-infested, and uncared for. Free has a cost: free means you don't complain. Free means enforced gratitude.

My brother and I would routinely ask my parents to select a different kind of job. We didn't articulate it as such, but we hated this life of waiting to be moved by the rich and of accepting the untenably "free." As I began to gnaw at the research of this book, at the theoretical questions that were, in fact, deeply personal, I began to see how the material dynamics of wealth, desire, and legacy play out visibly yet are mystified in arts and poetry spaces. Prominent museums, archives, and poetry spaces become so via colonial accumulation. That is, they require the transfer of the commons, Black and Indigenous dispossession, and labor expropriation to a concentrated figure of wealth, and then to his desired aesthetic pursuit. I am interested in what is lost in this transfer because I imagine there is much. I remain interested in the desires of those fighting, waiting.

My positionality serves as both the possibility and limitation of grappling with the various stakes of property, US settler colonialism, chattel slavery, aesthetics, poetics, labor, and representation. The experiences of my life before and at the Getty prompted me to trace a transfer that I believe extrapolates labor and aesthetic congruences, and, as I stated at the beginning, my interest in tackling this history is about the present. As another dawn of robber barons is upon us, as individual wings of museums and aestheticized techno-utopian schemes are presented to the public with applause, I work to denaturalize their historical and political continuums.² If we are to abolish them, it is imperative to understand the politics carried forth as sacred aesthetic expression, and to repatriate these havens in their entirety.