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## From Nubia to New York: The Politics of Advocacy, Agency, and Land Rights in Proximity to the Temple of Dendur

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From Nubia to New York: The Politics of Advocacy, Agency, and Land Rights in Proximity to  
the Temple of Dendur [PODCAST SCRIPT]

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Episode 1 (Historical Background)

The Temple of Dendur was originally constructed around 15 BC<sup>i</sup>. Fifteen years prior, Egypt had been established as a province of the Roman Empire following Octavian (later known as Caesar Augustus)'s deposition of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Caesar Augustus thus commissioned the acting Roman governor of Egypt, Gaius Petronius, to build a number of Egyptian temples on the Nile. Dendur was one of them: a dedication to the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris, as well as a tomb and memorial for two deified sons of a local Nubian chieftain, Pediese and Pihor, who both drowned in the Nile.<sup>ii</sup> About 500 years later this temple was converted into a Christian church, as indicated by Coptic inscription. For the next fifteen hundred years, this temple remained intact on the banks of the Nile until it was dismantled in 1963 and moved to New York City in 1967. To introduce the temple, this episode will trace the historical and political moments in Egypt that led up to the temple's relocation. How did ownership over the temple of Dendur stem from a question of control over resources and the accumulation of power? Central to the temple's story is the history of the dams that caused the flooding of Nubia, and the subsequent international campaign to rescue what would otherwise be drowned antiquities. Inundated by the Nile, the temple stands today as a steadfast symbol of contentious politics.

Controlling the waters of the Nile was first recorded as a dream of Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Fatimid Caliph. He sent for the famed mathematician and engineer, Hasan Ibn al-Haytham, to complete field work on the Nile and investigate how the Nile's flooding could be regulated.<sup>iii</sup> Unfortunately for the Caliph, al-Haytham's fieldwork proved the impracticality of this desire: building a dam of Nile magnitude would be an onerous task, and would also have severe consequences for the surrounding land and its inhabitants.<sup>iv</sup> While the Caliph may have heeded al-Haytham's warning, 19<sup>th</sup> century British invaders shared no such concern. In 1882, Great Britain sent a fleet of ships to Alexandria, Egypt in order to quell a movement of rising Egyptian Nationalism and anti-imperialism (led by Ahmed 'Urabi) and took control of the Suez Canal, granting them access to the Indian Ocean. This conquest was known as the Anglo-Egyptian war, which resulted in a firm establishment of British colonial rule in Egypt.<sup>v</sup> In 1898, attempting to reorient Egyptian economic development towards capital gain, British colonial aristocracy financed, planned, and constructed the Aswan Low Dam, which opened in 1902. *The World's Work*, a British business magazine, published an article about the Aswan Low Dam in 1902, writing, "it was agreed that the natural advantages of the [Aswan] site, six hundred miles above Cairo, with its bed of granite beneath the river, the high granite banks on either side and the inexhaustible supply of stone nearby offered advantages not equaled elsewhere." The article also noted that, "it cannot be definitely stated who first planned this reservoir," however, when "the majority of an International Commission visited the site in 1984" and agreed upon the idea, construction was a go.<sup>vi</sup> This dam was, at the time of its construction, the largest masonry dam in the world<sup>vii</sup>; nothing of such scale had ever

been attempted before.<sup>viii</sup> With this capacity for water storage, flood control, and hydroelectric generation, regulating the water of the Nile proved to be an incredibly lucrative endeavor for both the British and the Egyptians. British fortune accumulated by the Low Dam's resource control led the British to propose building more water storage facilities on the Nile in Sudan and Ethiopia, where levels of evaporation were much lower, and the potential to generate resources was much higher. Convinced that these British plans would be financially detrimental to the Low Dam's potential to harness resources, the Egyptian government felt it necessary to maximize the dam's benefits by building a bigger and more powerful dam in its place.<sup>ix</sup>

Before this bigger dam would be built, however, a group known as the Free Officers staged a coup and took control of Egypt. The Free Officers were a faction of army leaders who wanted to dismantle Egyptian aristocracy and King Farouk's monarchy, end British occupation, and grant Sudanese independence.

[news clip from 1952] From Cairo come these first authentic pictures of a bloodless coup by which the army took over control of Egypt, it was the end of the king's attempt to maintain power. Troops in the street were the first indication of the change to most people until when the broadcasting station seized, it was announced that General Naguib, the commander in chief, whom Farouk refused as one minister had taken control and the army were ordered to guard strategic points. The declared aim was to stop corruption.

The aftermath of this coup and the subsequent political instability eventually led to Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency.<sup>x</sup> With a steadfast belief in the abolition of monarchy, Nasser declared Egypt to be a republic with a nationalist, secular, anti-imperial, and socialist agenda. Nasser's rule represented a major threat to the dominance of the American government: his beliefs and ideological influence had the potential to spread communist thought. His rise to power marked the onset of the Arab Cold War.<sup>xi</sup> This becomes important when considering the funding for Nasser's major industrialization projects and land reforms that resulted in urbanization and the creation of much infrastructure throughout Egypt. The Aswan High Dam, one of these major projects, was really, really expensive. With inflation, the dam would cost about 12.6 billion dollars today.<sup>xii</sup> This high cost necessitated foreign investment in the dam. Financing this dam represented an opportunity for the U.S. to safeguard their political interests, positing Nasser as a procapitalist, anticommunist leader of the recently formed Arab League.<sup>xiii</sup> The American government, in association with the United Kingdom and the World Bank, submitted a joint proposal to fund the dam. The USSR also submitted a rival financing proposal. These two rivaling bids evidence the Cold War politics playing out, as both America and the Soviets sought to fund this dam as a way to maintain political influence in Egypt. Nasser tactically acknowledged both offers amicably, thereby leveraging one offer against the other in hopes of landing a better offer. Ultimately, the Americas pulled out of the funding deal, leaving Nasser to accept funding from the Soviets for the High Dam.<sup>xiv</sup>

[news clip from 1960] Aswan, Egypt on the Nile River: a special ceremonies marked the start of work on the US, one high dam whose construction has been delayed by lack of funds and international complications, posed for the occasion as President Gamal Abdel Nasser is guest of honor. Morocco's King Mohammed the Fifth. This is an important moment for Nasser, who has finally gotten the project going with the help of a 93-million-dollar Soviet loan. The U.S. refused aid after Egypt bought arms from communist Czechoslovakia. A dynamite blast touched off by Nasser officially breaks the first round for a project which has made news for many years.

Before groundbreaking had begun, archeologists expressed fears that major historical sites and antiquities would be destroyed by the lake that the dam would create. This lake was to be known as Lake Nasser. In light of these archeological concerns, in 1959 the Egyptian and Sudanese Governments requested assistance from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for the protection and rescue of the endangered monuments and sites in Nubia.<sup>xv</sup> Nubia is the region that straddles Egypt and Sudan, south of Aswan, and is the region that would be flooded by the waters of Lake Nasser. This UNESCO request resulted in an appeal before UNESCO's House in Paris on behalf of what would be known as 'The Nubia Campaign'. Speaking in support of launching the Nubia Campaign was the French cultural minister André Malraux. I find his speech to be quite revealing, as it demonstrates how this campaign was framed in terms of its universal, global appeal, and how UNESCO understood their role in the campaign. He began his speech saying, "On March 8 1960, for the first time, the nations, though many of them even now are engaged in overt or open conflict, have been summoned to save by a united effort the fruits of a civilization on which none has a preemptive claim."<sup>xvi</sup> He proceeded to refer to this campaign as "the antithesis of the kind of gigantic exhibitionism by which great modern states try to outbid each other." He continued, "At the moment when our civilization divines a mysterious transcendence in art and one of the still obscure sources of its unity, at the moment when we are bringing into a single, family relationship the masterpieces of so many civilizations which knew nothing of or even hated each other, you are proposing an action which brings all men together to defy the forces of dissolution. Your appeal is historic, not because it proposes to save the temples of Nubia, but because through it the first world civilization publicly proclaims the world's art as its indivisible heritage."<sup>xvii</sup> Political theorist Elazar Barkan considers the Nubia Campaign's purported restitution to be a stark example of a new "international morality" that arose in mid-twentieth-century diplomacy, an era in which governments increasingly relied on using cultural 'rights' to remedy historical 'wrongs.'<sup>xviii</sup> Malraux's logic posited UNESCO as the ultimate agent of ethical mediation, the only political body able to enforce international standards of morality. In this way, the Nubia campaign marked a democratization of archeology and historic preservation by opening the door for all countries to suddenly be able to participate in or launch their own types of these campaigns so long as UNESCO stands as the sole arbitrator of any and all indivisible heritage.

[news clip from 1964] Up the Nile, 800 miles from Cairo, stand the temples of Abu Simbel. All this has stood since 1257 B.C. It now has to be moved to a different site. The plan is to demolish

the temples and rebuild them on a site 200 feet higher. If left here, these priceless monuments of a remote past would disappear, inundated by the huge manmade lake 300 miles long, formed by the Aswan High Dam. The removal will cost 12 million pounds, of which the United Arab Republic will pay one third. UNESCO will collect the rest. The temples had to be saved.

This news clip rationalizing that the temples *had* to be saved evidences how Malraux's emphasis on this campaign being for the benefit of 'civilization' in his speech before UNESCO was an incredibly tactical framing. UNESCO's authority in handling a 40-million-dollar trust fund to deconstruct, move, and rebuild over fifteen temples and facilitate assistance from fifty nation states sending over 150 teams of experts to Nubia transformed this educational, scientific, and cultural organization into an international philanthropic foundation and the sole channel of bureaucratic authority on cultural preservation. The nominal identification of all of these simultaneous archeological, engineering, and political projects into a single "campaign", *naming this massive undertaking the Nubia Campaign*, authorized UNESCO to create a blueprint for universal global diplomacy: urgent historical events like the building of the High Dam can serve as grounds for mobilizing multilateral international action through the scope of pay-to-play liberalism. Any nation can participate in the game of international historical preservation so long as they contribute funds and/or resources. Perhaps it could also be said that the word "campaign" implies a certain degree of coloniality by way of establishing structural political machinery that works to support and uphold said campaign globally, but especially in the Global South. By writing the rules and establishing the norms of international historical preservation, UNESCO continues to maintain dominance as a global cultural heritage broker through its steadfast claim to uphold history and culture. The Nubia Campaign solidified UNESCO's omnipotence by wielding expertise and morality as a way to prevent any dissolution, and by positioning historical and cultural precarity as grounds for capital gain.

The lexicon of the Nubia Campaign also avoided using any language of exchange or trade. Rather than an explicit, 'you help us fund this excavation, we will give you antiquities,' the campaign relied on a lexicon of gifting. For instance, a UNESCO pamphlet from 1960 refers to temples like Dendur that were meant to be sent abroad as 'surplus', while objects and trinkets recovered in excavations are referred to as 'gifts of gratitude'.<sup>xix</sup> In his book, *The Gift*, French anthropologist Marcel Mauss asked himself, "what power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?"<sup>xx</sup> For Mauss, the act of gifting is not simply a question of objects, but rather a question of relationships as "the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them."<sup>xxi</sup> In this way, gift-giving stipulates a mutual interdependence between gifter and receiver, generating a gift-debt that must eventually be repaid. Thus, Mauss would regard the idea of a free gift to be a contradiction. If you visit the Temple of Dendur in the MET today, you will find a plaque that reads, "The United States made major contributions to [the Nubia Campaign], and Egypt graciously gave the Temple of Dendur to the American people." I argue, rather, that the exchange of antiquities occurring throughout the Nubia Campaign should

not be viewed as this gifting relationship, but rather as an act of acquiring power through leveraging obligation disguised and marketed as gifting discourse.

Egypt had, in previous decades, resisted leveraging antiquities as gifts or currency. A forty-million-dollar deficit and the threat of Lake Nasser, however, mandated that Egypt give away antiquities in exchange for capital and expertise.<sup>xxii</sup> Realizing the potential for the resources and publicity Egypt could acquire by giving away antiquities, Nasser sat down with UNESCO and negotiated the terms of an agreement. Nasser's government published a declaration that not only stipulated a 'fifty-fifty' division of all antiquities to funders, but also granted access to other archeological sites and antiquities. This declaration incentivized many countries to join in the Nubia Campaign that otherwise may not have.<sup>xxiii</sup> India's government agency for archeology, The Archeological Survey of India (ASI), for example, participated in this campaign. ASI claimed that having a number of archeologists who had trained under the organization's former director, a prolific British archeologist, as well as prior experience carrying out excavation work necessitated by an impending dam validated their ability to contribute to the campaign.<sup>xxiv</sup> ASI's participation in this campaign, we can see another country that had been colonized by the British using their colonial history as claim to authority and expertise. This is an example of a colonized country participating in the democratized pay-to-play Nubia Campaign for the sake of material benefits, the antiquities that could be gained through participation in this campaign. British colonial expertise and leadership validated for UNESCO Indian abilities to make contributions to the Nubia Campaign, thereby allowing India to perpetuate this colonial history by claiming authority elsewhere in the Global South.

Soviet funding for the High Dam left American politicians conflicted about participating in the Nubia Campaign and thus reaping the material benefits like Dendur, or staying withdrawn in order to shed light on Soviet irresponsibility.<sup>xxv</sup> Nonetheless, in 1961, JFK pledged 12 million dollars to the Nubia Campaign. JFK wrote to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House saying that he based his decision off of the, "[belief] that the ancient and new components of human culture should blend in one harmonious whole. The United States, one of the newest of civilizations, has long had ... a special interest in the civilization of Ancient Egypt ... and a deep friendship with the people of the Nile Valley."<sup>xxvi</sup> His rationale in this letter reiterates Malraux's speech at UNESCO's House in Paris with the official narrative of participation in the Nubia Campaign being for the universal benefit of humanity and culture. As evidenced by the prior terms of Nasser's 'fifty-fifty' declaration, official narratives, especially those of universalism for the sake of civilization's benefit, work to camouflage the violence of a one-sided gifting relationship.

This episode has aimed to provide the historical background leading up to the relocation of the Temple of Dendur. Explaining the background context of these dams' history and closely analyzing the language surrounding the Nubia Campaign hopefully revealed how contentious politics and funding surrounding development has had far-reaching consequences. The



subsequent episode will build off of this historical background by looking further into the detrimental implications of the missing context of the inundation of Nubia and the displacement of the Nubian people.

## Episode 2 (Nubian Agency)

[music in] There is no such thing in school called the Nubian history. It's just history, even in history classes, when they refer to Nubian history, it is not fully credible. The process is known from the start and it is politically oriented. Even the construction of the dam itself was carried out without proper planning and in an inhuman manner. And the compensations that we have been granted were almost worthless. [music out]

That was Zakaria Tag El Sir, a Nubian musician, speaking to a French journalist about the forceful erasure of his history and society. Nubia is located between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile, a considerable amount of land between the modern day borders of Egypt and Sudan. For thousands of years, this area was inhabited by culturally, ethnically, and linguistically distinct groups living in villages on the banks of the Nile. Nubians did not regard themselves as part of a single ethnic category, but rather as “regionally based ethnic subgroups”.<sup>xxvii</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, however, all of these diverse groups were lumped together. British colonial rule in Egypt, as well as Egypt’s colonial relationship with Sudan left Nubians trapped in the middle of these political dynamics without representation, agency, or autonomy. Historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote extensively about how countries under the role of a colonial power, like Egypt, often replicate the behavior of their ruling colonial powers. Hobsbawm wrote, “For all governments and elites of countries faced with dependency or conquest, it had been clear for several decades that they had to westernize or go under.” Historian Albert Hourani has written about the success of westernization in the Middle East through the expansion of secularized Arabic schools, schools that taught students to be able to have discourse about sensitive political and cultural issues within a small, increasingly literate audience of their peers. In 2016, Tag El Sir opened a cultural center in Soheil, a Nubian inhabited island near Aswan, to transmit endangered cultural heritage by teaching Nubian children songs and tales in the dying Nubian language, and thereby claim agency to his history and culture.<sup>xxviii</sup> This episode aims to trace moments of Nubian claims to agency as a way to understand indigenous resistance to the pressures of colonialism. While this episode will not explicitly focus on the Temple of Dendur, it is my hope that the proximate context of Nubia rights and land issues will illuminate how discourses surrounding the Nubia Campaign and the politics of historical preservation overwrote the lives of an entire group of people.

It is important to note that Nubians were not involved in the planning of the High Dam, nor the Nubia Campaign. UNESCO’s archives make it clear that the experts involved with the archeological and engineering projects, as well as the UNESCO officials working on the campaign considered the Nubian population to be an external factor from the work that was being done.<sup>xxix</sup> Hassan Dalafa, the Sudanese official in charge of accounting for the emigration of the Sudanese Nubian population following the erection of the High Dam, wrote an anthropological/autobiographical book about his perspectives on this evacuation in 1975 entitled *The Nubian Exodus*. His book reveals how the Nubian population was factored into policy

decisions: he canvassed individuals, surveyed their opinions and anxieties about the campaign, but ultimately when it came time to make policy decisions about Sudan's role in the Nubia Campaign, Dalafa's authority within the Sudanese government and as a member of UNESCO's campaign team allowed him to make assured decisions about resettling the Nubian people and the reparations they would receive based solely on his expertise, rather than deferring to Nubian testimonial.<sup>xxx</sup> What is striking in Dalafa's book is how this erasure of Nubian agency stems from the rhetoric put forth by UNESCO's universalism. The Nubia Campaign was globally marketed as a necessary moment of humanitarian intervention: UNESCO's director general at the time, Vittorino Veronese, notably stated that, "It is not easy to choose between temples and crops. I would feel sorry for any man who is called upon to do so without a feeling of despair."<sup>xxxii</sup> Here we can see how UNESCO reproduced epistemological foundations for colonial violence by framing Nubia's inundation as a question of land and resources rather than human lives; this quote might as well be saying, there is no easy way to choose between land and crops, so we decided to ignore the plight of the Nubian people and ultimately opt to preserve and hold onto their antiquities, rather than preserve their livelihood.

Following the erection of the High Dam, Egyptian authorities began the forcible resettlement of Nubians to 'resettlement communities' in Southern Egypt. Nasser promised that following their resettlement, "the benefits that the Nubian people will enjoy are very great."<sup>xxxiii</sup> These benefits never came to fruition, as a lack of adequate housing and minimal state subsidies (often delayed in distribution) left most Nubians dissatisfied and living in poor conditions.

[Nubian confessional in Arabic (voiceover translation) from National Geographic] One year before I came here, I felt like we would quickly have a lot of family that would come here, available public services, and support from the government. They used to tell us, "There are no people in the village." But even if there is one person in the village, don't they still count? We are almost isolated right now. The hospital is not even open. We feel that there are only buildings and facilities. Take this dead thing and make it alive. Can I make it alive on my own? No, I can't.

Nubians were not consulted about the location and design of their new villages, which some of them deemed not 'culturally appropriate'.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Minimal efforts were made to safeguard the unique cultural characteristics of Nubian society, a society that naturally had clung to the Nile's distinct geographic and economic environment. For instance, the Egyptian government insisted that Nubian farmers turn to sugar cane crop production as a method of economic revitalization, ignoring the fact that sugar cane was not one of their traditional crops.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

[Nubian confessional in Arabic (voiceover translation) from National Geographic] We were forced to migrate in 1964. They brought us to the new village of Toshka Sharq. And this became our new home. We prepared for our future: the beds, the couches, the mattresses, and everything we owned to transfer it here. When we were leaving, we were all happy and excited to go and

live in the city. But as you can see... these are the houses we found. It was even worse. It was a wreck.

In 1993, renowned Nubian author (and activist) Idris Ali wrote *Dongala: A Novel of Nubia* to shed light on the ongoing historical atrocities occurring in Nubia. His writing addresses UNESCO and its universalism as an extractive, colonial compulsion that stole essential resources from the Nubian people. The novel's protagonist, Awad Shalili, demands legal vindication for the inundation of Nubia: "My homeland is the land of Nubia, which has been consumed by the pages of history. We were, but you made us not be. I have come to you to bring a lawsuit against the builders of the dam and the reservoir, and to seek my old borders, from Aswan to old Dongola, to establish a provisional government. (31)" He goes on to demand, "'Give us back our old homeland.' 'Give us land fit for planting.' 'Build us factories.' 'Pay us compensation equal to what we lost.' And he ultimately asks, 'Aren't we worth just as much as temples and statues?' (33-34)" For Shalili, it is impossible to point his finger at one person, government, or organization responsible for his statelessness: "He cursed the river that had surrendered to the dam, and he cursed the whole world, which had helped to save the temples, while leaving the people to their fate. (20)" Shalili blaming the whole world for these frustrations evidences the harm imposed by UNESCO's narrative of necessary, greater good: when the United Nations, a globally representative organization, came together to combat the damage caused by Lake Nasser, this organization prioritized the preservation of material objects rather than safeguarding the needs of people harmed by the same cause.

In the wake of Nasser's many nationalization projects and political tactics that strongly contributed to the rise of Pan-Arabism across the Arab World, 'Arab' was constructed as a contemporary ethnic category. Pan-Arabism represented an opportunity for citizens of the Arab World to come together and rebuke colonialism and imperialism, and to reclaim identity and history.<sup>xxxv</sup> Here is Mohamed Abdel Wahab, prolific Egyptian singer, performing *Watini al-Akbar* (My Grand Nation), an ode to the theoretical united Arab super-state that could stretch from Morocco all the way to Iraq. Many of the Arab world's most prolific singers came together on stage for this performance:

[Mohamed Abdel Wahab audio]

Arab nationalist projects and early formulations of Arab unity also became increasingly interwoven by way of solidarity with Palestinian Arabs reconciling European Zionists buying and stealing land from Palestinians to establish a separate and independent state on their land.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Nonetheless, Pan-Arabism was not an all-encompassing project for everyone residing in the Arab world. Historian Osama Abi-Mershed writes that there are three dimensions to Arab identity: a common language, a shared history with shared cultural values, historical references, and lived context, as well as a willingness to be defined as Arab.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Christian Arabs, Jewish Arabs, Kurds, Amazighs, and Nubians, amongst others, cannot always be confined into these

dimensions. Listen to Nubian Historian, Dr. Muhammed Arabi, explain why Nubian blackness is contested within this Arab ethnic category.

[Dr. Arabi] Egyptians are black. The real Egyptians are black because the real Egyptians, we are real Africans. So those people in Lower Egypt you see in Cairo, Alexandria, and Felaheens area, they are mixed between the Turks, Mamluks, French, English, Romans. So those people who come to attack Egypt in that time, they couldn't come to Upper Egypt to the south, which we still have the same color, our dark color, our black color. So they couldn't mix with us.

Article 1 of Egypt's 1971 constitution states that, "Egyptian people are part of the Arab Nation and work for the realization of its comprehensive unity." This article leaves ethnic and racial minorities, as well as immigrant and indigenous groups without formal, constitutional representation. This is the same constitution that recognized Arabic as the *only* state language, overlooking indigenous languages like Nubian. Nubians in Egypt had come to exist in a liminal space, not necessarily in opposition to national identity, but still subject to anti-black racism. Racism in the context of Nubia cannot be thought about anachronistically; as philosopher Etienne Balibar has written, "There is not merely a *single* invariant racism but a number of racisms, forming a broad, open spectrum of situations. A determinate racist configuration has no fixed frontiers; it is a stage in a development which its own latent potentialities, as well as historical circumstances and the relations of force within the social formation, will shunt around within the spectrum of possible racisms."<sup>xxxviii</sup> He proceeds to identify there to be a plethora of racisms, between institutions, nations, ethnic groups, and communities. Egyptian nationalists had used categorical Arabic terms like 'abid (slave), barbari (Berber or barbarian), nubian (Nubian), arabi (Arab), and sudani (Sudanese) to establish a hierarchy of political and economic relations from one end of the Nile Valley to the other.<sup>xxxix</sup> This hierarchy maintains stigma and violence against black Nubians throughout Egypt. This is evidenced by popular representations of Nubian characters in film frequently being cast as one dimensional servants, drivers, doormen, or housekeepers.<sup>xl</sup> Some landlords in Egypt will not rent to Sudanese or Nubian tenants.<sup>xli</sup> Idris Ali's 2005 largely autobiographical *Below the Poverty Line: A Novel* explores the question of Nubian as Arab identity through a scene depicting a group of Nubian villagers complaining to a local government official about their land rights. One of these villagers says, "This is Nubian land," to which the official responds, "And what are you?" "We're Nubians," they say. "No, you're Egyptians, like I am," counters the official. They retort, "If we were Egyptians, you wouldn't have treated us this way." In this passage, Ali demonstrates the precarity of Nubian blackness within Egyptian society. While Ali spent his life writing novels, he also worked for a construction company making ends meet, and survived a number of suicide attempts. In considering his financial turmoil, the state of his mental health, and the unchanging theme of these two novels written almost a decade apart, we can see the extent of the detriments caused by the erection of these dams and the subsequent international Nubia Campaign. Instances of Nubian displacement since turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are ongoing and continual. In 2004, for

example, the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture revealed its plans to sell areas of land across Nubia to non-Nubian, wealthy property developers.<sup>xlii</sup>

Many Nubians view the structure of this ongoing statelessness as a question of indigenous colonialism. Discussing Nubian identity as that of indigeneity, however, is controversial, as some Nubian activists have pushed back against this identification. In 2010, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) submitted a proposal to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHRC) to request that the Nubian people be granted ‘international legal status’ as indigenous people and amends be made to the Egyptian constitution stipulating a recognition of rights and existence to the Nubian people. Support for ECHR’s proposal wavered in Nubian circles. Some worried that an acknowledgment of indigeneity would posit Nubian identity in opposition to that of Egyptian identity, creating the potential for the Nubian people to lose access to state benefits. Others feared that an official government acknowledgement of indigeneity would subsume Nubian culture into Egyptian society without the financial or material reparations. One activist noted, “Would we lose more than we benefit if we framed our demands as an indigenous people... What happened after the declaration of indigeneity? Nothing. We need more than recognition. More than papers.”<sup>xliii</sup>

The 2016 and 2017 Dakota Access Pipeline protests in North Dakota served as an opportunity for displaced Nubians to amplify their voices by finding overlap in a comparable human rights atrocity. Nubian organizers began an online solidarity campaign with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.<sup>xliiv</sup> Both the Aswan High Dam and the Dakota Access Pipeline optimize the violence inherent to the tactic of colonial occupation being framed as necessary national sacrifices to the displaced and affected indigenous groups. Rather, both Nubian and Sioux access to land, water, air, essential resources, and spiritual relationships with the subjected land was deemed a necessary sacrifice for the sake of national energy resources.

[‘water is life’ chant from Standing Rock protest]

By wielding the logic of development, both the American and Egyptian governments were able to justify indigenous displacement. Nonetheless, borderless networks of anti-imperialist solidarity that are able to find common ground have much radical potential. When Egypt colonized Sudan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ‘protection of minorities’ was used as a justification for their occupation. By defining the nation as a sanctuary for minorities, the Egyptian government has been able to regard any advocacy for the recognition of distinct or unique minority identity as a threat to national security.<sup>xliv</sup> Through this historical legacy, the Egyptian government has been successful in quelling and controlling the tides of minority politics, harshly penalizing groups that promote ethnic autonomy. Thus, this moment of international solidarity is incredibly hopeful, as it reveals a fragmentation in the identification of two, parallel indigenous land rights issues that evidence the constant global threat of white supremacy in tandem with imperial capitalism. While calls for the return of land to both Sioux and Nubian people do not

threaten an authoritarian power's military grip, they do complicate and begin to destabilize established politically and socially heterogeneous power structures internationally.

I also write about this instance of solidarity to address history not as a static monolithic past, but as an ongoing, temporal present. This instance of solidarity recognizes settler colonialism as something that is structural and globally connected, rather than temporal and circumstantial. The structure of settler colonialism relies upon the existence of land as property, where inhabitants' relationships with their land exists as a state of precarity under the whims of their land's owner.

[Nubian confessional in Arabic (voiceover translation) from National Geographic] If the dams didn't exist, the Nubians wouldn't have been dispersed. The Nubians made a great sacrifice for Egypt. Because when we look around, we see all the people with their families except for us. Except us, the Nubians who were dispersed everywhere. I hope that what we call the dream will come true. Will it turn out like how we were dispersed outside of Nubia? One here, one there, and so on. Or will we reunite again? I don't know...

Today, the Temple of Dendur stands in the MET with no indication or signage detailing this violent history. I felt it necessary to write this history into the podcast, as Nubian lives are written out of this temple's official history, subsumed by the MET's grand display and curation. The curation of the temple is a tactical reminder of how we are fed history through the logic of curation and museum education.

The following episode will look more closely at the ideology of universalism and museum education through curation. How has the temple come to function as a political tool, and what about the temple allows it to be used as such?

### Episode 3 (Universalism)

In 1978, Steve Martin made an appearance on SNL to perform his new song King Tut.

[(music intro) King Tut. Now, when he was a young man, he never thought he'd see people stand in line to see the boy, King Tut.]

In 1922 in the Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt, King Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered nearly intact, however, most Americans did not see the contents of the tomb until *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* became a touring museum show that began in 1977, and continued until 1979. The 1922 discovery induced a zeitgeist of 'Egyptomania', an American obsession with the cultural consumption of Ancient Egypt.<sup>xlvi</sup> Steve Martin's song becoming a hit single is evidence of how this touring exhibit replicated this obsession by way of a museum exhibit. By analyzing this exhibition tour and breaking down the fascination it created, is my hope that illuminating the context and political stakes involved in the curation of this touring exhibition will allow us to rethink the language and politics of curation within the Temple of Dendur and its display. Both *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* and The Temple of Dendur's respective displays and exhibits provide context into the ways museum education and the state are interested in teaching the public to see, teaching the public to understand art in certain ways and thereby using that understanding as a way to leverage other political interests.

*The Treasures of Tutankhamun* toured for nearly three years across the United States, with more than seven million people having viewed the 55 object exhibit.<sup>xlvii</sup> It remains one of the most viewed museum exhibitions in history. Here is a CBS news clip from 1978 about the exhibit:

[news clip] Ancient Egypt's 18th dynasty, which Tutankhamun ruled for nine years, was a time of tremendous expansion and productivity, a glorious time, especially in the arts and religion. The Tutankhamun Collection is fifty-five pieces of truly remarkable religious art from the tomb of the boy king, who assumed power at the age of nine and who died at 18. The most striking single piece in the collection is a solid gold mask, which was placed directly over the bandaged face of Tut's mummy. It is considered to be a very close likeness of the king, and it is majestic, impeccably detailed, with carnelian lapis lazuli, quartz and colored glass inlays. The collection, of course, is priceless. Its historical value immeasurable. It is of the highest degree. These are simple descriptions of the treasures. What's difficult to describe is the sensation of having seen them.

The language used in this news clip proves this exhibit's ability to educate audiences. Phrases like 'immeasurable historical value' and 'of the highest degree' evidence that this exhibit's intended narrative aestheticized the antiquities on display as 'universal art', antiquities capable of being appreciated by all viewers, as the art is too precious and too human to belong to a single people or a single nation. Having CBS, a major news outlet, describe this exhibit in such a way



reveals how the curation team marketed the exhibit in terms of universalism, emphasizing the art's quality and priceless nature to the media. The layout of the exhibit was structured according to the archeological plot designed by Howard Carter, the archeologist who discovered Tut's tomb. Visitors moving through the exhibit saw photos of Carter and read his descriptions of objects. These descriptions used language like "delicate, superb craftsmanship", "graceful and realistic" quality, and "incredible style and perfection" to describe the antiquities on display.<sup>xlvi</sup> In this language, we can see history serving as a frame for the art, a way to admire and understand the art in its current context, rather than showing the violent, imperial history that allowed the antiquities to be on display at the museum in the first place. Before *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* began touring the U.S., Thomas Hoving, the then director of the MET and a lead curator of this exhibit, visited Cairo to select items for the museum's collection. On this visit, he chose objects that he felt (quote unquote) "looked great." In fact, the MET's Egyptian curator "tried to point out what was important or not from the Egyptological point of view, but [Hoving] didn't listen." Hoving said, and I quote, "I knew what I wanted."<sup>xlix</sup> The value associated with pieces from this tomb stemmed from Hoving's authority within the museum, and was a factor of Hoving's taste, or what Hoving regarded as important or quality. Historian Melani McAlister writes that, "The discovery of the Tut tomb was rendered significant not because of what it told Americans about the "other" but because of what it uncovered – what it rescued in universal art."<sup>l</sup> The discovery of Tut's tomb did not represent an opportunity for Americans to gain a better, deeper understanding of Egypt's history and past, but rather represented an opportunity for Americans in power to claim agency to this history through the practice of curation.

Claiming agency to this history was not solely an interest of those in the art world. Before agreeing to house *The Treasures of Tutankhamun*, the MET's chair of the board, Douglas Dillon, was hesitant to take on the responsibility of safeguarding such precious objects. Dillon received a phone call from Henry Kissinger, secretary of state at the time, informing him that this touring exhibit would be a "vital part of the Middle East peace process," and that if the MET did not go through with organizing the exhibit, the federal government would be "disturbed".<sup>li</sup> As the negotiations surrounding this exhibit were occurring, the Egyptian and Israeli governments were simultaneously struggling to resolve Palestinian land disputes over the Sinai Peninsula and the West Bank.<sup>lii</sup> Wanting to maintain political influence in Egypt to have the power to aid US ally Israel, Kissinger viewed *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* as an opportunity to gain favor with the Egyptian government. This is all occurring about one year before the Camp David Accords. Dillon interpreted Kissinger's warning of disturbance as a threat; he feared that if the MET did not take on this show, the museum may permanently lose all federal funding.<sup>liii</sup> This threat from a major political leader at the highest denomination of America's foreign policy apparatus reveals how big the stakes of exhibiting these antiquities were.

You may be wondering, 'Okay, well while I can see what you are saying about the greater political stakes involved in the curation of this exhibit, what is so dangerous about a touring

museum exhibit? Can't we just admire this art?' Let's put the logic of universalism into a dangerous political context. In 2014, secretary of state John Kerry delivered a speech broadcasted nationally, standing in front of the Temple of Dendur at the MET to announce imminent drone strikes on ISIS/ISIL in Syria. Listen to how he began his speech:

[John Kerry] Thank you very, very much for hosting us all here at this rather remarkable gathering in this absolutely extraordinary location for which we thank the Egyptians for their generosity and Augustus for his creativity. It's a pretty special backdrop for anybody. This remarkable institution has given millions of people the opportunity to learn about our collective past and to share some of the finest examples of human achievement on the planet.

Defining Dendur as one of the finest examples of human achievement on the planet mirrors the language of universal artistic appeal used to describe *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* in the CBS news clip, and the exhibit's exhibition descriptions. Beginning his speech by crediting Augustus, a white, European conqueror, Kerry erases Nubian agency from the inception and creation of this temple, and is thereby able to claim the temple as a product of *his* civilization, a civilization being threatened by ISIS's violent acts of cultural devastation that is comparably less destructive. Kerry proceeds to use the logic of universal artistic appeal as a justification these drone strikes:

[John Kerry] We gather in the midst of one of the most tragic and one of the most outrageous assaults on our shared heritage that perhaps any of us have seen in a lifetime. Ancient treasures in Iraq and Syria have now become the casualties of continuing warfare and looting, and no one group has done more to put our shared cultural heritage in the gun sights than ISIL. ISIL is not only beheading individuals. It is tearing at the fabric of whole civilizations. It has no respect for life. It has no respect for religion and it has no respect for culture. These appalling acts aren't just a tragedy for the Syrian and the Iraqi people. These acts of vandalism are a tragedy for all civilized people, and the civilized world must take a stand. Each artifact tells a story, a human story, our story. How shocking and historically shameful it would be if we did nothing while the forces of chaos rob the very cradle of our civilization? That is profoundly what is at stake, and if you leave it unstopped, if you don't stand up, we're all complicit. I want you to know that President Obama and our administration are laser-focused on protecting the cultural heritage of countries all around the world. Our heritage is literally in peril in this moment. And we believe it is imperative that we act now, we do so knowing that our leadership, the leadership of the United States can make a difference and that the fight to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria isn't just about shared values, it's about protecting a shared legacy. Thank you for being a part of this tonight – this reminder of our values and this reminder of our connectedness and reminder of our responsibility. Thank you.

Standing in front of Dendur, a prime example of cultural heritage that *needed* to be saved by America, Kerry is implicitly able to articulate the ways in which both Dendur and his political actions are representative of universal civilian benefit. For the Obama administration, the Dendur

backdrop serves to prove America's ability to protect a globally shared legacy of history, culture, and art. Having successfully preserved the Temple of Dendur, Kerry is able to assuredly say that by drone striking Syria, America would be doing the world a favor on behalf of civilization. In this way, we can see how these tactical decisions to use antiquities and art as a way to educate the public is detrimental in shaping American perceptions of foreign relations. Galvanizing American support of these drone strikes by shedding light on ISIS/ISIL's acts of cultural devastation is also dangerous in so far as it draws attention to these acts and generates additional motivation to continue to annihilate cultural heritage. This is particularly unfortunate considering heritage sites, in the Global South especially, can serve as major sources of economic opportunity via tourism.<sup>liv</sup>

Further, ISIS is not responsible for the majority of antiquities looting that occurs in Syria.<sup>lv</sup> While I did not include Kerry's speech in full, throughout this speech he repeats false and misleading claims about the extent of cultural devastation caused by ISIS, and conveniently ignores significant threats to cultural heritage posed by groups other than ISIS.<sup>lvi</sup> For instance, John Kerry had nothing to say about U.S. ally Saudi Arabia's bombing of Yemen's historic architecture.<sup>lvii</sup> Before the US military's occupation of Iraq in 2003, government officials were repeatedly warned about the potential to damage irreplaceable artifacts from bombs and missiles, as well as post-war instability after the removal of the Iraqi government.<sup>lviii</sup> The National Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad was one of the largest storehouses of materials and artifacts from Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Persian civilizations, and following the American occupation, eighty percent of the items stored in this institution were either stolen or destroyed.<sup>lix</sup> When a group of museum directors and scholars visited the Pentagon to explain the significance of this museum and its antiquities, the American government claimed to be taken by surprise. Here are two members of the Bush administration responding to this group's outcries:

[‘stuff happens’ audio]

The historical preservation of antiquities and heritage sites is not important to American politicians. Rather, questions of preservation become important when economic and political interests of the countries in which these historical sites and antiquities are located have shifting relationships with the American government. At these junctures, these sites and antiquities can either become a factor worth overlooking and destroying, or serve as a catalyst to represent a universalism that binds and unites our shared, global civilization. The discourse surrounding these material objects and structures is noisy, and directs the public to overlook the human lives at stake. No act of cultural devastation should serve as a justification for drone strikes and further violence.

## Episode 4 (Counter Mapping)

Environmental scientist and sociologist Nancy Peluso coined the term ‘counter mapping’ in 1995 as a way for indigenous communities to appropriate the state’s techniques of defining geography and making their own maps.<sup>lx</sup> This episode aims to counter map the Dendur temple’s accepted geographies through a critical analysis of some of the spaces it has occupied.

After John F. Kennedy’s administration pledged sixteen million dollars to contribute to the relocation of antiquities in the Nubia Campaign, there were many factors to consider in the logistics of Egypt gifting this temple to the U.S. Moving the temple was an incredibly challenging and expensive task. Costing the American government nearly 10 million dollars, the temple had to be broken down into 642 different blocks that weighed nearly 800 tons, with some individual blocks weighing nearly seven tons themselves.<sup>lxi</sup> These blocks were packed into crates and transported through the Mediterranean, across the Atlantic on a freighter ship. While the logistics of this expensive transportation endeavor were being determined, a number of American museums and institutions were vying to house the temple. This contestation was dubbed by the media and press as “the Dendur Derby”.<sup>lxii</sup> A presidential commission, led by Lyndon B. Johnson, --- JFK was suddenly assassinated shortly before the beginning of the derby --- was responsible for determining where the temple would be displayed. Museums in Memphis, Tennessee and Cairo, Illinois leveraged the Egyptian names of their cities as grounds for deserving the temple. This nomenclature, however, was not enough of a considerable factor for the presidential commission.<sup>lxiii</sup> Both the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Washington D.C.’s Smithsonian Institution presented plans to display Dendur on the side of the Charles River and the Potomac, respectively. One critic feared that, “Outside of their natural setting they will not look like much. And probably they will not hold up well away from a desert climate... An ideal site would be the Arizona desert, except there no one would see it.”<sup>lxiv</sup> Dendur’s blocks are made of sandstone, a material that wind and water swiftly deteriorate. Considering the temporal quality of this material, Thomas Hoving, then director of the MET, suggested that the temple should be housed inside of a museum away from the natural elements. Hoving hired a team of corporate, A-list architects to draw up plans for a new wing of the museum, that would emulate the temple’s original environment. The proposal described the space as a ‘glass case’ encompassing a water concourse, Nile reeds, and strong light sources that would mimic the Egyptian Sun.<sup>lxv</sup> In response to this immaculate proposal, the presidential committee decided to cede the temple to the MET, officially stating that, “there was no way of guaranteeing the preservation of the temple out-of-doors and the museum obviously had the financial resources to maintain it properly.”<sup>lxvi</sup> Today you can see a manifestation of this proposal in the MET’s Sackler Wing, named after the exhibit’s primary benefactors, the Sackler Family.

However, in 1967, after the temple had been awarded to the MET, but before the temple had been installed in the Sackler Wing, Harlem CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality’s New York

Chapter, advocated that as a product of African and Nubian culture, Dendur should be displayed in Harlem or Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn.<sup>lxvii</sup> To learn more about the implications of CORE's advocacy for the relocation of this temple, I spoke with L.E.J. Rachell (he also goes by EJ), whose parents were members of Harlem CORE:

[EJ] So CORE, which is short for the Congress of Racial Equality, was one of the most significant organizations of the civil rights and black power movements. It was the first of the nonviolent direct action groups, and it introduced many of the tactics, techniques, and strategies that have come to characterize the civil rights movement as we know it. CORE, from the beginning, existed to fight against racial discrimination, specifically to get rid of the Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation. You can see the influence that CORE as an organization and its movement had on many of the other major social justice groups and movements that followed from SNCC to the SCLC to the Panthers, the Young Lords, the feminists, gay rights, environmentalist movements to the more recent Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movement.

Considering CORE's influence as a civil rights organization, their advocacy for the temple to be placed in a location emblematic of blackness, occupied by black people, speaks to the magnitude of the temple's iconographic significance and the power its symbolism held. Asserting race within Egypt's pharaonic history has been a point of historical contention between black and white historians. Egyptology as an academic discipline has historically led Egyptologists, archeologists, classicists, anthropologists, and scholars of other disciplines to steadfastly assert that the Pharaonic Egyptians were white.<sup>lxviii</sup> In 1832, for example, German historian A. H. L. Hareen analyzed lineaments of Egyptian sculptures' faces to claim that their features were white, rather than black.<sup>lxix</sup> Nonetheless, many early black historians rejected these types of assertions. In 1848, British abolitionist Wilson Armistead described black people as 'parents of Egyptian civilization'. He cited the Greek historian Herodotus who had spent time writing about his travels in Egypt and Ethiopia in 400 BC, in which he noted the amount of black Ethiopian sovereigns living in Egypt.<sup>lxx</sup> My aim in describing the contested racialization of the Pharaonic Egyptians is not to assert one way or another if they should be thought of as black or white, but rather to point out the significance of claiming history in these ways. CORE's advocacy for this temple's relocation mirrors Armistead's historical framing of blackness. For CORE, advocating that the temple should be made a cultural centerpiece of Harlem or Bed-Stuy represented an opportunity for black residents of these neighborhoods to be able to express pride and admiration for the achievements of their ancestors. These are the same ancestors who white historians had often claimed to be descendent. EJ emphasized the importance of drawing this connection in black communities:

[EJ] Ancient Egypt is something that's an element of popular culture in black communities. It sort of speaks to a larger issue of the role that Africans played in the history of the world. And its purposeful erasure from American and Western school systems and the way the history is taught

there, is seen as part of an effort overall to support racism and justify slavery. It's about inspiration, the connection that would have been made between a people who are supposed to be on the lowest level of humanity to one of the greatest civilizations in human history. Right. Inspiration.

EJ emphasizes the power of this temple to inspire visitors and onlookers. In the same way that this temple being located in these historically black New York neighborhoods could inspire individuals seeking a physical connection to their ancestry and heritage, by standing in the MET, the temple maintains the historically accepted notion of ancient Egypt being a white society. This racialization of ancient Egypt is manifested in the physical layout of the Met's exhibits. The Sackler Wing and Egyptian art collections are separated from the 'Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas' exhibits, occupying opposite sides of the museum. There is no way to be in the MET and walk directly from the Egyptian exhibits to the African exhibits without passing first through another exhibit or the lobby. This geographic divide severs Egypt from Africa, and claims Egypt's purportedly universal art as a product of the western civilization on display elsewhere in the museum, just not in the 'Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas' exhibits. While it may seem passive or apolitical, this physical division is intentional; museumgoers are intended to think about ancient Egypt's art as universal, beautiful and astounding for all audiences.

In 2018, visual artist Nan Goldin challenged the apolitical universalism Dendur has come to represent by staging a public protest with the activist group PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) in the Sackler Wing. Purdue Pharma, the pharmaceutical company that developed and released the painkiller OxyContin in 1995, is owned principally by the Sackler Family, the same benefactors who principally financed the wing of the museum in which Dendur stands. Since OxyContin's release, nearly half a million people have died from overdoses involving opioids, and these numbers have continued to rise due to a recent influx of fentanyl and synthetic opioids.<sup>lxxi</sup> Purdue Pharma has also been criticized for actively marketing OxyContin to doctors and convincing them to prescribe it to patients.<sup>lxxii</sup> Goldin previously developed an opioid addiction after being prescribed OxyContin for a wrist surgery. In a personal essay about her struggle with this substance abuse disorder, Goldin wrote, "I SURVIVED THE OPIOID CRISIS. I narrowly escaped. I went from the darkness and ran full speed into The World. I was isolated, but I realized I wasn't alone. When I got out of treatment I became absorbed in reports of addicts dropping dead from my drug, OxyContin. I learned that the Sackler family, whose name I knew from museums and galleries, were responsible for the epidemic. This family formulated, marketed, and distributed OxyContin. I decided to make the private public by calling them to task."<sup>lxxiii</sup> Goldin did so by gathering 100 demonstrators in the Sackler Wing unveiling banners that read "Fund Rehab" and "Shame on Sackler". They also threw pill bottles into the reflecting pool, staged a die-in, and chanted:

[protest audio]

Goldin and protestors asked to see the Sackler heirs put what would be ‘cultural funding’ towards solving the opioid crisis and funding rehabilitation for victims of opioid addiction. When the Temple of Dendur was moved to the MET in place of other environmentally precarious sites, there was no expectation that the temple would ever be moved again, safeguarded in place by funding from the Sackler family. The notion of permanence and universalism inherent to this temple’s grand display, however, is destabilized by this type of protest that brings into question the ethics of funding and grant making. A member of the Sackler family responded to Goldin’s protest saying, “for anyone to assert that institutions received “tainted” gifts is ludicrous. Passing judgment on Arthur [Sackler’s] life’s work through the lens of the opioid crisis some 30 years after his death is a gross injustice. It denies the many important contributions he made working to improve world health and to build cultural bridges between peoples.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> While the temple’s display is intended to represent the positive outcomes of a global act of working together for the greater good of art, this protest reclassifies the space in which this temple stands as representative of a global splintering society, ignoring the plight of certain humans (in this case opioid users) and thereby disrupting the imposing vision of heritage universalism. While Goldin may not have been attempting to make this criticism, I argue that her protest reveals how Dendur *is* a tainted gift; this temple standing in New York City is a factor of America’s imperial relationship with Egypt, upheld by an institution that accepts dirty money and maintains curation that does not historicize the violence that surrounds its existence.

At this point in the podcast, you may be wondering what can be done to further destabilize the paradigms that allow this temple to stand in the MET? Decolonize this Place actively works to disrupt hierarchical power imbalances at private institutions in urban spaces by using an abolitionist framework. Their mission statement cites the critical theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney who together write, it’s “the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> In thinking about abolition in terms of the museum, Decolonize this Place has launched a campaign called Strike MoMA (the museum of modern art). Here is a mission statement for their protest of the MoMA:

Art is not a luxury, and it is a vital part of our communities and movements. Art is one of the few means of production available to oppressed peoples for the creation and sustaining of worlds in the face of death and destruction. The aesthetic forms and imaginative powers of art require material support: economies of solidarity, platforms of cooperation, infrastructures of care and mutual aid. But the political economy of the art system is antithetical to these life-affirming practices. It is predicated on property, scarcity, competition, and assimilation. One canon. One center. One meta-narrative of modernity, however diversified and globalized it may have become. It is governed by gatekeepers, critics, and canon-makers who try to create the measure by which art lives or dies, giving access to a select few while leaving the rest with the false choice between eating and making art. It doesn’t have to be this way. There is no blueprint for dismantling MoMA, but here is the starting point: whatever comes after MoMA, it must preserve

and enhance the jobs of museum workers, and enact reparative measures for communities harmed by the museum over time, beginning with the legacy of land dispossession. The agenda is open, but any path forward must be premised on the acknowledgement of debts owed: from top to bottom and horizontally too, between and within groups, communities, and movements. We need a just transition to a post-MoMA future. MoMA has been a toxic force, but there can be growth and healing in the aftermath of toxicity. May a thousand mushrooms bloom in the ruins of the modern museum.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

I think this final quote is the perfect place to end this podcast. Instead of looking to the question of repatriation, or investigating if this temple should be returned to Egypt, I find Decolonize This Place's idea of transitional healing to be more worthwhile. Dendur would not be able to return to Nubia on the banks of the Nile, as the physical circumstances of Lake Nasser, as well as the organic cultural environment of the original location have been shaped by time and history. While we have no control over the historical atrocities of our past, we need to constantly be rethinking the histories that we are told critically, and by doing so we can look forward to the future as potential for growth and healing. None of us can assuredly what will happen to Dendur in the future, however, it is my hope that this podcast illuminated Dendur's past as a way to reconcile its present state and identified the danger of accepting popular narratives.

Thank you for listening.



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<sup>xviii</sup> Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

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<sup>xx</sup> Mauss, Marcel (2002). The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchanges in Archaic Societies p. 4

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<sup>xxii</sup> Allais. p. 192

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