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MUSEUMS AS AGENTS OF COLONIAL TRAUMA: THE SILENT TESTIMONY OF A WESTERN LOWLAND GORILLA

MUSEUS COMO AGENTES DE TRAUMA COLONIAL: O TESTEMUNHO SILENCIOSO DE UM GORILA DAS PLANÍCIES OCIDENTAIS

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ABSTRACT

After gorillas were scientifically identified in the mid-19th century, it led to a 'race' to collect them for museums via colonial exploitative systems of nature for profit. Gorillas were hunted, dismembered, and forcibly brought to colonizing countries as 'scientific specimens'. This paper documents a male gorilla who suffered at least two acts of violence for science, which ultimately resulted in his death. His remains were sold to an American museum in 1955, where they remain to this day. This individual testifies to the traumatic role museums played in the lives of gorillas. Besides the killing of gorillas, hunting may also disrupted the social structure and well-being of the surviving troop. The continuous retention of gorilla remains in Europe and North America perpetuates colonialism, and thus, this paper urges the need for further decolonization among natural history museums.

KEYWORDS

Colonialism, Colonial history, Scientific Exploitation, Trauma, Wildlife Trade

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RESUMO

Após os gorilas serem cientificamente identificados em meados do século XIX, iniciou-se uma 'corrida' para coletá-los para museus através de sistemas coloniais de exploração da natureza para fins lucrativos. Gorilas foram caçados, desarticulados e transportados para países colonizadores como "espécimens científicos". Este artigo documenta um gorila macho que sofreu pelo menos dois atos de violência em nome da ciência, o que resultou, por fim, em sua morte. Os remanescentes deste gorila foram vendidos a um museu americano em 1955, onde permanecem até hoje. Este indivíduo testemunha o papel traumático que os museus tiveram nos gorilas. Além da morte dos gorilas, a caça também pode ter influenciado a estrutura social e o bem-estar do grupo sobrevivente. A retenção de remanescentes de gorilas na Europa e América do Norte perpetua o colonialismo. Por último, este artigo discute a necessidade de descolonização dos museus de história natural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Colonialismo, História colonial, Exploração científica, Trauma, Tráfico de vida selvagem

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTIGO

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Colonial exploitation of gorillas for science by the Global North: A brief introduction

The term 'gorilla' first appears around the sixth and fifth centuries BCE during a colonizing expedition by Carthaginians to the western coast of Africa (NEWMAN, 2013). Carthaginians mentioned an island inhabited by wild, hairy people, which the interpreter called 'gorillas' (GROVES, 2003, p. 15; NEWMAN, 2013; AMIR, 2019, p. 6). It is not possible to discern what the Carthaginians were referring to, as the account was recorded centuries after the expedition and bore little resemblance to gorillas (GROVES, 2003, p. 15; NEWMAN, 2013). Until 1847, other fantastical accounts of a giant ape in Africa's tropical forests circulated among Western countries for centuries (PATTERSON, 1974, p. 662; NEWMAN, 2013; HERZFELD, 2017). In the 19th century, the gorilla was scientifically recognized as a distinct species and introduced to the Western world, when classified and named as *Troglodytes gorilla*[1] in 1847 by Thomas Savage (SAVAGE, 1847), an American Protestant clergyman and naturalist. In his communication on the scientific classification of gorillas, SAVAGE (1847, p. 245) also mentioned that natives in the Gabon River called gorillas *Engēena*. Although neither had ever seen a living gorilla, Thomas Savage and Jeffries Wyman - who collaborated to describe gorillas scientifically – identified them[2] as a separated species from chimpanzees based on incomplete skeletal remains of four western lowland gorillas and oral descriptions provided by natives to Savage (SAVAGE and WYMAN, 1847; CONNIFF, 2009, p. 57).

When gorillas were formally introduced to the Western scientific community, racism was a prevalent component linked to pseudoscience and colonial imperialism. Like other ape species, gorillas were compared to African people, and their similarities and differences to humans became a central topic not only among the scientific community but also in public discourse, tabloid news, art, and sideshows across America and Europe, often embroiled in misrepresentations and embellished accounts by hunters as 'ferocious beasts', (PATTERSON, 1974, p. 662-663; GROOVES, 2003, p. 18; CONNIFF, 2009, p. 59-60; NEWMAN, 2013; HERZFELD, 2017). This led to further expeditions to hunt and capture gorillas, not only for academic institutions and/or museums but also for trophy hunting, zoos, and circuses across Europe and North America (NEWMAN, 2013). Hunting of gorillas was seen by the colonizers as a necessary act for science (MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957, p. 13). During colonial imperialism, three main routes for capturing gorillas were in place. Scientific expeditions were carried out by European and American academic institutions and/or museums to kill and collect gorillas (GREGORY and RAVE, 1936; GORDON et al., 2013), such as the George Vanderbilt African Expedition of the Academy of Natural Science of Philadelphia in 1934 (COOLIDGE JR., 1936). Hunting excursions to capture gorillas for sale to Museums and universities

[1] Since Savage (1847), the number and naming of gorilla species have changed over time, with subsequent classifications mainly based on osteological data (GROOVES, 2003; AMIR, 2019, p. 3). With genetic information alongside phenotypical data, the current consensus is of two species and 4 subspecies of gorillas: *Gorilla gorilla gorilla, Gorilla gorilla diehli, Gorilla beringei graueri, Gorilla beringei beringei* (GROOVES, 2003; GORDON et al., 2013, p. 4-5). However, debate continues among the scientific community regarding gorillas' specific and subspecific variation (MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 200).

[2] The word 'it' was not used to refer to gorillas in this paper because I recognize their right to be respected, not just as living beings, but as cognitive and emotional individuals, rather than objects.

were also conducted by amateur fieldworkers, independent hunters, and commercial companies (MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957; GORDON et al., 2013; NEWMAN, 2013; MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 207). Additionally, hunters, collectors, and missionaries bought or took gorilla remains from locals to resell for profit to Western institutions (MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957, p. 101-102; PATTERSON, 1974, p. 655; NEWMAN, 2013). While the capture of living gorillas for zoos and circuses usually targeted infants and juveniles, which often involved killing their mother and other members of the troop (NEWMAN, 2013). Gorillas were killed and captured using a variety of tools, such as firearms, spears, crossbows, machetes, snare traps, and poisoned arrows (MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957; COOLIDGE JR., 1936, p. 491; GREGORY and RAVE, 1936). Although Westerners relied on the Knowledge and labor of the natives to locate, capture, and transport gorillas during hunting and scientific expeditions, most of that knowledge was ultimately dismissed and marginalized as inaccurate and subjective among the scientific community, fueled by elitism, racism, and colonial authority (CORREA, 2015; AMIR, 2019, p. 2). Some white male hunters even glorified themselves as empathetic towards the gorillas, claiming they were not cruel to gorillas during hunting excursions and justified their actions in the name of science, while racially perceiving native hunters as being vicious for engaging in the same practices (e.g., MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957). In the 1950s, gorilla hunting started to face growing criticism from conservationists. Leading to the stipulation that gorillas could only be hunted with a license granted under special conditions at the International Conference for the Protection of African Fauna, held in Bukavu in 1953 (MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957, p. 81; NEWMAN, 2013). Hunting gorillas without a license became illegal, even though, in reality, the license requirement was slowly implemented over time (NEWMAN, 2013).

Many collections of non-human primates, including gorillas, established during colonial times are still housed in Europe and North America, more so than in the Global South (GORDON et al., 2013, p. 5), due to an exploitative colonial system of nature with ramifications in place today. For example, out of 157 North American institutions, 71 have wild-caught primates in their collections (ALBRECHT, 1982, p. 78). This is reflected in the fact that most of the scientific community still values documenting wild-caught primates, more so than captive-born individuals, for morphological, systematic, and evolutionary studies. In addition, various non-human primate species in osteological collections are currently endangered, including gorillas and, in some cases, originate from habitats where these primates no longer live (GORDON et al., 2013, p. 2), in part due to hunting and logging industries during colonial times (AMIR, 2019, p. 4). Currently, heavy regulations also constrain the collection of primates' remains due to poaching and infectious diseases (MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 200). Placing an even greater value on colonial collections of non-human primates among scientists, including gorillas.

This paper presents a case study on multiple acts of human violence and trauma inflicted on a male gorilla within a larger network of wildlife trade for Western museums during colonial imperialism. This paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive osteobiographical and pathological analysis of a male gorilla housed at the American Museum of Natural History. Rather, its focus is on the physical marks of colonial violence that this individual was subjected to, within a

grand scheme of museums as agents of trauma for scientific purposes. This gorilla is one among many gorillas and other non-human primate species who were exposed to colonial violence. Traumatic experiences and acts of physical violence are deeply embedded in the history of how non-human primate collections were assembled in the United States and Europe. While gorillas are the primary focus of this paper, the discussion presented here is applicable to other non-human primates violently captured during colonial dominance.

A gorilla's silent testimony to colonial violence

This section centers on a young adult male[3] *Gorilla gorilla gorilla* (M-167335), housed at the Department of Mammalogy, American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). His body is a testament to the colonial violence he endured, which ultimately resulted in his death, a victim of a system of colonial exploitation of nature for financial and scientific gain. He was shot at least three times - possibly by hunters - on at least two separate occasions. He survived the shots to his face and left arm. But on a subsequent encounter with humans, he lost his life. This gorilla was captured in 1946 in the Republic of Cameroon (named French Cameroons under European colonial rule), and sold by Fred Hope, an American Presbyterian missionary (GUTHMANN, n.d.) identified as AMNH collector number 11 (AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, 2025). His complete postcranial disarticulated skeleton, unmounted cranium, and mandible was later purchased by Eliz. C. Hope and entered into the AMNH records on June 1, 1955 (AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, 2025).

A gunshot entrance wound on the right maxilla, located lateral-inferiorly to the zygomatic process, displayed signs of healing with smooth margins and a small bone spicule inferiorly (antemortem trauma - **Figures 1 and 2**). No signs of infection were present. Upon impact, the bullet fragmented into at least two pieces. A bullet fragment was embedded obliquely in the right maxilla, posterior to the entrance wound, partially covered by remodeled bone (**Figure 1**). No exit wound was present as a second larger bullet fragment was lodged endocranially in the right maxilla (**Figure 2**).

[3] Information about the sex of the gorilla was part of the AMNH records. The male gorilla was estimated to possibly be a young adult at the time of his death, according to dental and osteological maturity. His right third maxillary molar of the maxilla and both third mandibular molars had erupted. However, it was not possible to assess the eruption level of the left maxillary molar due to ballistic trauma. The left and right iliac crests and sacral vertebrae (S1 to S5) were partially fused. Additionally, the following epiphyses were unfused: 1) left and right medial clavicle; 2) costal notches of the manubrium; 3) the first to fourth sternebrae (ST). Although ST4 was absent postmortem, caudally, ST3 showed no signs of fusion with ST4. The remaining skeletal epiphyses were fused.

Figure 1: Gunshot entrance wound (antemortem trauma) on the right maxilla. Posterior to the gunshot wound, a bullet fragment with bone remodeling and a perimortem fracture without bone remodeling are visible.

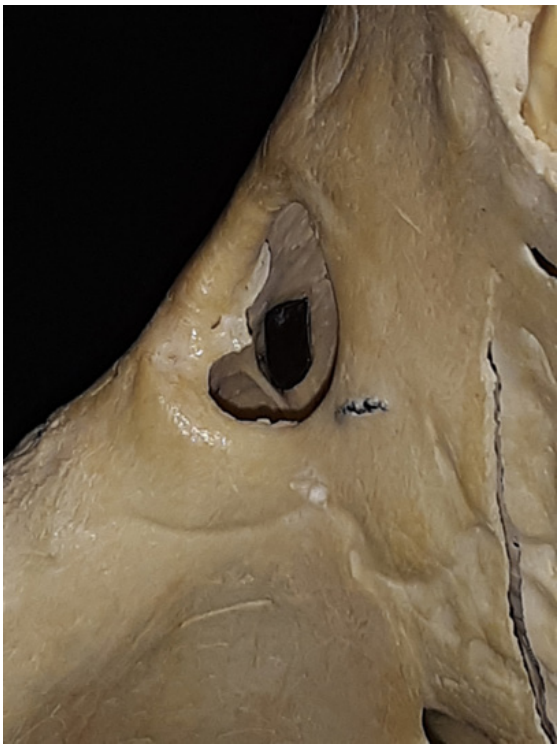

Figure 2: Bullet fragment lodged endocranially in the right maxilla, and a perimortem fracture posterior to the antemortem gunshot wound.

A second ballistic trauma was documented on the left distal humerus, with two bullet frag-

ments located anteriorly-medial, partially covered by remodeled bone (antemortem trauma - **Figure 3**). The bullet impact caused an oblique fracture, with two calluses slightly visible anteriorly and posteriorly. The fracture healed, with no visible signs of infection.

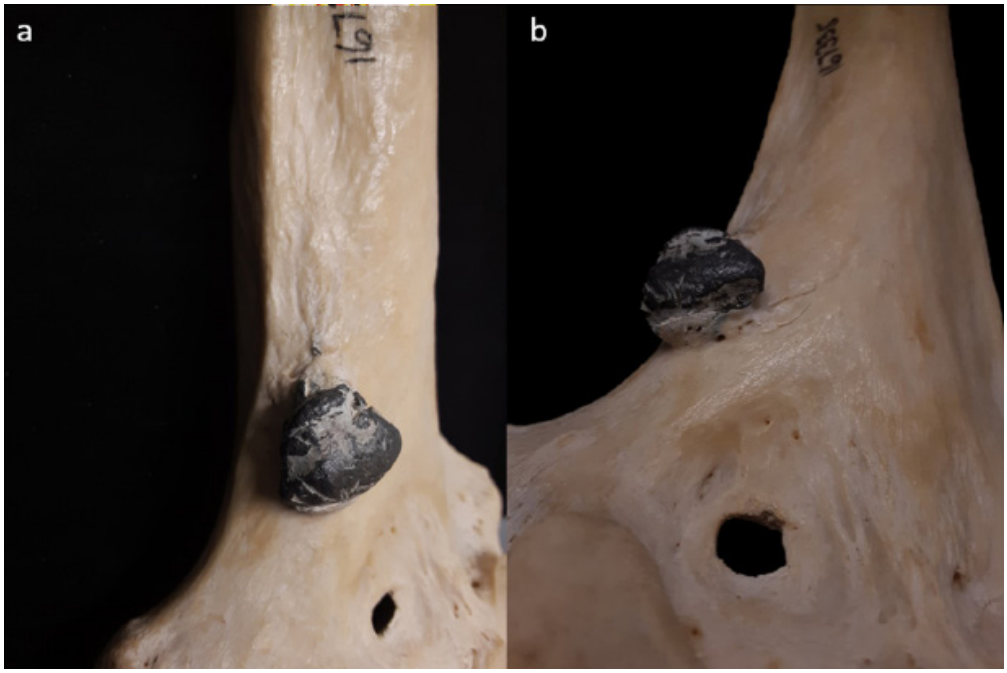

Figure 3: Gunshot wound with a fractured bullet on the left distal humerus. a) Medial view, b) Anterior view.

He survived after being shot in the left humerus and right maxilla, both of which had fully healed without signs of infection. This implies that, despite his injuries, he managed to evade the humans hunting him. In GREGORY and RAVEN (1936), both affiliated with the AMNH, reported a case similar to this gorilla during their hunting excursion to the Republic of Cameroon. GREGORY and RAVEN (1936, p. 325, 327) mention the escape of a gorilla who was shot in the face, as well as contact with an American Presbyterian Mission[4]. Instances of gorillas escaping have been described in hunters' biographies and field reports, mostly attributing such escapes to greater distances between them or to dense vegetation limiting visibility (e.g., GREGORY and RAVEN, 1936, p. 316, 325; MERFIELD and MILLER, 1957). Therefore, the two gunshots happened months to years [5] before the fatal encounter with hunters. These wounds may have healed at a faster rate than typically observed in humans. Although MATSUMOTO-ODA et al. (2025) did not include gorillas in their study, they observed faster healing rates in four primate species and rodents compared to humans. Thus, faster healing can also be a possibility for gorillas. However, with bullet fragments lodged in his body, the cytotoxic effects of the projectile's lead may have contributed to a slower

[4] There is a possibility that the gorilla shot in the face and mentioned by GREGORY and RAVEN (1936) is the male gorilla described in this paper. GREGORY and RAVEN (1936) also had contact with an American Presbyterian Mission during their scientific excursion, and this gorilla, captured in 1946, was sold to the AMNH by an American Presbyterian missionary. However, this cannot be confirmed with certainty.

[5] Estimating the exact post-traumatic interval for these antemortem lesions for this male gorilla was not possible due to the destructive nature of histological analysis and the author's lack of access to radiological technology.

healing process (RIEHL et al. 2015) than may be typical for gorillas.

This traumatic event, along with the resulting physical injuries, might have momentarily impacted his diet, manual skills, locomotion, and social dynamics due to temporary physical constraints. Considering he survived long enough for his injuries to heal, it can be inferred he might have had to adapt his behavior and feeding techniques during recovery. Gorillas with long-term illness and congenital malformations in both wild populations and captivity have exhibited behavioral flexibility (BYRNE and STOKES, 2002; STEWART et al., 2023). For example, gorillas can adapt their feeding techniques to accommodate their disability, such as using unusual grips, employing the mouth or foot, and using both hands instead of just one or vice versa (BYRNE and STOKES, 2002). However, no evidence of long-term disability was observed for this male gorilla, as both humeri presented similar sizes[6] without secondary osteoarthrosis (Figure 4), possibly suggesting that the gunshot wound did not affect arm mobility or locomotion in the long term. Although he recovered, it can be questioned whether his health was affected by the bullet fragments lodged in his body and lead poisoning until his death. Lead poisoning can happen with retained bullets. While the risk of lead poisoning is higher when bullets are retained in the synovial joints, the organic acid in synovial fluid dissolves the lead (DOUGHERTY et al., 2009, p. 985-986), this was not the case for this gorilla. However, lead can still be stored in bone by replacing calcium hydroxyapatite when bullets are retained in other parts of the body (DOUGHERTY et al., 2009, p. 986).

Figure 4. Left and right humeri showing similar sizes and lacking secondary osteoarthrosis.

6 Left humerus: Maximum length = 460 mm, Maximum diameter at midshaft = 104 mm, Epicondylar breadth = 100 mm; Right humerus: Maximum length = 458 mm, Maximum diameter at midshaft = 104 mm, Epicondylar breadth = 103mm. Humerus measurements were taken following Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994: 80).

A third ballistic trauma was recorded on the left maxilla at the time of death (perimortem trauma - **Figure 5**). The bullet impacted the left maxilla laterally to the nasal cavity, with beveling visible on the internal table of the cranium, exiting inferiorly, causing beveling on the external table of the cranium. The high-velocity projectile destroyed a portion of the left maxilla, which included the left upper molars; a section of the left palate; part of the vomer; and part of the left pterygoid process. The absence of bone remodeling and irregular margins suggests this trauma occurred at the time of death. The bullet impact on the left side also resulted in a perimortem fracture on the right side of the cranium, without evidence of bone remodeling, visible on **Figures 1 and 2**.

Figure 5: Gunshot wound on the left maxilla. a) Entrance wound, b) Exit wound.

Unfortunately, the violence and trauma this gorilla suffered during colonial times, which resulted in his death, is far from an isolated case. Not only gorillas, but many non-human primates housed in American and European museums met similar fates, with some also showcasing evidence of violent deaths by firearms (e.g., LOVELL, 1990; ARONSEN and KIRKHAM, 2017; MCRAE and ARONSEN, 2018).

Natural history museums as agents of colonial trauma: a call for decolonization

Museums were conceptualized as repositories and guardians of human and natural heritage, as well as to educate the public and produce new scientific knowledge. Thus, museums are more than tangible physical buildings and resources (ADAMS, 2007, p. 397). Intangible, invisible structures are also erected and reconstructed in museums. Constant dialogue, interactions, and

power relationships between scientists, the general public, collections, and ideas compose these invisible frameworks, influenced by social-cultural spheres both within and beyond museum walls (ADAMS, 2007, p. 397-398). As a result, museums, including natural history museums, can produce a wide range of societal impacts on different communities and nature, shaped by socio-cultural frameworks. The effects are not always positive; museums have also perpetrated trauma.

The physical and emotional trauma endured by gorillas and other non-human primates was rooted in colonial systems that allowed the exploitation of nature for profit. Despite being considered acceptable at the time and no longer practiced today, the museological collection of gorillas was a violent process carried out through hunting, as evident by the body of this male gorilla. The killing of gorillas was not only taking a life, dismemberment of bodies, and forced extraction from their countries to colonizer museums, but it also potentially affected surviving troop members. Although the extent of gorillas' cognitive understanding of death remains unclear (MASI, 2020), they seem to have some level of understanding that something has occurred (DE MARCO et al., 2022, p. 33). Observations in the wild and captivity have documented a range of gorilla behaviors in response to collapsed and dead conspecifics. For example, a juvenile male mountain gorilla was seen sitting and lying on his mother's body, manipulating her head, staring into her face, grooming her, and even attempting to suckle for a few seconds (PORTER et al. 2019, p. 9). MASI (2020) reported a near-fatal fall by an infant and how the mother held the unconscious infant for an hour while remaining unusually close to another adult female until the infant became responsive. Female gorillas have also been spotted carrying deceased infants for extended periods (WARREN and WILLIAMSON, 2004), and partial maternal cannibalism has been documented (DE MARCO et al., 2022, p. 20). Gorillas have also been seen on multiple occasions to sit near and stare at deceased individuals (POTTER et al., 2019) or approach and investigate the bodies by pulling, pushing, shaking, or even forcing them into a sitting position (DE MARCO et al., 2022, p. 23-25). Responses can also include rough handling, aggressive acts, and display behaviors such as chest-beating directed at collapsed and deceased conspecifics (PORTER, 2019; DE MARCO et al., 2022, p. 26, 32). Distress and warning calls have occasionally been observed (PORTER et al., 2019, p. 8; DE MARCO et al., 2022, p. 28). MASI (2020) further reported a fear response from three immature gorillas to a deceased red river hog, which included staring from a distance for 20 minutes, chest beating, urinating, and defecating.

Since the colonial era, nature and humanity have been predominantly interpreted by a Eurocentric male-dominated perspective (ADAMS, 2007, p. 394, 401). Several natural history museums in Western countries continue to dominate the production of scientific knowledge, largely due to the collections amassed during colonial times. As BATT (2021, p. 331) stated, "When one nation holds another nation's heritage, it not only has physical possession of that heritage but importantly it has possession of another's voice". This also applies to African natural heritage, as well as gorillas, which remain under the control of Western natural history museums. The continued retention of African heritage in Western museums arguably still sustains an imperialistic narrative that once legitimized colonialism (BATT, 2021, p. 331) and reinforces a continuous trauma of loss

by African countries (BROWN, 2004, p. 248). Efforts to decolonize natural history museums have been slower than those observed in social-cultural museums (ASHBY, 2024, p. 58). It is therefore vital to reckon the colonial legacies of Western natural history museums, as their decolonization can have positive benefits not only for social justice, but also for scientific progress (ASHBY, 2024, p. 57).

Recognizing that the past has been misrepresented is essential to the decolonization process, which includes dismantling narratives of 'discovery' made mainstream by Western nations that erased indigenous knowledge (VOGGEL, 2019, p. 1371). Gorillas were known to local communities long before they were identified as a new species in 1847 by Savage. The omission and dismissal of indigenous knowledge reinforces unequal power relationships and structural racism (ASHBY, 2024, p. 58-59) with ramifications still evident today. Museums must therefore commit to correcting their archives by trying to identify the people of color involved in the collection of natural history life (ASHBY, 2024, p. 63). This process will involve, for example, reviewing manuscript correspondence, descriptions of collection practices (ASHBY, 2024, p. 65), field notes, biographies, and oral and written testimonies from Africans. Additionally, archives and scientific papers should include contextual information, life histories, and names of primates, if they had one, to acknowledge their traumatic past (KRALICK et al., 2023). To further recognize non-human primates' life histories, it is recommended to use 'she', 'he', 'who', and 'whom', rather than 'it' and 'that' (KRALICK and CANINGSTON, 2025). However, one issue is the absence or incompleteness of field data and biographical information for several non-human primates housed in museums in the Global North. In some cases, gorillas and chimpanzees lack even the country of origin, identified only as being from 'Africa' (GORDON et al., 2013, p. 5; MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 207). One possible solution is to consult archival records from companies that sold primates, as they may hold field data and biographical information missing in museums (MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 207). However, the growing impact of budget constraints, as funding continues to decline for Western museums, can hinder staff's ability to comprehensively catalogue their collections, including gorillas (MCRAE and AROSEN, 2018, p. 199).

Western museums have focused on the digitalization of natural history collections as a potential solution to address colonial legacies, as in theory facilitates an easier and faster access for African scholars (KAISER et al., 2023, p. 14). However, this approach may replicate existing inequities and conflicts, as it centers on Eurocentric standards and concepts, and may also result in further barriers due to financial and technological constraints (KAISER et al., 2023, p. 21). Moreover, the digitalization of collections without their restitution to countries of origin reinforces colonial dynamics, since Western museums still retain physical control over African natural collections. A solution can only be attained through dialogue with African scholars, governments, and communities. Such dialogue must not be dominantly shaped by paternalistic Western perspectives, interests, or ethos, but must reflect the priorities and interests of African counterparts, including the restitution of natural history collections. For this reason, Western museums' archives and inventories must be made public and shared with African countries to ensure transparency in res-

titution procedures (EYIFA-DZIDZIENYO and NKUMBAAN, 2020, p. 92). Additionally, collaborative research agreements can be established, and which African researchers must be acknowledged as co-authors in joint academic outputs (SKELTON, 2007, p. 41).

Conclusion

This paper documented the physical trauma endured by a male gorilla, a victim of colonial exploitation of nature for financial and scientific gain. During his life, he survived being shot at least twice on his face and left arm. Later, in 1946, he was hunted again, which ultimately resulted in his death, and the sale of his remains to an American museum. His violent fate was not unique, but shared by many other gorillas, who were targeted after being scientifically identified as a new species in 1847 by an American missionary and naturalist. Museums in Europe and North America sought to acquire their remains for their collections, which implied hunting and killing gorillas during colonial times. The continuous retention in museums of gorillas and other non-human primates violently captured in the past perpetuates an imperialistic narrative that once legitimized colonialism. Therefore, decolonization efforts must continue through collaboration with African scholars, institutions, and governments, contributing to bringing social justice and supporting scientific progress.

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We must continue to recognize the rights of non-human primates with whom we share this planet, all of whom have a right to a life with dignity. I am grateful to Dr. Cláudia Plens for the invitation to write this paper for the Special Issue ‘O Passado Traumático através da Arqueologia e Antropologia forense’. I would also like to thank the Department of Mammalogy, American Museum of Natural History for allowing me to document this gorilla. As a European American, I acknowledge my privilege in having access to this gorilla’s remains. This paper is dedicated to a world without borders.

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