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Meditations on 'international friendship': Situating twinning in global struggles for solidarity, recognition, and restitution

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Abstract
This article takes the practice of twinning as an entry point for problematising conventional accounts of 'international friendship' in the field of International Relations. In particular, the paper zeroes in on three examples of twinning practice, past and present, that have challenged the status quo: twinnings established in opposition to the Contra war in Nicaragua; twinning as an act of recognition for communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; and twinning as a vehicle for the recovery and return of sacred artefacts to post-colonial Kenya. Through these examples, it argues for an alternative conceptualisation of international friendship – one that pushes beyond the methodological nationalism and ontological rigidity of dominant approaches.

Introduction

'Twinning' refers to the construction of formal or informal partnerships between towns, cities, institutions, or localities usually situated in different countries. The theory and practice of twinning has at least two distinct origins. On the one hand, twinning builds on and evolves out of a much older tradition of inter-city diplomacy.[1] On the other hand, as a social practice forged on overseas cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual assistance, twinning has early antecedents in the writings of 19th-century internationalists, anarchists, and social reformers.[2] While the first record of a 'town adoption' dates back to 1920, the practice blossomed in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Establishing connections between communities across Western Europe and more latterly between the United States and Japan was understood as a way of overcoming past hostilities and working towards a future devoid of conflict and competition.

In the decades that followed, twinning expanded into a markedly more global phenomenon, often spurred by landmark events and processes including decolonisation, the geopolitical tango of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and expansion(s) of the European Union. Throughout the last 50 years, individuals and organisations have come to support their partnered

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[1]Michele Acuto, 'City diplomacy', in Costas Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (London: SAGE, 2016), pp. 510–20.
[2]Wilbur Zelinsky, 'The twinning of the world: Sister cities in geographic and historical perspective', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81:1 (1991), pp. 1–31; Holly Eva Ryan and Caterina Mazzilli, 'Debating the value of twinning in the United Kingdom: The need for a broader perspective', *British Politics* (2021), available at {https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057/s41293-021-00163-x.pdf}.

localities in a variety of ways: politically, culturally, economically. From calling attention to foreign intervention and fundraising for vital supplies in the wake of natural disasters to collaborations in the arts, education, and trade, the activities and motivations of twin towns (or sister cities) are today innumerable and extremely hard to pigeonhole. There are more institutionalised manifestations of twinning that are predominantly geared towards local development goals such as income generation and building business ties. There is also a range of less institutionalised or loosely institutionalised forms, which have more holistic, long-term, and normative ambitions around inter-cultural learning, mutual aid, and social change. This paper is predominantly focused on the latter form of twinning, although it acknowledges that, for a variety of reasons – strategic, historical, cultural and, structural – there is often slippage between these more and less institutionalised forms.

Despite the wide range of activity that goes on under the banner of twinning, there has been relatively little academic focus on the practice in recent years. From the fields of history and geography, there has been a handful of works that underline the evolution, growth, and continuities in twinning as a form of municipal internationalism.[3] Meanwhile, from the field of political studies and International Relations (IR), there has been some recent engagement with the questions of twinning and public value[4] and twinning in/as international development cooperation,[5] and there is a growing interest in the ways that China has used sister-city and twin-town arrangements as a vehicle for cultural and medical diplomacy.[6] Although this body of work is insightful, much of it addresses the macro-trends of twinning uptake as opposed to the micro-processes of twinning practice. It seeks to answer questions about where twinning occurs and why, as opposed to how twinning is sustained, what it involves at an individual/community level, and how it makes participants feel. Very little of the existing literature spotlights the political work that twinning can – and does – achieve. One possible reason for the lack of thorough scholarly engagement with twinning practice is a popular conception that these kinds of relationships constitute a fairly mundane and humdrum aspect of local governance and international life. This sentiment is summed up in the title of a recent news headline for the Scottish newspaper, the *Daily Record*, which read: 'Hello Dull, we're Boring! Twinned towns meet each other for the first time'. The headline actually referred to the 2012 twinning between the Scottish village of Dull and the community of Boring in Oregon, but for many, it also captured the relative obscurity, even parochialism, that is often associated with twin-town relationships. Heeding the words of Cynthia Enloe,[7] however, we should be primed to take an interest in the seemingly mundane, quotidian, and routine. As she and many others[8] have compellingly argued, power is embedded in everyday sites, rituals, and practices, and turning a critical scholarly gaze to such locations and matters can reveal important insights about

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[3]Zelinsky, 'Twinning of the world'; Antoine Vion, 'Europe from the bottom up: Town twinning in France during the Cold War', *Contemporary European History*, 11:4 (2002), pp. 623–40; Mark Jayne, Phil Hubbard, and David Bell, 'Worlding a city: Twinning and urban theory', *City*, 15:1 (2011), pp. 25–41; Nick Clarke, 'In what sense "spaces of neoliberalism"? The new localism, the new politics of scale, and town twinning', *Political Geography*, 28:8 (2009), pp. 496–507; Nick Clarke, 'Town twinning in Cold-War Britain: (Dis)continuities in twentieth-century municipal internationalism', *Contemporary British History*, 24:2 (2010), pp. 173–91.

[4]Ryan and Mazzilli, 'Debating the value'.

[5]Holly Eva Ryan and Caterina Mazzilli, 'Twinning and development: A genealogy of depoliticization', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26 (2023), pp. 433–52.

[6]Noela Haughton and Dawai Han, 'Internationalisation through a Confucius sister city partnership: Examining a 10-year sister city and university bi-lateral partnership', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52:8 (2022), pp. 1277–95; Dominik Mierzejewski, Przemyslaw Ciborek, and Mateusz Chatys, 'The sister city frameworks and China's public diplomacy in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic', *Azja-Pacyfik*, 24 (2021), pp. 9–28.

[7]Cynthia Enloe, 'The mundane matters', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 447–50.

[8]John M. Hobson and Leonard Seabrooke, *Everyday Politics of the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Xavier Guillaume, 'The international as an everyday practice', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 446–62; Roger MacGinty, 'Circuits, the everyday and international relations: Connecting the home to the international and transnational', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54:2 (2019), pp. 234–53.

the ways that particular political orders, ideologies, and discourses are constituted and become pervasive.[9]

This paper posits that a very particular modality of power is embedded within twinning practice: 'friendship'. It further argues that friendship can – and does – matter for international politics, lending individuals and communities the strength, resolve, networks, and resources to challenge forms of tyranny and dispossession. Marshalling insights from feminist ethics and social movement studies, the account of friendship developed in this paper seeks to unsettle the conventional, ontologically rigid, and methodologically nationalist discourse of friendship that dominates the disciplinary landscape of IR today. Herein, three examples of twinning practice – past and present – are analysed and figured as 'dissident friendships', in the dual sense that they breach the conceptual parameters established by mainstream IR theory *and* work to disrupt the global political status quo. These are (1) twinnings established in opposition to the Contra war in Nicaragua; (2) twinning as an act of recognition for communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs); and (3) twinning as a vehicle for the recovery and return of sacred artefacts to post-colonial Kenya.

The research presented in this paper emerged from an ESRC New Investigator funded project on the global politics of twinning. The research design for the project was qualitative, interpretive, and multimodal, featuring a combination of semi-structured interviews, archival and desk-based research, and artistic (co-)production. The three case studies elaborated at length in this paper were selected from a more extensive collection of stories that formed the basis of the art exhibition 'LINES: Making Friends; Crossing Borders'.[10] The premise of 'LINES' was to highlight the role of twinning practice in everyday acts of 'world-making' and to situate twinning work as part of struggles to define and resolve some of the most salient political debates of our times. From the very start of this project in 2018, I was struck by the prevalence of the terms 'friendship' and 'international friendship' in policy documents, campaign literature, and interview transcripts pertaining to twinning. This led me to survey the existing scholarship on friendship in IR, hoping to find a useful framework or anchor for my work. Unfortunately, I did not find that anchor, and the following 'meditations' reflect my attempts to bridge some of the conceptual gaps and silences that I came across.

International Relations theory and the discourse of 'international friendship'

The phrase 'international friendship' is ubiquitous in policy documents and campaign literature related to twinning. However, nowhere is it purposefully defined by the groups in question. IR theory might appear to be the logical place to appeal for insight and elucidation of this concept. Yet, among IR scholars, 'international friendships' are most commonly characterised as strategic or instrumental alliances among nation-states. The influential social theorist Alexander Wendt[11] has spoken of international friendship as a role structure within which 'states expect each other to observe two simple rules: (1) disputes will be settled without war or the threat of war (the rule of non-violence); and (2) they will fight as a team if the security of any one is threatened by a third party (the rule of mutual aid)'. Meanwhile, P. E. Digeser suggests a sharp analytical distinction between 'international friendships' and 'interpersonal friendships'.[12] She writes that the former must be understood as relationships among states, defined as 'entities that are ontologically incapable of having feelings', while the latter may have an affective quality and be created or sustained by 'mutual feelings of attraction, trust and openness'.

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[9]Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

[10]'LINES: Crossing Borders; Making Friends', launched at The Bloc, Queen Mary University of London in February 2023. The exhibition explored the politics of twinning, looking at the ways that translocal constellations of friends have come together to press for social change across a range of issue areas and global challenges. The exhibition also sought to prompt closer intellectual reflection on the synergies and disjunctions between the research process and the final outputs that we choose to make public. To see some of the artwork that was exhibited, please see{https://friendship-project.international/artworks/}.

[11]Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 298.

[12]P. E. Digeser, 'Friendship between states', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39:2 (2009), pp. 323–44 (p. 327).

This distinction between non-feeling states and feeling individuals also pervades and structures some of the more recent examples of scholarship in this area, including Simon Koschut and Andrea Oelsner's edited collection, *Friendship and International Relations*.[13] Borrowing from Aristotle's enduring meditations in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the editors distinguish two main types of friendship that can be identified within international politics: the 'strategic' and the 'normative'. They write:

> Friendship in international politics may be called 'strategic' when actors refer to each other as 'friends' in public discourse and treaties without it necessarily resulting in substantial long-term change of behaviour or mutual perception among these actors. Such a 'thin' or strategic type of friendship does not permanently alter agents' behaviour since it is purely based on rational self-interest. It is an entirely instrumental, functional, and oftentimes asymmetrical form of friendship.[14]

In contrast, 'normative' friends are those that genuinely trust each other because their relationship is not based on an instrumental rational thought process but rather upon an emotional and moral disposition. While this pushes a bit further in terms of attributing morality and emotionality to *some* state actors, the authors' and contributors' overriding interest is in characterising international friendships as a particular kind of bilateral relationship within the context of multi-member security communities. As such, the prevailing focus remains on states and security defined in methodologically nationalist terms.

Indeed, one of the overriding problems with many of the dominant characterisations of international friendship in IR is that they tend to rely on three outmoded and reductionist images. The first is the image of international politics as an arena characterised by relations among states (as opposed to say, individuals, communities, or even corporations); the second is the image of the state as a unitary actor or 'black box' whose constituent parts (such as sub-national governments or civil society groups) have very little bearing on the direction and conduct of international political affairs; and the third is the image of an international realm characterised by conflict and competition among said 'black boxes' (and thus a refusal to recognise other kinds of relationships that might be built upon care, trust, and mutuality). Taken as a starting place for analysis, these images or assumptions occlude and limit possibilities for mapping the highly complex connective relationships that shape our world.

The other major problem with the work on friendship in IR is that there is a tendency to borrow rather selectively and thus reductively from classical meditations on friendship. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has become a common starting point for excavating and reconstructing a whole tradition of thought, but there is a great deal more breadth and ambiguity in the original text than contemporary interpretations would suggest. For instance, where many contemporary works such as Koschut and Oelsner's borrow Aristotle's notions of virtue-based friendships and utility-based friendship to construct a strictly binary relationship with an implicit normative thrust, the *Nicomachean Ethics*[15] actually references three types of friendship – the third being friendships based on pleasure/passion – and allows for some interrelationship and slippage between them. Although Aristotle ascribes a higher value to friendships of virtue, he also makes it clear that such friendships are extremely rare. They tend to be characterised by a high level of closeness and connectedness that he acknowledges is impossible to have with all of the members of one's society. Thus, it is often the other two forms of friendship that come to constitute the social glue holding communities together. As Evgeny Roschin[16] argues, the moralising perspective prevalent in modern works on friendship is problematic for analytical reasons. By holding friendships

[13]Simon Koschut and Andrea Oelsner (eds), *Friendship and International Relations* (London: Springer, 2014).

[14]Koschut and Oelsner, eds, *Friendship and International Relations*, p. 14.

[15]Roger Crisp (ed.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[16]Evgeny Roshchin, *Friendship among Nations: History of a Concept* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

of virtue as a high ideal, supposedly 'inferior' or 'defective' utility-based relationships have been judged as wanting rather than being recognised on their own terms and interrogated as a legitimate part of socio-political life. Furthermore, the inclination to ignore friendships of passion/pleasure (which Roschin is also guilty of) reinforces the idea that love, passion, and sexual relations have nothing to do with the world of politics and the activities of states. In this way, contemporary works on friendship in IR arguably perpetuate the false dichotomy of public/private that has historically worked to sideline and obscure women's experiences from view. Aside from the specific issues around how we interpret these 'canonical' texts, we should also be poised to question whether, in its reliance on figures such as Aristotle, the field of IR as a whole attributes too much weight to a very particular or 'provincial' set of reflections[17] that have been taken from a male, European perspective and then universalised.

As Graham Smith[18] summarises well, the task of theorising friendship in IR to date has been defined by two invisible outer limits: the centrality of the state and the legacy of those who have theorised it before (i.e. the white, male, European 'canon'). While there are other possibilities and enactments of friendship that we could (and should) attempt to locate, *within, between*, and *beyond* the state, there has been surprisingly little concerted effort to breach these outer boundaries from within the field of IR itself. However, there is much advantage in a serious engagement with works emerging outside the field.

There could be much to gain, for example, from reconceptualising international friendship with a feminist ethics of care at its foundation. Carol Gilligan,[19] Nel Noddings, [20] and Sara Ruddick[21] were among the first feminist scholars to orient their work towards an ethics based on relations of care as opposed to the justice-oriented moral theories of utilitarianism, deontology, and rights theory that then dominated the landscape of Western philosophy. These influential early care theorists addressed issues that were usually relegated to the private sector, such as maternity and reproductive choices and providing assistance to the sick or elderly. While these kinds of provisions and activities were (and are often still) regarded as 'women's work' and were thus marginalised from mainstream philosophical and moral debates, care theorists have convincingly argued that we can and should use these concrete experiences as a starting place for examining moral choices and developing theory. Gilligan's work argues that an ethics of care starts from the premise that – as humans – we are inherently relational, responsive beings and that the human condition is one of continued connectedness rather than one of cauterised individualism.[22] Following this line of reasoning, the task for theorists of the international is to denaturalise and cast a critical eye on discourses, structures, and forms such as nationalism, citizenship, and border regimes that are premised on the unnatural separation and division of peoples into competing groups.[23] Relationships (and, by extension, friendships) matter, and not just for instrumental purposes. Indeed, feminist theorising teaches us that connective relationships are the substance and bedrock of international relations, rather than superfluity or exception.[24]

Moreover, although they have not taken up the lexicon of 'international friendship', social movement scholars and cultural theorists have also successfully taken on the task of breaching the

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[17]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[18]Graham M. Smith, 'Friendship and the world of states', *International Politics*, 48:1 (2011), pp. 10–27.

[19]Carol Gilligan, 'New maps of development: New visions of maturity', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 52:2 (1982), pp. 199–212.

[20]Nel Noddings, 'An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements', *American Journal of Education*, 96:2 (1988), pp. 215–30.

[21]Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Philosophy, Children, and the Family* (Boston, MA: Springer US, 1982), pp. 101–26.

[22]Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Carol Gilligan, Care Ethicists Network Interview, 2011, available at: {https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/}.

[23]Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Nationalism, belonging, globalization and the "ethics of care"', *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, 2–3 (2007), pp. 91–100.

[24]Virginia Held, 'The ethics of care', in Serena Olsaretti (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 213–34.

aforementioned outer limits posed by the state and the 'canon'. Refusing to take the state as their primary object of analysis, Keck and Sikkink,[25] Tarrow,[26] Featherstone,[27] and May[28] are among several voices that have pointed to the ways in which transnational networks of solidarity effectively fuse processes of domestic and international contention and usurp national borders in order to create shared collective action frames and develop common ways of seeing the world. Meanwhile, other social movement scholars have successfully collapsed ontological distinctions between the 'international' and the 'interpersonal'. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta,[29] Gould,[30] Chowdhury and Philipose,[31] Shepard,[32] and Ryan[33] are among those that have underlined the importance of cultural co-production, affects, and emotions in creating and sustaining bonds between people that cut across national, physical, geographical, classed, raced, and gendered boundaries. What binds the feminist and social movement literatures is the refusal of abstract moral positioning *qua* the 'canon', in favour of analyses that are grounded in and generated by close involvement with concrete practices of solidarity and of struggle. This close attunement and responsiveness to praxis should also give rise to a general trepidation about anything approaching a 'grand theory' of friendship, the effect of which would be to merely elevate another 'provincial' set of experiences to the level of Truth. As Celina Romany has put it: 'Far from claiming privileged access to truth with a capital T, feminism with a capital F thrives in a room with a great view of narratives about intersections.'[34] The same can be said of social movement studies.

These kinds of conceptual advances in the discourse of friendship would have particular relevance for the study of twinning, since even a cursory examination of the practice today reveals a breadth and depth of exchange and interaction that goes beyond the primacy of the state, challenges assumptions about its atomised character, and invites close reflection on the intimate, interpersonal, cultural, and affective processes that bind distant communities into lasting relationships of care. As the following section will seek to demonstrate through three concrete examples, twinning should be understood as a potential locus of power, whereby actions and possibilities rooted in friendship serve to challenge and disrupt the political status quo, albeit in subtly different ways. In the section that follows, I adopt the language of 'dissident friendships' to describe these relationships and highlight their tendency to subvert and break with the models and expectations of friendship that have been established and upheld in mainstream IR theory.

Dissident friendships: How twinning challenges the status quo

Twinning as solidarity: Building connections with revolutionary Nicaragua

For much of the 20th century, Nicaragua was ruled by a corrupt family dynasty – the Somozas – who were in turn backed by the United States. Years of repression, corruption, and dispossession at the hands of the Somozas led the country to a tipping point in 1979, when a popular

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[25] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[26] Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[27] David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

[28] Todd May, *Friendship in an Age of Economics: Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

[29] Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, 'The return of the repressed: The fall and rise of emotions in social movement theory', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 5:1 (2000), pp. 65–83.

[30] Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics. Emotions and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Deborah Gould, 'On affect and protest', in Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (eds), *Political Emotions* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 18–44.

[31] Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose, *Dissident Friendships: Feminism, Imperialism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

[32] Benjamin Shepard, *Rebel Friendships: 'Outsider' Networks and Social Movements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[33] Holly Eva Ryan, 'Twinning for solidarity: Building affective communities in the aftermath of the Nicaraguan revolution', *International Relations* (2022), available at {https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00471178221141603}.

[34] Celina Romany, 'Ain't I a feminist?', *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 4 (1991), pp. 23–33 (p. 23).

uprising ousted Anastasio Somoza Debayle and brought the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front or FSLN) to power. Invoking the legacy of the martyred peasant hero Augusto César Sandino, the FSLN formed a Council (or Junta) of National Reconstruction and initiated process of sweeping reforms, investing heavily in healthcare, infrastructure, literacy, and culture. This transformative policy agenda was widely welcomed by large parts of the international community. Nonetheless, through the prism of United States Cold War foreign policy, the FSLN were perceived as a 'communist threat'. In the early 1980s, the United States imposed an economic blockade on Nicaragua and, behind the scenes, then President Ronald Reagan authorised the Central Intelligence Agency to begin financing and training irregular forces of *contrarrevolucionarios* (counter-revolutionaries or *contras*) with the aim of destabilising and ultimately overthrowing the Sandinistas.[35] Contra tactics included disrupting trade and economic supply lines across the country and attacks on public services, as well as acts of violence and intimidation directed towards civilian populations. The escalating situation was followed closely by international audiences. NGOs, United Nations agencies, and left-leaning governments offered rhetorical and material support to the Junta. Private citizens also came together as part of transnational solidarity campaigns that conceived of novel acts of witnessing, claim-making, and awareness-raising to support the Sandinista cause. Among these, the practice of 'twinning' saw popular uptake. By the end of the 1980s, it was possible to count dozens of Nicaraguan sister cities in the United States and many more links in Europe, including some 17 formal or informal twinnings between Nicaraguan and British localities.

As Ryan[36] explains in detail, solidarity twinnings with Nicaragua were forged on the basis of affective connections wrought in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, when scores of international volunteers (*internacionalistas*) made their way to the war-ravaged country to help out in factories, schools, farms, and healthcare facilities. Accommodated in home-stays and inculcated with narratives about the progressive ideals and achievements of the new Sandinista government, the *internacionalistas* were so moved by the new connective bonds they formed in Nicaragua that, when they returned home, many of them sought out new avenues for ongoing solidarity work. Twinning was regarded as apposite to this task, binding translocal communities into pacts of mutual assistance and allowing for the ongoing exchange of people, goods, and ideas for many years to follow.

The UK–Nicaragua solidarity twinnings had practical, symbolic, and performative virtues. Practically speaking, they provided nodal points for the collection and transfer of resources in aid of the revolution. Somoza's pillaging of the state coffers, the devastation of the ongoing Contra war, and the beginnings of the US blockade had taken their toll on the Nicaraguan economy, so many British twinning participants first set their sights on addressing the acute material needs of their friends. Hence, UK partners mobilised resources and machinery to donate to schools, hospitals, and public utilities. Examples included glues, tacks, and textiles for shoemaking that were purchased by the Leicester–Masaya Link Group and two large refuse trucks from Lambeth that were filled with household items and shipped to the community of Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast.[37] Before long, many of the twinning links also started to facilitate two-way travel between Nicaragua and the UK, placing an onus on identifying professionals – teachers, nurses, engineers, and planners – for upskilling and capacity-building opportunities. With these skills-based delegations growing apace, longer-term infrastructural projects such as the upgrading of hospitals and maternal health units (Swindon–Ocotal), schools (Islington–Managua), and community centres (Oxford–Leon) could be maintained and, in time, staffed by Nicaraguans themselves.

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[35]See National Security Decision Directive 17 on Cuba and Central America. available at: {https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/reagan-administration/nsdd-digitized-reference-copies}.

[36]Ryan, 'Twinning for solidarity'.

[37]Lambeth Council Archives, *Documents pertaining to Lambeth-Bluefields Twinning*. LBTG—LBL/CE/TT/3/2 (accessed 2019).

In terms of their symbolic and performative functions, the twinnings challenged existing stereotypes, discourses, and concentrations of power. They did this in two main ways. First, by facilitating manifold individual encounters between Nicaraguans and Brits, they worked to loosen and dismantle preconceived notions of self and other. As Ryan[38] writes, for the British partners, 'dinner table conversations, pillow talk and impassioned political dialogues at local bars, churches, repurposed theatres and *alcaldias* (town halls) breathed life into the political axioms of *Sandinismo*', making the revolutionary figure of the metallurgy worker, *campesino*, or weaver one that was relatable and sympathetic. But similarly, for the Nicaraguans, interactions with outsiders who were broadly supportive to their struggle helped to challenge preconceptions of the Global North as a monolith and enemy.[39] Among the close bonds that emerged from these encounters were an abundance of romances, some short-lived and others more durable. Salman Rushdie's *Jaguar Smile* recounts the now-emblematic tale of the woman who gave up her career and family life in the UK to join her partner on the remote Atlantic coast at Bluefields;[40] during fieldwork in 2017, I encountered several more British expats who had settled in Nicaragua after falling in love. These romantic partnerships or 'friendships of passion' (in the Aristotelian lexicon) feed into politics in important (but routinely neglected) ways. Lust drives bodies towards one another, and falling in love implies tying your fate to that of another. It means becoming a part of their world, taking on their struggles, and becoming intimately invested in the outcomes of those struggles. It is, in the words of Lianne Hartnett, 'normatively implicated in acts of worldmaking'.[41]

Second, as an example of 'paradiplomacy',[42] the twinnings helped to lend credibility to the Sandinistas, while circumventing the power of the state. With the support of the Nicaraguan embassy, British solidarity activists acted as interlocutors between receptive *alcaldias* (town halls) in Nicaragua and their own local councils in the UK, petitioning both sides to establish formal twinning 'pacts' that would enshrine and institutionalise the relationships at the level of subnational government. As Ryan summarises,[43] 'successful overseas cooperation via municipal links contributed to the FSLN's international image campaign through the process of "counter-framing",[44] in which the existing "schemata of interpretation"[45] that painted the FSLN as hard-line agents of Soviet-style Communism was successfully challenged and supplanted by day-today interactions that "normalised" relations between British and Nicaraguan officials'. Therefore, although the official foreign policy of the British government under Margaret Thatcher was closely aligned with that of Reagan, by institutionalising twinnings with Nicaragua, the solidarity activists succeeded in amplifying and encouraging dissenting voices and political practices at the level of sub-national government. Some British councils went as far as to publicly declare their solidarity. As such, solidarity twinning sits among a number of examples of alternative diplomacy – or paradiplomacy – that transcend traditional state-centric modalities and problematise claims about the state's 'unitary' nature.

Twinning as recognition: Bearing witness in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The areas known as the West Bank and Gaza have been militarily occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War. Collectively, they are known as the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs).

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[38]Ryan, 'Twinning for solidarity', p. 8.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile* (London: Viking, 1987).

[41]Lianne Hartnett, 'Love is worldmaking: Reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* as international theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 66:3 (2022), p. sqac037.

[42]Rodrigo Tavares, *Paradiplomacy: Cities and States as Global Players* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[43]Ryan, 'Twinning for solidarity', p. 11.

[44]Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Counterframing effects', *The Journal of Politics*, 75:1 (2013), pp. 1–16; William B. Anderson, 'Counter-framing: Implications for public relations', *Public Relations Inquiry*, 7:2 (2018), pp.111–26.

[45]Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

The West Bank is a landlocked expanse to the west of the Jordan river. It is bounded by Israel to the north, south, and east, with Jordan to the west. Gaza, meanwhile, is a small enclave bordering the eastern Mediterranean. Gaza and the West Bank are separated from each other by Israel. The precise character and intensity of Israeli occupation differs within and across the two territories. For Palestinians in the West Bank, the occupation entails restrictions on movement and civil liberties, arbitrary violence, and the ongoing demolition of homes and other infrastructure to make way for expanding Jewish settlements, a practice that is in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions.[46] Where the West Bank (except for eastern Jerusalem) remains under the partial administration of the Palestinian Authority, Gaza has, since 2007 been governed by Hamas, a militant, fundamentalist Islamic organisation. Following the ascent of Hamas, Gaza was placed under an international economic and political boycott by Israel and the United States. Although Israel announced its withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the majority of international commentators still regard the territory as falling under indirect occupation. This is because Israel maintains total control of Gaza's air and maritime space, administers six out of seven land crossings, and maintains an extensive buffer zone within the territory.[47] Gaza remains dependent on Israel for its utilities and basic needs: water, electricity, and telecommunications. Formal and informal twinnings linking British communities to the OPTs have been active since at least the turn of the millennium. Due to the immense challenges of travelling to and communicating with civilians in Gaza, the overriding majority of these relationships are currently with communities in the West Bank. Some 4.5 million Palestinians live within the OPTs, with a large proportion housed in refugee camps administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).[48] Those living within the camps face the compounded challenges of overcrowding, poor infrastructure, high levels of unemployment, food shortages, and protection issues.[49]

Twinnings with the OPTs have been explicitly couched in the language of 'friendship', with an emphasis on providing visibility, care, and aid to communities facing the constant threat of direct and indirect violence that comes with living under occupation. The Hanwell Friends of Sabastiya (HAFSA) for example, have been visiting and supporting the ancient Palestinian village of Sabastiya for well over a decade. Sabastiya is located in the Nablus Governorate of the State of Palestine, some 12 kilometres north-west of the city of Nablus. Home to some 4,000 people, the village relies on Nablus for access to services and employment, but Israeli military checkpoints make travelling back and forth difficult. Sabastiya is believed to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the West Bank, and it houses an archaeological site which is of great historical and religious importance to the multiple peoples of the region. The archaeological site is believed to house the tomb of Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyā/John the Baptist; the rocky hilltops overlooking the village of Sabastiya are believed to be the site of Shomron/Samaria, the ancient capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; and excavations in the region have uncovered evidence of numerous cultures:

Canaanite, Israelite, Hellenistic, Herodian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman.[50] Due to its historical and religious significance, Sabastiya has unfortunately become a flashpoint and frontier in the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The issues are numerous. Some of the areas in the archaeological site are designated Area B under the Oslo Accords and thus fall under joint control. However, the Palestinian local authorities report that Israeli intransigence has hampered their

[46] Amnesty International, 'Destination: Occupation' (2019), available at: {https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/destination-occupation-digital-tourism-israel-illegal-settlements/}.
[47] Amnesty International, 'Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians' (2022), available at: {https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2022-01/Israel%27s%20Apartheid%20Against%20Palestinians%20Report%20-%20Amnesty%27s%202022%20report.pdf?VersionId=s0fIB_wt.dMwGiAksB8nnlG_irQIqf67}.
[48] European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Mapping Palestinian Politics' (2022), available at: {https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/opt/}.
[49] United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 'Profile: Am'ari Refugee Camp' (2015), available at: {https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/amari_refugee_camp.pdf}.
[50] Jafar Subhi Suleiman Abahre and Samer Hatem Raddad, 'Impact of political factor on the tourism development in Palestine: Case study of Sabastiya Village', *American Journal of Tourism Management,* 5:2 (2016), pp. 29–35.

efforts to develop a tourist infrastructure that would bring much-needed local investment. Other parts of the archaeological site are designated Area C, which means that they fall under exclusive Israeli control. Israel permits visitors to these spaces, but Israeli tourists are often accompanied by heavily armed officers of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), who shut down the space and the surrounding roads at will. A 2023 proposal by Israel to develop parts of the site in Area C would see a fee-based ticketing system imposed and a new access road that avoids zones in Area B. The effect of this would seemingly be to raise entry barriers for Palestinians and limit their access to tourist footfall and revenue.[51] Meanwhile, there have also been reports of violent incursions by hard-line Israeli activists whose goal is to expand West Bank settlements and reduce the presence of Palestinian residents, cultures, and national insignia.[52]

To counter these forms of economic disempowerment and erasure, HAFSA have fundraised for a number of 'village enhancements' to support the burgeoning tourist industry in Sabastiya. These have included the purchase of olive seedlings and shrubs for planting, the upgrading of an Ottoman palace into a tourist guesthouse, and a clean-up of the village cemetery.[53] The people of Hanwell have also raised money for first-aid training and gas masks for residents living in proximity to the archaeological site at ancient Sabastiya. Having observed the frequency with which the civilian population has been exposed to tear gas, these projects seek to counter the risk of harms arising for elderly people, the immunocompromised, and children, who are especially vulnerable to the effects of atmospheric chemical weapons utilised by the military.[54]

Concerns about the brutality of the Israeli military and the extension of care to the vulnerable were also factors behind friendship links established between the Oxford and Ramallah. Although a formal twinning pact was only signed in 2019, the relationship between these cities dates back to 2002, when volunteer observers from Oxford witnessed Israeli tanks rolling into Ramallah as a part of Operation Defensive Shield, a period of heightened conflict during which the IDF seized most of the buildings in the headquarters compound of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah before moving on to impose curfews in most major West Bank cities. The Oxford Ramallah Friendship Association (ORFA) was established by these volunteers, who had the aim of supporting residents of Ramallah by reducing their sense of isolation and making their voices and experiences known.[55] Over the course of the last two decades, ORFA have focused much of their attention on Al Am'ari refugee camp. Am'ari is located to the east of Ramallah city in al-Bireh municipality. One of the smaller camps in the West Bank, it was established in 1949 for Palestinian refugees who lost both home and means of livelihood during the 1948 conflict. In accordance with the Oslo Accords, Am'ari camp is located in Area A and is thus under the control of the Palestinian Authority. However, UNWRA observes frequent incursions and detentions of residents by Israeli security forces. They note that prior to the first intifada, many refugees living in Am'ari camp were able to move to surrounding villages and cities. However, the construction of the West Bank Barrier and rising prices for land have limited the mobility of Am'ari refugees, whose numbers have doubled since 1949.[56] Since the early 2000s, ORFA has sought to improve conditions in the camp and address the lack of prospects and opportunities for its residents. Recent projects have included the upgrading of a teaching room

[51] Peace Now, 'News: Establishment of new tourist settlement in Sebastiya Archeological Site adjacent to Palestinian village of Sebastiya' (2023), available at: {https://peacenow.org.il/en/the-government-voted-to-develop-the-sebastiya-archeological-site-located-adjacent-to-the-palestinian-village-of-sebastiya}.

[52] Jonathan Cook, 'Annexing Archaelogy: Will UNESCO take on Israel?', *Al Jazeera* (19 May 2016), available at: {https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/5/19/annexing-archaeology-will-unesco-take-on-israel}; Taghreed Ali, 'Israeli settlers threaten Palestinian archaeology in historic town of Sebastia', *Al-Monitor* (20 January 2021), available at: {https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/west-bank-sebastia-archaeology-israel-settler-attacks.html#ixzz83I2SH0vb}.

[53] Hanwell Friends of Sabastiya, 'HAFSA Projects in Sabastiya' (2022), available at: {https://hafsa.org.uk/trainers/}.

[54] Anna Feigenbaum and Anja Kanngieser, 'For a politics of atmospheric governance', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5:1 (2015), pp. 80–4; Anna Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas: From the Battlefields of World War I to the Streets of Today* (London: Verso Books, 2017); Hanwell Friends of Sabastiya, 'HAFSA Projects'.

[55] Oxford Friends of Ramallah, 'About Us' (2022), available at: {https://www.oxford-ramallah.org}.

[56] UNRWA, 'Profile'.

in the refugee camp's Women's Resource Centre and the fixing and replacing of toilets and changing rooms at the camp's youth centre. Since 2005, ORFA has organised several opportunities for children from Am'ari to visit Oxford. They are also officially partnered with the Palestinian History Tapestry Project (PHTP) a charitable project that encourages Palestinian women to use their skills with needlework and embroidery to recount the history of Palestine from Neolithic times to the present.[57] The premise of the PHTP is to raise awareness of Palestinian history and culture and to celebrate the particular importance of women and 'women's work' in preserving, cultivating, and narrating a sense of collective identity and belonging among the displaced. It is an expression of *sumud* (steadfastness), which is often figured as a 'third way' between submission and violence.[58] The first phase of the tapestry was unveiled in London a few years ago. The names of Palestinians who contributed to the project are followed in parentheses by the names of the places in Palestine from which their families originate, followed by their current locations.[59] The function of this was to draw attention to ongoing acts of dispossession from the OPTs.

Recognising that they form part of a complex assemblage of non-state actors working for, with, and on behalf of the Palestinian people, members of HAFSA and ORFA are keen to highlight the particular character and obligations of care implied in their twinning work: 'We are not political in the sense of supporting a party – and we are not a campaigning organisation. But being partnered with a place under occupation means that you do inevitably get drawn into political issues as they affect your community.'[60] Recounting one experience, during which a video-call between the part- nered towns was interrupted by the sound of gunfire, one member observed, 'Through the twinning links you really begin to see first-hand what it means to live under occupation.'[61] As such, the work of HAFSA, ORFA, and the wider Britain and Palestine Twinning and Friendship Network (BPFTN) can be understood in terms of feeling and witnessing. Their long-standing links to communities in the OPTs allow them to stay informed of the realities and hardships on the ground and gives them an empathetic orientation towards the communities they know, and this makes them especially well placed to call out and amplify abuses of power by the occupying forces. Meanwhile, as vehi- cles for ongoing communication and cooperation between Britain and the OPTs, the twinnings have also had an important performative function: by repeatedly enacting forms of recognition for Palestinian territory, culture, and identity, their friendship combats forms of erasure and ultimately foreshadows the possibilities for a future Palestinian state.

Twinning as restitution: Facilitating activist curation and supporting the return of cultural patrimony

In a recent report conducted on behalf of the French government, Sarr and Savoy[62] affirm that some 90 to 95 per cent of African cultural patrimony is held outside the continent. Most of this her- itage was removed during the during the so-called scramble for Africa, a race for territory among European colonial powers that took place in the late 18th and early 19th century, but patchy laws and persisting colonial logics mean that cultural objects have continued to leave the continent, being sold or simply taken away as aesthetic curiosities. Many African countries have been calling for the return of their cultural objects since they gained independence,[63] but so far very little has

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[57]Oxford Friends of Ramallah, 'The Palestinian History Tapestry Project' (2021), available at: {https://sites.create-cdn.net/sitefiles/61/8/1/618166/PHT_Exhibition_Report_Final_PDF.pdf}.

[58]Alexandra Rijke and Toine van Teeffelen, 'To exist is to resist: Sumud, heroism, and the everyday', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 59 (2014), pp. 86–99.

[59]Oxford Friends of Ramallah, 'Palestinian History Tapestry Project'.

[60]Anonymised research participant, 2020.

[61]Anonymised research participant, 2020.

[62]Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018), available at: {https://www.unimuseum.uni-tuebingen.de/fileadmin/content/05_Forschung_Lehre/Provenienz/sarr_savoy_en.pdf}.

[63]Ibid.

been returned. While more and more museums, galleries, and cultural-sector organisations across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia have been taking steps to address the colonial legacies of their institutions, there are differing views about what this process can and should entail, with responses ranging from inclusion and engagement with communities that have historically been looted or pillaged through to more concrete agendas of repatriation/rematriation, restitution, and reparation. As curator Dan Hicks contends, often 'national museums reduce "decolonisation" to artwashing by offering loans rather than return'.[64] He goes on to highlight that despite this, in many non-national museum settings, from those belonging to universities to those run by local authorities, there have been bolder and more experimental approaches.[65] Among these, it is possible to situate the story of the sister cities of Denver and Nairobi and their contribution to efforts to return the funerary statues of the Mijikenda peoples.

The Mijikenda are a group of nine related Bantu ethnic groups – the Chonyi, Kambe, Duruma, Kauma, Ribe, Rabai, Jibana, Giriama, and Digo – who live in Kenya's coastal regions. During the pre-colonial period, the Mijikenda cultivated plants and animals and participated in trade and political life alongside other nearby coastal and hinterland groups. However, under British colonial rule, relations between the various coastal populations were altered: the British favoured the Coastal Swahili over other local ethnic groups, affording them a heightened social and economic status, and in 1895 the British signed a treaty giving a large tract of coastal land to the Sultan of Zanzibar.[66] In effect, these processes led to some Mijikenda being dispossessed of their *kaya* (homesteads) and relegated to the status of squatters beholden to absentee landlords.[67] By the 1960s, *vigango* (singular, *kigango*) – cultural objects sacred to the Mijikenda – had found their way to international art markets. *Vigango* are life-sized carved statues that serve as memorials to Mijikenda elders. However, these are not funerary monuments in the Western sense. The Mijikenda believe that *vigango* are living objects that embody the spirits of their dead. Once erected, *vigango* are supposed to be left in situ to decay through natural forces, even if the community's *kaya* moves.

Although *vigango* are listed as 'protected objects' by the National Museums of Kenya and were first recognised as the cultural patrimony of peoples in the Republic of Kenya under the 1983 Antiquities and Monuments Act of Kenya, no international laws prevent foreign parties from owning *vigango*, and Kenyan law does not yet prevent their sale.[68] Gene Hackman, Powers Boothe, Linda Evans, Dirk Benedict, Shelley Hack, and Andy Warhol are among the artists and celebrities who have allegedly owned them.[69] As of 2005, some 400 *vigango* were believed to be held in museums in the United States. Indeed, as Steve Nash and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, curators at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS) discovered, 30 of these were to be found among the institution's collections. Keen to redefine the DMNS approach to collecting and curating, Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Nash initiated a conversation among trustees, and in 2007 committed to return the objects to their rightful owners. As Colwell-Chanthaphonh explained, 'just because a museum is not legally required to return cultural property does not mean it lacks an ethical obligation to do so'.[70] Embedded in this statement is a tacit recognition that the law often, if not always, takes time to catch up with evolving societal attitudes and normative standards.

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[64] Dan Hicks, 'Has the Sarr-Savoy Report had any effect since it was published?', *Apollo Magazine* (6 January 2020), available at: {https://www.apollo-magazine.com/sarr-savoy-report-sally-price-dan-hicks/}.

[65] Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

[66] James R. Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's flag: Sovereignty and decolonization in coastal Kenya', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50:4 (2008), pp. 831–61.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Joseph Nevadomsky, 'The Vigango Affair: The enterprise of repatriating Mijikenda memorial figures to Kenya', *African Arts*, 51:2 (2018), pp. 58–69.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Tom Mashberg, 'Sending artworks home, but to whom? Denver museum to return totems to Kenyan museum', *New York Times* (3 January 2014), available at: {http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/arts/design/denver-museum-to-return-totems-to-kenyan-museum.html}.

Colwell-Chanthaphonh had some experience of repatriation efforts *within* the United States. For years, he had been navigating questions of how to weigh the religious freedom and dignity of Native Americans against the academic freedom and research needs of archaeologists. His book *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*[71] follows the stories of four objects as they were created, collected, and ultimately returned under the auspices of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). A short 17 pages, NAGPRA establishes a legal framework, protocol, and enforcement mechanism for the return of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony to their lineal descendants, Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organisations. However, the international transfer and restitution of objects would prove to be much more complex. A patchwork of international conventions and governance mechanisms establishes the normative and legal imperatives for restitution as well as some limited guidance regarding procedure. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, for example, sets out a process for recovery and return. However, Kenya is not currently a signatory to the Convention. Other international legal instruments such as the Hague Conventions and International Commiittee of the Red Cross Customary Laws establish some procedures for restitution, but they only apply where the removal of cultural objects has taken place in the context of armed conflict. In short, there was no directly applicable international law and no obvious precedent or guidance for the transfer and return of *vigango* from the United States to Kenya. Moreover, Nash and Colwell-Chanthaphonh had great difficulty establishing contact with representatives of the Mijikenda or with cultural institutions in Nairobi. As Nash writes, 'from 2008 through 2013, Chip and I reached out to counterparts and colleagues at the Nairobi National Museum, but we were largely unsuccessful in getting their attention or help'.[72] Unbeknownst to the pair, Kenyan cultural institutions were in the midst of a major operational transformation. In 2006, the Kenyan Parliament had passed a new Museums and Heritage Act, which initiated a wholesale restructuring of Kenya's cultural sector into the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), a state corporation whose role was to collect, preserve, study, document, and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage. In the years that followed, Kenya's museums were working at full capacity to take stock of and manage the restructure. Calls and emails thus went unanswered.

In 2013, just as hopes of returning the statues were beginning to fade, Nash came into contact with members of the Denver–Nairobi sister-city committee. The sister-city committee had, since 1975, been working to foster a special relationship between the two cities. Nearly half a century of translocal engagement via skills-based delegations, fundraising, Kenyan independence day celebrations, and educational and cultural exchanges had paved the way for an extensive social network linking individuals from the arts, business, and local government in the two cities. It was the interpersonal relationships forged through this network – friendships built over decades – that came through for DMNS in the end. By leveraging its unique modality of soft power, the sister-city committee managed to connect DMNS with incoming leaders at NMK and facilitate a formal consultation and political commitment pertaining to the return of the *vigango*. In 2014, the sister-city organising committee again galvanised its friendship network to coordinate a public signing ceremony at the DMNS, an event involving the mayor of Denver, the Kenyan ambassador, and officials from the Nairobi city government and NMK. The ceremony involved a symbolic pledge to hand the statues over to the NMK, who would undertake further work with the Mijikenda to identify an appropriate final home for the monuments. Although this was not legally binding, the pledge constituted an important affirmation that the repatriation of the statues *should* and *would* commence. The event was covered in a 2014 *New York Times* editorial and a 2019

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[71]Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[72]Steve Nash, 'A Curator's Search for Justice', *Sapiens* (2020), available at: {https://www.sapiens.org/column/curiosities/vigango-repatriation/}.

TedXMileHigh story, which further magnified the case and set a new precedent for the return of stolen patrimony.

Regrettably, this was not the end of the saga for the statues, which got caught up in a dispute over import tariffs that further delayed their journey home by several years.[73] Nonetheless, this unusual story of activist curation and translocal networking points to some of the ways that twinned/sistered communities can and might contribute to the success of larger political-cultural agendas such as those of decolonisation, repatriation, and restitution. By mobilising its unique constellation of actors to amplify the story and create a new political corridor for the transfer of the *vigango* back to Kenya, the friendship network linking Denver and Nairobi participated in processes that ultimately seek to reposition and restore post-colonial states as the producers, patrons, purveyors, and protectors of global history and culture. Successful examples of repatriation driven and enabled by actors working at a translocal level not only offer alternative pathways and possibilities for action in this space, they also add normative weight to restitution claims made against national museums and other flagship cultural organisations whose approach to decolonising collections continues to be rather more 'light touch'.

Conclusion: Thinking differently about international friendship

In a 2011 International Political Sociology forum, Cynthia Enloe keenly reminded readers that 'the mundane matters'. Careful, considered attention to everyday activities, discourses, and habits can reveal the (often unstable) architecture and assumptions upon which our global political order has been built and sustained. It can show us whose voices, perspectives, and practices have been universalised and whose have been obscured from view. This paper has taken a cue from Enloe and her contemporaries by pausing to examine the seemingly mundane and routinely overlooked practice of twinning. The discussion presented above sought to characterise twinnings as 'dissident friendships' in the dual sense that they (1) challenge and disrupt the global political status quo; and (2) subvert or break with the models and expectations of friendship established in mainstream IR theory.

On the one hand, the three vignettes presented above reveal how twinning actors, engaging in acts of friendship, have furthered agendas of political solidarity, recognition, and restitution. UK–Nicaragua links did practical, symbolic, and performative work, providing material and technical assistance to impoverished communities while challenging US rhetoric in favour of the contras. Links between Britain and the West Bank have amplified everyday stories of violence, intimidation, and dispossession that characterise life under occupation. Meanwhile, those involved with the friendship tie between Denver and Nairobi have shown their support for a more activist curatorial model aligned with wider social and cultural agendas of decolonisation.

On the other hand, placing a spotlight on these twinnings also helps to magnify the limitations of existing work on international friendship in IR. As we have seen, these actors militate, act upon, and contribute to processes of change in international politics. But they are not states; rather, they are translocal constellations of people that operate *below and beyond* the level of the state, acting in ways that confound claims about the state's unitary disposition. Moreover, and contrary to expectations deduced from existing scholarship on friendship in IR, the connective relationships examined in this paper are not purely strategic. Rather, they consist in actions that are driven, at least in part, by affective, emotional, and moral cues. Friendships between British residents and West Bank Palestinians, although strategically oriented towards a future settlement that is just and pacific, are underpinned and driven by an ethic of care. The materially impactful solidarities that emerged between Nicaraguan militants and *internacionalistas* in the wake of the Contra war were formed through manifold personal encounters and the affectivities they produced. The 'soft power' of the Denver Nairobi committee and its ability to mobilise a network of influential sub-national

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[73]Denver Museum for Nature and Science, 'The Vigango Repatriation' (2020), available at: {https://www.dmns.org/learn/dmns-at-home/watch/science-division-live/the-vigango-repatriation/}.

institutions and officials is built upon decades of translocal interaction where people have 'gotten to know one another' and build relations of trust, respect, and care. Thus, as an example of international friendship, the twinnings under study in this paper confound attempts to draw stark analytical divisions between the interpersonal and international, forcing us to recognise, *qua* Enloe (1989),[74] that the personal is of course political, and the personal is international too.

The point of this study, it must be said, is not to idealise twinning or to overstate its ability to intervene in global political affairs. Obviously, no one translocal partnership can single-handedly change the world. Nonetheless, a focus on the dissident friendships embodied in twinning gives us the opportunity to trace important counter-narratives and sites of resistance that provide some of the scaffolding and rehearsals for a world that might be otherwise.

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[74]Cynthia Enloe and Beaches Bananas, *Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora,1989).