Any display of any object is the result of a vast number of choices made by a wide range of people. When information about the economics and ethics of the acquisition of those objects is added to this picture, however, these choices take on additional meanings: the money for purchasing some of the objects exhibited here was earned from work done for petroleum companies notorious for decades of exploitative labor and environmental policies and practices in Africa. Does our thinking about a piece of jewelry on a wrist change when this kind of information is included in an exhibition such as this one?

Inspired by Fred Wilson’s 1992 exhibition “Mining the Museum” at the Maryland Historical Society, Backtalk hopes to create an open dialogue around Bryn Mawr College’s African collection by engaging in the global conversation concerning the display and interpretation of African art and archaeological materials. In honor of Black History Month and looking ahead to the completion of the new Black Cultural Center on campus, Bryn Mawr College’s Special Collections and Africana Studies programs have collaborated on an exhibition of selected objects and selective information from the College’s African Art Collection. In showcasing artworks keyed to various aspects of family, political and spiritual life, the exhibition invites viewers to engage, questions of what the collection includes, leaves out, clarifies and obscures, as well as how this collection came to be and how it functions within and beyond the College.

As an exhibition, Backtalk strives to facilitate meaningful discussions about the complexity of exhibition and ownership of African cultural items. In order to actively center the voices, culture, and experiences of people of African and Indigenous descent when displaying their works, we must actively work to de-center the people, institutions and languages that colonized these peoples.

* In solidarity with all global indigenous people, the curators of this exhibition ask the forgiveness of the Lenape, upon whose ancestral land this show is displayed.
Opening reception. On February 5, 2015, 6:00 to 7:00pm, the community is warmly invited to an opening reception in the Canaday Library Coombe Suite immediately before the Naomi Tutu Black History Month Keynote lecture.

Panel Discussion. On Wednesday, February 18, 6:00-8:00 pm, a group of scholars will discuss methods for talking back, with attention to the tensions and synergies between scholarly and political discourse.

Creative Workshop. On Saturday, February 21, 11:30am to 1:30pm, participants will respond via writing, visual media, and/or performance to pieces/aspects of the exhibition in a workshop led by Alice Lesnick, Term Professor of Education, Director, Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program, and Coordinator, Africana Studies. Location: Coombe Suite.

Social Media. Viewers are invited to engage virtually via a Backtalk webspace at Serendip Studio.

Organized by Whitney Lopez BMC’15; Alice Lesnick, Term Professor of Education, Director, Bryn Mawr/Haverford Education Program, and Coordinator, Africana Studies; and Brian Wallace, Curator and Academic Liaison for Art and Artifacts.

Support for this project has been provided by the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Library, the Africana Studies Program, and Special Collections.

Serendip Studio online engagement. All are invited to join in ongoing dialogue with exhibition materials and other people via serendip.brynmawr.edu/oneworld/backtalk. This web space will persist beyond the physical show and we hope it will foster independent thought, bring in multiple perspectives and languages, and generate new energy and knowledge around these issues and objects.