

Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum

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Royal Religion Series

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Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum

WORD COUNT:8760



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PROVOCATION BY

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When it comes to the study of artworks as material culture, there are few more familiar idioms than that of the “life-history” of the object. From Arjun Appadurai’s formulation of “the social life of things” (1986) to Bruno Latour’s business-school model of “actor-networks” (1993), over the past generation a particular variety of materialist anthropology has taken root in those parts of historical studies that deal with things.¹ “If humans have biographies, so should things”, some historians of science have proposed.² In the history of art meanwhile, the reception of Alfred Gell’s influential text *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* recast artworks as “indexes”, distributing the agency of artists, as part of the “relational texture of social life”, where biography is expanded from human into the non-human realms.³ As if anthropocentrism were in the top ten problems with art theory (a field that is perhaps more accurately not human enough). Through this consumption of anthropological theory, the analogy of artefactual histories with human lives has come to be inculcated as a genre of historiography. In the process, I want to suggest, older, deeper, long-standing forms of object-oriented inclinations and prejudices have

been refreshed and emboldened. At times the notion of object biography has served to fix the boundaries of things rather too firmly by tending to overestimate physical constancy in the face of movement between shifting human contexts, what Igor Kopytoff called “regimes of value”.⁴ But for conservators, archaeologists, curators, and others who work with physical things, it is always clear that any object is at least as unstable as its context; that any life-history is always a life course, with ageing, decay, maintenance, death, rather than just serial recontextualisation. In other words, it is clear that any object or artwork is always to some extent a form of event and an endurance, rather than being purely reducible to some kind of subject. Contexts can also decay. Cultures, as any student of anthropology must learn, can be degraded. No contemplation lasts forever. Even theories can decompose. The world can outlive an idiom. Maybe this is what is now happening to the idea of object life-histories.

The primary institutional context that was physically and laboriously assembled and constructed by anthropologists for their theoretical studies of material culture—those Euro-American spaces, variously called the “ethnological”, “anthropological” or “world culture” museum, filled with the cultural heritage of the global south transported under colonialism—is not simply decaying. It has failed. The central role of such collections in the objectification of so-called “non-Western” human cultures was not foregrounded in those late twentieth-century theoretical discussions of object agency—but this was doubtless the principal source of the category error through which objects came to be treated analytically as subjects.⁵

Today the role not just of objectification but also of cultural dispossession in the ongoing history of European colonialism is coming into focus in new ways.⁶ The legitimacy of institutions in the global north that oversaw and enacted the ideological hyper-concentration of “world culture” during colonialism is evaporating as calls for restitution, reparations, and justice grow. Each stolen object, insofar as it is an unfinished event, is also some form of outstanding debt. And to refuse to return what was stolen, just as Marcel Mauss famously described for the refusal to reciprocate when a gift has been given, is tantamount to “a declaration of war”.⁷

From London and Oxford to Berlin and New York, as these museums start to fail, it is clearer than ever that those anthropological theories of material culture, as they were received within art history, were never innocent metaphors, without histories of their own—or without politics in the contemporary moment. The failure of the world culture museum brings about a kind of flip, some form of figure-ground reversal. This failure is conceptual just as much as it is ethical. I mean that one emerging consequence of the failure of the world culture museum is a conceptual recalibration: with the decomposition of the idea of object life-histories comes the sudden emergence of its counterpoint (which was surely always there) into plain sight.

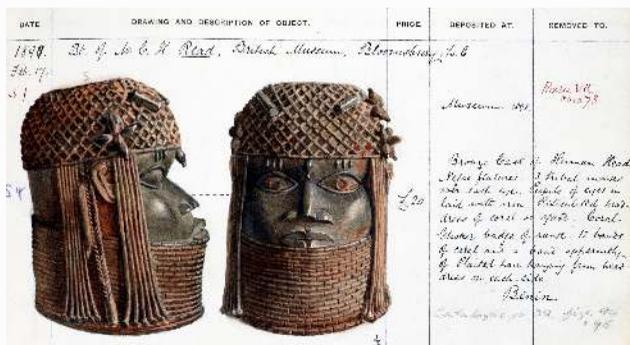


Figure 1

Illustration of a Brass Head of an Oba (1550–1680), with notes on its provenance, from the catalogue of the collection of the second Pitt Rivers Museum at Farnham, Dorset, 1898, ink and watercolour on paper. Collection of the University of Cambridge Libraries (Add.9455), Vol. 5, 1590. Digital image courtesy of University of Cambridge Libraries (all rights reserved).



Figure 2

Brass Head of an Oba, currently on view in Gallery 352 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1550–1680, metal sculpture, 27.3 × 21.3 × 21.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller (1979.206.87). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Take the example of the Benin Bronzes—thousands of sacred and royal artworks from the City of Benin in what is today Edo State, Nigeria, violently looted in 1897 by British naval officers and colonial administrators, now scattered across more than 160 museums around the globe as well as countless private collections (figs 1–3). Tens of thousands were killed and the spoils of war were chaotically acquired and displayed to illustrate an ideology of cultural supremacy.⁸ In spring 2016, art historian John Boardman wrote in the pages of *Common Knowledge*, a respected Duke University Press journal that: “With the Benin bronzes, the rape proved to be a rescue”.⁹

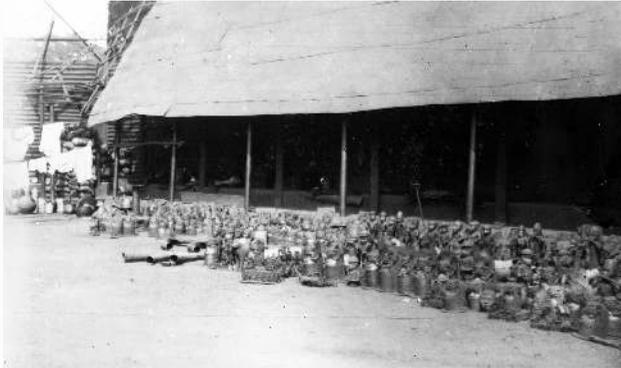


Figure 3

Bronze Heads and other sacred and royal looted objects lined up by British troops in the aftermath of their attack on Benin City, February 1897, photograph. Collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum Photographic Collection. Digital image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum Photographic Collection (all rights reserved).

Or think of the so-called “Elgin Marbles”—that group of Classical Greek marble sculptures made in the fifth century BCE and brought from the Parthenon to the British Museum by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, just over 200 years ago, in 1812, which are currently living a strange afterlife as an iconic and conventional first point of reference for British conversations about the restitution of looted cultural heritage. Speaking to the Greek magazine *Ta Nea* in Spring 2019, Hartwig Fischer, the Director of the British Museum, said: “When you move cultural heritage into a museum, you move it out of context. However, this shift is also a creative act.”¹⁰

Such comments are not merely the antiquated views of an outgoing generation; they represent long-standing intellectual positions in art history with roots in extractivist colonialism which have been bolstered over the past two or three decades by the reception of the anthropological notion of object biography—a concept which as we have seen presents a positive, incremental model of recontextualisation, where each new setting is a new accumulated layer of life for an itinerant object, a creative phase full of new meaning, some kind of semiotic patina. The idea of the *cultural biography* of objects has thus served to stifle any discussion of enduring colonial violence and dispossession over time. What is silenced, then, in our model of life-histories are histories of loss and death.

In my new book *The British Museums*, I suggest a name for the curatorial work that can excavate such inverse histories—*necrography*—and a name to the knowledge that emerges from them—*necrology*.¹¹ These neologisms take inspiration from Achille Mbembe’s inversion of Michel Foucault’s classic account of the “biopolitical”, in his idea of “necropolitics”. Foucault described a transformation that took place during the nineteenth century, through which a sovereign’s power to “take life or let live” came to be joined by the emergent power of the state to “make live and let die”; it was “the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomopolitics of the human body, but ... a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race”, Foucault suggested.¹² The potential of this Foucauldian biopolitical approach, especially as it was developed by Giorgio Agamben through his account of “bare life” has been explored in many different ways in the study of the violent displacement of people under extractive, militarist colonialism.¹³ How might it apply to the parallel case of the violent displacement of objects?

Achille Mbembe's account of "necropolitics" provides a powerful corrective to the Eurocentrism of Foucault's account, and to the general absence of the enduring and unfinished legacies of empire in uses of Agamben's account of "bare life" in African Studies and beyond. Crucially, Mbembe underlines the role of colonial histories and their continued after-effects, and in doing so he expands the persistent Foucauldian focus on the living body. For example, he shows how it is the use of the bulldozer for the continual destruction of the lived environment, as much as the fighter jet used for precision strikes targeting individuals, that is central to the practice of neocolonialism in Palestine as an "infrastructural warfare".¹⁴ We learn then from Mbembe that necropolitical conditions can be made through attacks upon the wider non-human environment as well as just the human body.

If the taking and retention of artworks represents a kind of enduring infrastructural colonial war, made to last in the galleries of museums, then perhaps some kind of forensic death-writing, or autopsy, is part of what colonial collections require of the curator. An exercise in contemporary archaeology (the excavation of the recent past and the near-present). Forensic because this is about understanding the truth at the scene of a crime. Not an object biography but a *necrography*. Central here is what we might call a "Euro-pessimism"—by which I mean that the knowledge that Europeans can make with stolen objects in the anthropology museum will be coterminous with knowledge of European colonialism, wholly dependent upon anti-Black violence and dispossession, until such a time as these enduring processes are adequately revealed, studied, understood, and until the work of restitution—the physical dismantling of the white infrastructure of every anthropology and "world culture" museum—is begun.

The question of restitution requires Euro-American museums not just to generate new top-down curatorial policies but also to collaborate on new bottom-up conceptual realignments, to share knowledge of what's in these collections with full transparency on provenance and archival detail; to listen to and to amplify long-standing demands from Africa and across the global south and First Nations. Our choice of theory is never neutral, not least when the question of returns remains unresolved. The collections of "world culture" museums are a form of colonial archive that wasn't burned or destroyed by the coloniser, in part a kind of unique melancholy index to the central role of art in the history of empire, of dispossession, and of the ideology of "race" and racism. Anthropological/ethnological museums were put to work to make these dispossessions endure. But each museum, like any object or assemblage—and like the disciplines of anthropology and art history themselves—is an unfinished event. We don't know how this ends. We've never needed something like a world culture museum more than we do today—a space in which to encounter and to celebrate art beyond a Eurocentric lens. But can we imagine anthropological museums fit for the twenty-first century—museums where nothing is stolen? Can we hope that a decade of unravelling these *necrographies* of silence and loss, a decade of returns, may lie ahead?

Yes. But for what some call the "decolonisation" of museums or history curriculums, and what others (myself included) prefer to see as the unfinished work of anti-colonialism and anti-racism in the academy, to effect any meaningful change to disciplines or institutions, we need to dismantle and also to reimagine concepts as well as physical displays. Writing histories of theft, co-producing and sharing knowledge of dispossession, involves undoing the renewal of the colonial model of the world culture museum—a renewal wrought through the reception of anthropological theories of object biography. The curatorial work of physical returns of looted objects is urgent, but there is also conceptual work to do.

RESPONSE BY

Priya Basil

Writer

Writing to Life

Can the task of necrography be left to the very places—the *ethno-illogical* museums—that have long propagated racist classifications and hierarchies, turned stolen cultural artefacts into tools for enforcing white domination? How to guard against necrography becoming yet another form of self-serving inventory—something at which museums are so skilled? How to avoid necrography as a kind of in-house purgatory through which museums pass only to feel absolved? Death writing is necessary, but alone it won't suffice.

“An object is at least as unstable as its context”, Dan Hicks reminds us in his provocation for this feature. If we were to replace the term “objects” with “*belongings*”, might it help underline that instability, signal the precarious nature of possession, the ever-shifting, *living* relations between people, places, and things? *Belongings* ties up notions of (not) having, of being, of longing.

Belongings suggests a multifariousness that requires many modes of telling.

A necrography can map the colonial landscape around a museum's collections. Yet, even as it reveals topographies of terror, its contours will repeatedly fade into blankness, terra incognita—ruptures in time, space, and story that cannot be retraced: what of those killed during looting, those who survived and lived—still remain—without their belongings? Which forms of investigation, what narration might give shape to those experiences? And the belongings themselves, imbued as many were—are—with spirit, with symbolism, with more than we can know—how to express the effects of their theft, the ways they were damaged, misused, misplaced, forgotten? Such questions leave one “straining against the limits of the archive”, as Saidiya Hartman wrote after a different, if related, search.¹⁵ Her practice of “critical fabulation”, melding history, theory, and fiction, aims “to displace the received or authorized account ... to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done”.¹⁶

Museums truly committed to investigating their collections would benefit from a similar, fabular approach. I propose that forensic dissection unite with unfettered imagination; I see necrography mixing with artistry to enable what I will call *fabulography*—a practice of projecting freely, associatively into the gaps of the past to retrieve in any form—song, dance, film, text, drawing, recipe—something of what has been lost. These attempts would create potentiality, other kinds of liveliness, around objects—a challenge to the stifling authority of traditional museums, which have for too long promulgated their own myths and denied other narrations. Instead, the museum would now, in a sense, voluntarily de-platform itself. The museum becomes a counter-museum in the vein of what James E. Young called “‘counter-monuments’: memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument”.¹⁷ Museum spaces reconfigured to disrupt the usual workings of the museum.

Whereas necrography is likely to be the prerogative of experts within institutions, fabulography can be performed by experts from without, such as artists, and also by anyone entering the museum space—indeed it may be best carried out as an ongoing, polyphonic, collective enterprise. Where necrography necessarily goes down into the deadly depths, fabulography rises in full knowledge of what's below—with the equally necessary imperative to reanimate, through manifold perspectives and narratives, belongings that have for too long been objectified by the museum. Fabulography is not about filling in or claiming the voids exposed by necrography, but respectfully inhabiting them, imagining in-with-through them, creating from them.

Picture the museum that opens up to such a process, a kind of cultural Truth and Reconciliation Commission: inviting people and artists in communities from which belongings were taken, as well as other artists and even museum visitors, to share—through exchanges, workshops, displays—in shaping other kinds of landscapes for belonging. A landscape where collections are not cut off and fixed in time, but visibly kept in flux as what’s around them changes. A space of reparation—if it might really be possible, as Hartman proposed, “to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive”.¹⁸ A place in which belongings are not just something to look at, but long for-with-through on the understanding that those which are wanted back must be returned (fig. 4).



Figure 4

Priya Basil, *Locked In and Out*, 2021, film essay, 35 mins 4 secs. Digital file courtesy of Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (all rights reserved).

RESPONSE BY
Haidy Geismar
Professor of Anthropology
University College London

In Defence of the Object Biography

As Dan Hicks argues, many museums have stuffed the unsavoury histories of their collections, not so much under the carpet, but in the museum equivalents—the storeroom, the password protected database—well out of the public eye. Hicks’ recent book, *The Brutish Museums* (2020), follows his own realization, as a curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, of the lengthy (and often wilful) amnesia that has polluted so many of our cultural institutions.¹⁹ The recent publication of the National Trust’s Interim Report on the “Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery” demonstrates the start, in the UK, of a more widespread institutional reckoning with these aspects of our history.²⁰ However, public response to the report, both from a portion of the Trust’s membership, and from vocal segments of mainstream media and the political

establishment, is evidence of an ongoing and deep-seated discomfort in the direction that this public conversation will necessarily take us—towards a discussion of restitution, repatriation, and redress.²¹ This sets us far behind other former colonizing countries, for instance, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, where debates about national accountability and repatriation of museum collections are being prominently led and supported by the state.²²

Audre Lorde famously noted that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”.²³ Yet, here I want to push back on Hicks’ assertion that the analytic toolkit of the object biography, as it has emerged across a number of academic disciplines, is rendered useless by its use as a tool in the cover-up by museums of their difficult histories. The notion of the object biography, and of the social life of things, has been an important heuristic that has entered museums from social research fields, and crucially from stakeholder communities as well as academics, enabling the surfacing of alternative narratives, counter-histories, and histories from below. Take for example the project *100 histories of 100 worlds in One Object*, launched in 2019 by Mirjam Brusius and colleagues at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, in direct response to the master narratives assumed by the British Museum’s *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.²⁴ Making explicit use of the notion of the object biography, projects like *100 Histories* enable a proliferation of perspectives as a necessary corrective to the curatorial and institutional authority of national museums (and the property relations that this authority bolsters) made explicit by former British Museum director Neil MacGregor’s rendition of the “encyclopaedic museum” as “the whole world in our hands”.²⁵ Object biographies, as material narratives, exemplified in visual form perhaps by the image illustrating my words—*The African Library* by Yinka Shonibare—provide opportunities to present the complexity and multiplicity of experience that surrounds the singular stories often presented by short labels in museums; they enable objects to be linked to different voices and to tell expanded histories (fig. 5). The methodology emerged in relation to understanding the complex global values of objects as they moved from place to place; and has been used with great effect to delegitimize narratives of national superiority and imperial conquest in museums. Object biographies can empower and create space for voices from outside of the institution, and can become a crucial part of the citational refresh that is so dearly needed within the scholarship on these questions—moving us away from the voices of (in the main) white men, in positions of institutional authority.



Figure 5

Yinka Shonibare, *The African Library*, part of the *Trade Winds* exhibition, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa, 2018, installation. Digital image courtesy of Yinka Shonibare CBE / DACS / Photo: Lois GoBe / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

By so stringently throwing away concepts and tools such as object biography and replacing them with necrology/necrography, Hicks replaces the possibility of a polyphonous, grass-roots or bottom-up approach with yet another top-down perspective. If we must, as he writes, “dismantle and.... reimagine concepts as well as physical displays” in order “to effect any meaningful change to disciplines or institutions”, surely we must start with an approach that gives much more space to voices that have been so violently displaced and suppressed? Alongside the broader theorization and recognition of violence and yes, base criminality that Hicks explicates, we also need to include voices that, for example, are working through discourses of healing and redress. There is no space within the theorization of necrology for the voices of survival, or in the words of Gerald Vizenor “survivance”: a concept that was used to underpin the building and curation of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC.²⁶ In several large museum projects, Indigenous curators have rejected the model of memorialization enshrined so well by Holocaust museums (there can be no better instantiation of Hicks' formulation of necrography or necrology). Curators at NMAI, and at other Indigenized national museums, have insisted that their narratives transcend the conceptual as well as literal colonization of genocide and cultural annihilation as the dominant framework used to represent Native peoples. Rather than the anthropomorphism that Hicks derides, the object biography is a conduit through which diverse narratives can be made visible, and material, solidifying alternative epistemologies in the museum. Dismantling the house is as much about crafting new futures as it is about learning from the past. The notion of the object biography should not be discarded as an important tool in this enterprise.

RESPONSE BY
Marlene Kadar
Professor, School of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
York University

Reading the Trapper Point Blanket: Coded Conquest

Of all the European goods made for the “Indian Fur Trade” probably none is more emblematic of that era of commerce than the point blanket.²⁷

Artefacts of deemed significance belong to museums and thus have institutional status.

Undervalued artefacts occupy an ambiguous in-between zone—between the political and global history of taking, and the privatised history of domestic space and giving.

The Trapper Point wool blanket is one such ambiguously situated object, a beautiful textile whose legacy is shrouded in Canada’s colonial settler history and the fur trade. The blanket operates as a signifier of everyday domestic life, and simultaneously of how anti-Indigenous racism is enabled by empire-building and its markets.²⁸ Although in this case not the direct product of violent imperialist extraction, the blanket has cruelty written into its weft.

If we allow ourselves to take life-writing and the personal archive as links between a Trader Point blanket and the necropolitical, we can address the unfinished work in this conversation—wrapping domestic objects into the sphere of Hicks’ provocation.²⁹ In the case of the blanket, the trauma done by stealing skews and delays a full understanding of its history. Due to this belatedness, its past owners could not have grasped the blanket’s contentious history as either a straightforward chronology or an insight about the traumatic stories out of which it evolved.³⁰

Indeed, the blanket represents both lost subjects and contested objects.³¹

Dan Hicks’ “Euro-pessimistic” view of museums is poignant in considering such troubled and traumatic histories. The blanket whose details are seen here is a wedding gift stored in a domestic archival space, my mother’s closet (figs 6 and 7). As a white immigrant woman married in 1948, her ownership is also troubled, a kind of breach. The blanket celebrated new love and a hopeful future in the new land. The land, however, had been stolen, and the First Nations dismantled to make room for white settlers and future waves of migrants—a complicated story of the long arm of wealth and consequent poverty.

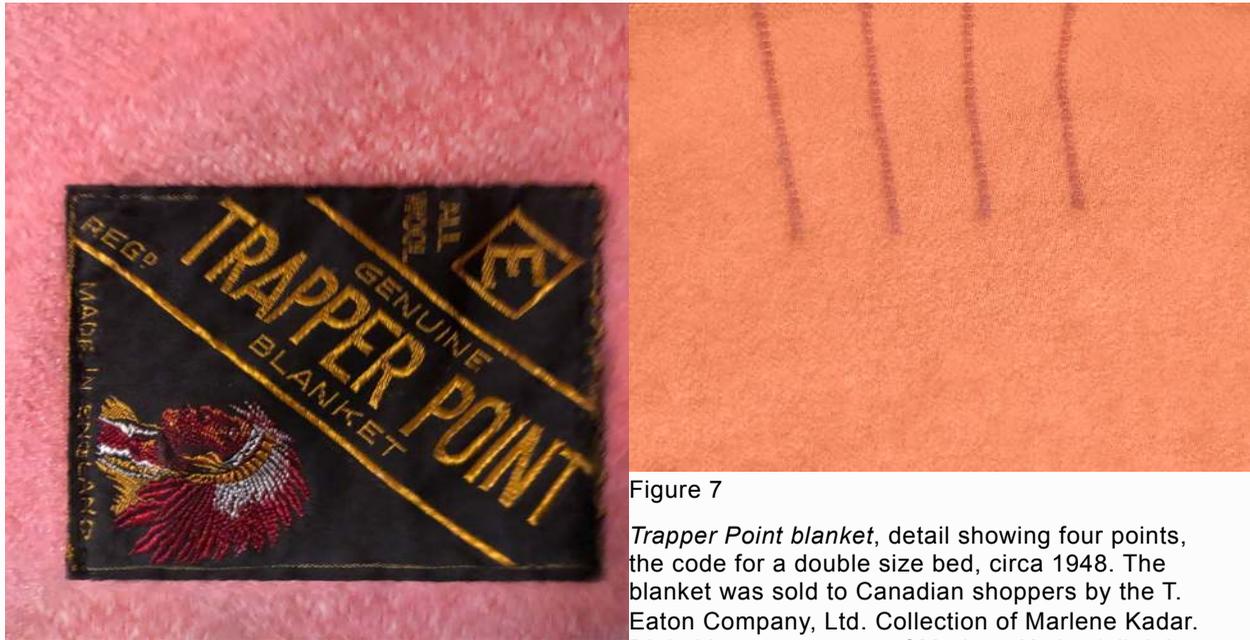


Figure 6

Trapper Point Blanket, detail showing the original brand label stitched into the corner of the blanket, circa 1948. The label authenticates the “genuine” Trapper Point blanket by marketing the blanket with a racist stereotype of the “Indian Chief”. The label also indicates that in spite of a market in the colonies, the blanket is “Made in England”. Collection of Marlene Kadar. Digital image courtesy of Marlene Kadar (all rights reserved).

Figure 7

Trapper Point blanket, detail showing four points, the code for a double size bed, circa 1948. The blanket was sold to Canadian shoppers by the T. Eaton Company, Ltd. Collection of Marlene Kadar. Digital image courtesy of Marlene Kadar (all rights reserved).

Hicks invokes the phrase, death-writing, in two guises: first, as a practice that chronicles the past, but does so in the present; and second, as a “forensic” activity in the present that also stretches into the political future of a just restitution, an unfinished event. In other words, as the responsible, ethical act of the anthropologist who acknowledges necrography but also intends to address it by “writing histories of theft” and dispossession.

I suggest that life-writing studies can intervene to amplify that story without adhering fully to the constraints of an artefact biography. For me, the subject of a biography is heroic and their life story, coherent. The life-writing subject is more varied.³² Leigh Gilmore explores life-writing genres that dodge the boundaries of telling regimes in order to authorize the “silenced life-histories of stolen culture”.³³ These genres are limit cases, which can broaden the literary and archival field, making a just outcome more likely. The Trapper Point blanket, for example, can be seen as a limit case genre, which encodes domesticated suffering and loss without our knowing it at the time. Against the grain of official histories, it archives a story that can be read in future.³⁴ The eponymous points served as glyphs that indicate the size of the blanket or, some say, the exchange value in “made-beaver”—the number of adult pelts for which the blanket might be traded.³⁵ The label in Figure 6 authenticates the blanket with a racist image of a Chief in headdress, thereby proving the blanket is not an imitation, but the real thing, “Made in England” and registered (“REG’d”). *Empointer* encodes a story of dimensions and value, while the label chronicles multiple cruelties: decimation of the beaver, killing off of the buffalo, the racialisation

of Indigenous peoples, and genocidal intent as the Crown's Commander-in-Chief suggested using point blankets to carry smallpox and "extirpate this execrable race".³⁶ All this was accomplished in the name of the Crown, in aid of, as it turns out, the dispossession of traditional First Nations' lands.

In this context, a form of limit-case "writing" is sewn into the Trapper Point blanket as death-writing. Both the points and the label cannot avoid coding the conquest of Canada's First Nations, no matter where—like the museum's booty—the blanket is stored, preserved, or displayed. The relationship between life-writing and death-writing is imprecise, but perhaps the latter is subsumed in the former and may be its most virulent disguise. Here is how the blanket performs limit-case qualities and calls on us to uncover its disguise in the present tense. Writing the life of this object—underpinned by reading it closely—merges with chronicling associated deaths. The encounter that difficult knowledge imparts—even in a domestic space—underscores the "urgent, overdue task of *necrography*" that Hicks proposes.

RESPONSE BY

Emeka Ogboh

Artist

Vermisst in Benin: An Artistic Intervention

Vermisst in Benin (Missing in Benin) is an artistic intervention that seeks to accelerate and actualize the narrative around the repatriation of the Kingdom of Benin artefacts currently in possession of the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden (figs 8–12). The reparation dialogue to date has been ineffective in returning the artefacts to their original home of Benin City, Nigeria. I created the *Vermisst in Benin* artistic intervention out of a sense of impatience and necessity, aiming to frame the stagnant and abstract discourse surrounding colonial reparations with the urgency and gravity of a public service announcement.



Figure 8

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).

Figure 9

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).

Figure 10

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).



Figure 11

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).

Figure 12

Emeka Ogboh, *Vermisst in Benin*, poster, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Emeka Ogboh (all rights reserved).

Taking to the streets of Dresden with posters declaring that these bronzes are “Missing in Benin”, I hope to demystify what has become an elitist dialogue confined to the museum and arts sector. In moving into the public domain with the instantly recognizable format of a missing poster, I

hope to reclaim this issue as a post-colonial and societal responsibility. No one is exempt from the repercussions of colonialism and as long as issues of agency, ownership, and freedom continue to exist. Society must act as a whole to repatriate artefacts that are simply not theirs. These posters are a call to action, a transparent and clear message that can be understood and digested by all. Missing posters rely upon an absent variable: the missing object itself or the location an object should be returned to. In many ways, this intervention highlights the absurdity of why these artefacts still remain in the museum, when their origin and current location are both public knowledge. In their cooperation with the project, the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden opens dialogue for a new way forward, which does not hide or shy away from the clear and damning facts. *Vermisst in Benin* is a profound approach to a conversation that has simply gone on too long and which belongs firmly in the public consciousness.

RESPONSE BY

Fernando Domínguez Rubio

University of California San Diego

Storage as a Form of Violence

Dan Hicks calls on us to rethink the museum by shifting our focus to neglected “histories of loss and death”. In this short reply, I want to argue that any such shift must involve buildings like the one pictured below.

Located in an unsuspecting corner of Long Island, this remarkably unremarkable building is one of the most important in the art world (fig. 13). Inside its walls, you will find most of MoMA’s 200,000-object collection. There are many other buildings like this hiding in plain sight in nondescript urban and rural areas. Together, they make up a vast, and yet largely uncharted, geography that exists as an inverted image of the museums and galleries that populate modern narratives about art and culture. Interestingly, this geography is rarely part of the conversations around museums and their politics, even if it is where the vast majority of collected objects *actually* live.



Figure 13

QNS, the Museum of Modern Art's main storage facility, 2019, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Fernando Domínguez Rubio (all rights reserved).

I concur with Hicks when he argues that we should require museums to inform us about “what’s in the storerooms”. But I also think that our engagement with museum storages should go beyond that demand because museum storages are not simply informative as fossilized records

of past forms of colonial violence. They are powerful machines actively organizing the contemporary logics of extraction and dispossession through which colonial violence is perpetuated *and extended* today.

Contemporary storages do not rely on the “good old” forms of plundering and killing that generated them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, they operate through a more subtle, but equally pervasive and no less effective, form of infrastructural violence—one that sits at the heart of the promise of care that these storages offer.

To understand what this promise of care entails, we first need to move beyond the traditional image of the storage as an inert, cobweb-filled repository where artworks sit idly until they are retrieved. Contemporary storages are powerful and sophisticated machines designed to artificially extend the life of the objects they contain by slowing down the chemical and mechanical processes through which death itself unfolds. Slowing down death does not come easily, or cheaply. It requires a complex infrastructural apparatus involving, among other things, massive energy-intensive air-conditioning systems, costly logistics, and high-end security.³⁷

It should not come as a surprise that only the largest and wealthiest museums can afford these machines, which also means that only they can afford to uphold the promise of care. It makes perfect sense, then, that when artists, private collectors, and artists’ estates sell or donate their collections, they choose those museums that, like MoMA, have storages that can care for them. This is especially the case for those artists and collections from the south. For most of these objects, entering these storages entails a devil’s bargain: they are promised care and life, but in exchange they must accept invisibility, as most of them will be confined forever to the silence of the storage. Only a few will briefly leave their confinement when their difference serves curators seeking to “extend”, “disrupt”, “compensate”, or “punctuate” the hegemonic narratives that they endlessly weave and re-weave.

My call to attend to storages and their histories is not simply a call to complement or extend narratives about the museum with stories about what sits in their backstage. If we need to pay attention to storages, it is because they force us to fundamentally reconceptualize the museum and its role. They do so by showing us that it is not possible to separate how objects are narrated, represented, and imagined from how they are stored and cared for. Storages remind us that any form of keeping entails a form of loss as its necessary and unavoidable shadow. And, in so doing, they remind us that in a museum, forgetting is not the other of keeping, much in the same way that necrography is not the other biography. Understanding this, understanding how loss is created in the name of care in the silence of storages, is key to revealing the uneven geographies of power and dispossession that define whose memories are being narrated today, where they are narrated, and, more importantly, by whom.

RESPONSE BY

Clémentine Deliss

Associate Curator, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin and Director

Metabolic Museum-University

MANIFESTO FOR THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO COLONIAL COLLECTIONS

SEQUESTERED IN WESTERN EUROPEAN MUSEUMS

February 2021

Where are we now in 2021?

125 years since the first Venice Biennale,
with its colonialist infrastructure and

anachronistic golden lion,
adopted and adapted,
to reach today over 200 iterations worldwide.
29 years since the first edition of Dak'Art, the Biennale of visual arts in Senegal.
29 years since Alpha Oumar Konaré, former president of Mali,
and president of ICOM, stated:

"that it's about time that we questioned
the fundamental basis of the situation and killed
—I repeat killed—
the Western model of the museum in Africa in order
for new methods for the conservation and promotion
of our heritage to flourish."

Let's think back to these colonial museums:
1863: Saint-Louis, Senegal:
the Museum of Tropical Africa, created by Louis Faidherbe
in the service of the French republic;
1907: Windhoek, Namibia:
the museological structure set up by colonial Germany;
1910: Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria:
the museums founded by British imperialism;
British museums!

And one century later,
in the throes of post-independence:
1966: the Musée Dynamique—
the *dynamythical* museum of
Léopold Sédar Senghor opens in Dakar
(Rest in peace!)

All that desire for internationalism,
for festivals, gatherings, and workshops,
those manifestations in Dakar
at the Village des Arts,
the collectives of *Tenq* and *Huit Facettes*,
and the *Laboratoire Agit'Art*!
(Rest in peace!)

And slowly, but far too slowly,
the issue is raised of collections in Europe,
engendered through imperialism and the market,
and noxious colonialism with its sinister discourse
and serial kleptomania.
Vast collections locked up still today

in the ethnocolonial museums of Western Europe.

Damnatio memoriae!

* *

Intellectual and governmental plantations,
built on notions of imperialist progress,
the monoculture of ethnology and its
disciplinary and discursive closure.
Taxonomies and scientific racism!
Metabolisms covered in blood!
“Colomentalities!”
(Rest in peace!)

What to do today?

With the mass of what are called “objects”?

Objects in collections that are named “ethnographic”,
“object-witnesses”, as Marcel Griaule once said,
“objects” from the market in so-called “tribal art”?
These millions of objects,
an inordinate quantity in Europe alone.

All!

Without name,
without author,
without intellectual rights,
incarcerated by ethnology and its genealogies,
which originate, more often than not,
outside the countries of origin,
identified by collecting, re-sales,
and swapping between European museums.
A provenance at home in the salons
and “secret gardens” of “patrons”,
from Nelson Rockefeller
to Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière.

All these objects in inaccessible depots
under the Seine in Paris,
where sleep, in the holdings
of ships built for slavery,
these muted bodies,
these human remains.

Or otherwise, secreted in the urban periphery,
in that fridge-freezer of the soul,
confined because of their double or triple toxicity,
as carriers of microbiome,
capable of unleashing unexpected pandemics,

or so they tell us....

Necropolitics of sequestered objects!
Hyper-restrictive access!
Discursive claustrophobia!
Exerting control, control!
Control over future interpretations
because anything is possible if you omit
the artist,
the author,
the producer,
the name of the non-documented,
to replace it with ethnos.

Where are we today?
Restitution?
Yes, please!
Provenance research?
Yes, please!
Retrace the biographies of objects acquired or stolen?
Yes, please!
Find out what those object hunters and
organ poachers of the Other excluded?
Yes, please!
But where?
With whom?
With what?
Ah okay...

So, reify omission instead,
return to the source of biographic travesty,
go back to the original protagonists,
the priests of ethnological phantasmagoria.
Bring back the handmaidens of colonialism,
and encourage their hermeneutic labour once more,
restore the legitimacy of their discipline,
just as they were about to go into retirement....
Not sure?
No thanks!

That's when the European state magnanimously walks in,
hand in hand with the universal museum
of the twenty-first century!
Now, go get a visa to visit your heritage!
In Paris, London, Vienna, or Berlin!

A new building with new displays,
fashioned by interior design,
exclusive and expulsive
that only add a sentence or two....
Because that's the point:
They didn't document much on those colonial expeditions, did they?
Instead, it was collect! Collect! Collect!

Ah! The excoriation of the name of the engineer, the artist, the architect!
And the bombs of World War Two that destroyed the archives.
The fires in the reserves....
We know them all too well.
But, what a relief for biographical analysis!
What comfort for the status of the "masterpiece"!
But then, how to heal the colonial wound?
"Kill the museum!" declared Alpha Konaré.

Hold on! We insist upon restitution!
But not blindly, at the pace of a snail!
We won't wait for ethnological resuscitation
for "necrographies" and the organ trade
to restore the ghosts of the past!
We won't wait for the discourse of provenance,
with its polite politics,
step by step,
piece by piece.

We have to act now,
while restitution is underway!
And push for legislation between museums,
for the right of access
to the art histories of the worlds held in
the British Museum in London
the Quai Branly Museum in Paris
the Humboldt Forum in Berlin
the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam
the Africa Museum in Brussels
the Weltmuseum in Vienna
and so many more.
Open up those bunkers
And revise these collections,
while they are still in Europe.
Dare to radically rethink the condition of the museum,
and begin with the deepest of injuries,
where no redemption exists for the intermediary:

the curator.

Let's build museum-universities,
with an architecture made for healing.
Physical and conceptual spaces for remediation
and reinterpreting these agent-objects.
Let's face their stubborn materiality,
which has been so terribly neglected.
Let's build incongruous and problematic assemblages,
and yes, integrate digitalization....

But hold on!
Who will select what is to be digitalized?
Who will access the heart of this heritage,
knowingly hidden or forgotten,
if not the colporteurs of ethnology and the market?
And, let's not forget the parameters of conservation!
That ideology of materialist survival,
which is remarkably impenetrable,
with its *longue durée* of a thousand years or more.

No more monocultures!
No more intellectual plantations!
No more museum mimics!
No more aesthetic hegemonies!
No more object hierarchies!
No more museological pyramids!
That "absent air conditioning",
those "inadequate conservators",
etcetera, etcetera...

Let's change the ergonomics of museums,
these "orgone accumulators" of consumerism,
and open museum-universities!
Build spaces for inquiry
in these reservoirs of ingenuity,
with rooms for conceptual intimacy,
and disciplinary transgression
based on these anxious and contested collections.

Museum-universities!
To welcome the new generation
of students and researchers
more diasporic than ever before.
With their politics of communication

and decolonial methodologies.
So that, with patented prototypes,
based on these occluded historical collections,
we can rename the excluded authors,
and return both respect and copyright
to their ancestors!
Organs and alliances!

All of you!
Artists!
Writers!
Curators!
Filmmakers!
Lawyers!
Architects!
Ecologists!
Anthropologists!
Brothers and Sisters!

There is no time to lose!

RESPONSE BY
Nicholas Mirzoeff
New York University and Mellon-ACLS Resident Fellow at the Magnum Foundation
New York University

The Palestine Skull: The Nakba as Crime Scene in the British Museum

In his recent book, *The Brutish Museums*, Dan Hicks describes the methodology of his transformative work as “forensic because this is about understanding the truth at the scene of a crime”—a forensic archaeology of the present.³⁸ Hicks evokes Benjamin’s famous comment about Atget’s photographs but with a difference: it states not individuals committing the crimes. In Palestine, for example.

Consider the so-called Jericho Skull in the British Museum, a portrait skull dating from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (8500 BCE–6000 BCE), excavated with great fanfare by the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon in her 1952–1958 dig at Tell es-Sultan (fig. 14). Before Kenyon’s work had even begun, a restoration drawing of her site by Alan Sorrell was shown in the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain in 1951, a few years after Britain had given up its Mandate in Palestine to Israel.³⁹ This object was about post-imperial Britain before it was even dug out of the ground.



Figure 14

The “Jericho skull”: human skeletal remains, religious/ritual equipment, 8200–7500 BC (Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), human bone, plaster, and shell, 17 × 14.60 cm. Collection of The British Museum (127414). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Her dig became possible because of the Nakba, the expulsion of Palestinians from the state of Israel in 1948. To the north of the archaeological site was a Palestinian refugee camp, known as 'Ein as-Sultan, where 19,000 refugees had settled after 1948. Lacking services of any kind, the Palestinians dug into the slope of the tell to make bricks and uncovered intact Middle Bronze Age tombs. Approaching Kenyon, they were hired to dig for about half what a British servant would have been paid at the time. She even excavated in the camp, where she claimed people were “complaisant to the complete blocking of their streets”.⁴⁰ In fact, her own photographs show Palestinians actively involved, physically and intellectually. In one striking shot, a man stands contemplating a Bronze Age skeleton at his feet.

By contrast, the photograph in the British Museum display casts the camp into dark shade, while the archaeological site was in bright sunshine. Leo Boer took detailed photographs of the camp while Kenyon was excavating, so it was not a question of availability.⁴¹ The skull was itself in a form of shade, as it was for many years displayed in a room leading into the Egyptian collections. Thousands rushed past one of the oldest existing portraits without a second glance. According to the British Museum website, the skull is no longer on display.

Even the object’s name should be questioned. The refugee camp site is situated outside the Palestinian city of Jericho in Area A of the West Bank, meaning it is under Palestinian Authority (PA) control. The archaeological site is in Area B where Israel controls security and the PA notionally has control of civil matters. Before the pandemic, Jericho was permanently besieged by international tourists attending what they took to be a Biblical site, although Kenyon had shown by carbon dating that there was no settlement during the time of the Biblical account of

the fall of Jericho. The “Jericho” in “Jericho skull” is the non-place of Judeo-Christianity, because to call it Palestine would be unthinkable.

Kenyon defined the site as Pre-Pottery Neolithic. Just as her trenches obscured how people lived, so does this name. She called the area of her work Palestine. Is the skull not, then, Palestinian, even if it is not the same Palestine as today? Were the first urban civilization to be called Palestinian, then Palestine might start to have a different set of values and meanings than as a crime scene.

RESPONSE BY

Bonita Bennett

Research Associate

District Six Museum

A Partial Necrography of Cape Town

A luxury apartment block resplendent with a seventh-floor penthouse conceals a burial ground. Its publicity brochures draw attention to the views from above: Table Mountain, Signal Hill, and a view of Cape Town’s Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. Keeping the gaze turned upwards directs attention away from what lies beneath: an exhumed burial ground where thousands of human bodies and their human life stories are elided from mind as well as from sight.

Less than a kilometre away, a coffee shop is emblazoned with the name “Truth”. Some coffee connoisseurs describe it as the place to get the best artisanal coffee in the city. Its brand is large, proud, and self-celebratory. There is no apparent connection between these two locations and yet they are both implicated in hiding parts of Cape Town’s shame-filled history embedded in its colonial past.⁴²

In 2003, human remains were uncovered when excavations took place in preparation for the apartment block—the Rockwell—to be built at the west end of the city. Archival records indicate that it had been a burial ground for “slaves and paupers” dating back to the eighteenth century. They were the wretched of this part of the earth: the violently enslaved, the displaced until death, the Indigenous labouring poor—all those governed by this colonial city’s necropolitical system, which literally worked them to the bone.⁴³ It was a burial ground that had fallen off the city’s maps—part of a longer neglected Cape Town story.

By 2008, as part of a compromise between activists and city authorities about the future of these remains, they were exhumed and placed in a purpose-built ossuary (fig. 15). It was intended to be a site of remembrance, education, and pilgrimage. A local government dilemma emerged: its operational costs had not been budgeted for! In order to recover the costs that these city ancestors would incur by being housed in the facility, the rent-paying “Truth” coffee shop was installed alongside the remains. A bizarre outcome has been that they have again been made invisible, out-branded by the trendy coffee shop, with the boxed remains pushed into what has ostensibly become a storage room. They had become a liability on a balance sheet rather than an asset to the city’s memory.



Figure 15

The Prestwich Memorial and Visitors' Centre, De Waterkant, Capetown. Digital image courtesy of Bonita Bennett (all rights reserved).

Restitution in this context has a somewhat different meaning from what Dan Hicks intends in writing about the return of looted objects from the colonisers. Addressing the legacies left in the colonies is as urgent as what was taken. Achille Mbembe reminds us that colonisation was a planetary project; decolonisation therefore needs to be a planetary project as well.⁴⁴ It requires engagements which are conducted on a coeval basis, not in a framework where “the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture”.⁴⁵ As Hicks points out in his provocation, colonialism took “knowledge, ideas, beliefs as well as physical things”. In examining what was left behind, it is evident in the colonial museum model that still lingers in the national museums of our country; it is evident in the treatment of colonised bodies as objects, of human remains stored in cardboard boxes in this ossuary — objects rather than ancestors.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) speaks of the “social life of things”.⁴⁶ Even though they have been treated as such, the human remains are not “things” but I would like to call attention to his reference to the significance of journeys. The journey that these human remains have travelled — from their exhumation to where they are being stored — is crucial to understanding their life stories. What led them to cross the road from one place to another almost three centuries after their burial? Why has any evidence of their long life in the earth beneath the surface of the Rockwell been erased? The text in the ossuary/coffee shop provides a detailed history of the area, and makes no mention of the struggle to keep them interred where they had been buried, or what brought about their dislocation. Appadurai reminds us that journeys are integral not peripheral to stories.

This is an unfinished event, made uncomfortable because part of it took place in the rights-based new South Africa.⁴⁷ There are many chapters to be enacted in this particular necrography before a conclusion can even be written.

RESPONSE BY

Ciraj Rassool

Professor of History

University of the Western Cape

Restitution as a Forensic Museology

I choose to participate in African museum settings and networks as a means of advancing social mobilisation and critical citizenship, as well as in European museum locations and gatherings, as a means of contributing to the dismantling and repurposing of the imperial edifice of the modern museum as a technology of subjugation (fig. 16). Dan Hicks' ideas about death writing and necrography read like a breath of fresh air as a critique of the sterile, neo-colonial field of reforming the ethnographic museum through co-curatorship, dialogue, and entangled collections, and the perpetuation of its self-styled ideology of humanism and care that it has built.



Figure 16

A ceremony of restitution, 2012, in which the skeletons of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar were returned by the Austrian Academy of Sciences to the Northern Cape in South Africa. They were reburied at Kuruman that same year. In this photograph, the Khoesan community leader and healer, Petrus Vaalbooi, explains to Klaas and Trooi Pienaar, whose remains lie in museum boxes in front of an artwork depicting the Academy, how they would be placed in coffins for their journey back home. Their corpses had been disinterred illegally by an assistant of the anthropologist Rudolf Pöch and exported to Vienna in 1909. Digital image courtesy of Ciraj Rassool (all rights reserved).

Hicks' call for provenance research on collections that focuses on colonialism's originary and enduring violence is also a demand for the museum to be reconfigured through a forensic methodology of truth-telling into the deaths and disruptions that accompanied collecting. This is the work of dismantling the museum as part of white infrastructure through the efforts of anti-colonialism, and not merely decolonisation. This confrontation with violence can only effectively occur through the embrace of restitution, not just as a new museum ethics but also as a new method of making museums themselves.

While supporting these expressions of "dissent in the ranks" in Europe (as the disruptions of the white ruling bloc were referred to in the anti-apartheid struggle) are important, we also need to understand what the challenges are for museum work on the African continent. If the ethnographic museum has failed in Europe, then its existence in African cities represents a continued colonial assault on the self-image of African people, and a relic of the colonial administration of Africans as members of races and tribes. And these physical and material

expressions of a colonial image cannot be reformed through being renamed as “world” museums (itself an imperial repositioning), nor through co-curatorship and temporary loans.

Restitution is emerging as monumental projects in Benin City, Dakar, and Algiers, with grand museums and architectures intended to receive and conserve returned artworks. It will require political work and diplomacy towards enabling African states and regional and continental multilateral formations to embrace restitution as part of transforming the cultural politics of African sovereignty. It is likely that an agency will be needed to work with these state and multilateral formations to build claims-making processes. While restitution must be driven by African claims (and not European gift-making), we need to build a theory of restitution that transcends monumental, preservationist, and events management frames.

Restitution has to be nurtured as an African social movement of artists, activists, and curators, who are able to work with communities as much as they are able to engage with state officials and cultural managers. The forensic methodology advocated by Dan Hicks should be more than mere truth-telling. It should take on board the origins of the forensic in the forum, and incorporate a museology of annunciation, contestation, and social criticism.

RESPONSE BY

Ana Lucia Araujo

Professor, Department of History

Howard University

Afterlives of a Dahomean Throne

On 24 December 2020, France promulgated a law that will allow the repatriation of twenty-six of the many hundreds of artefacts and artworks looted from Abomey, the capital of the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey, during the Franco-Dahomean War (1892–1894), which transformed the powerful ancient West African state into a French colony (fig. 17).⁴⁸ Today housed at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, the throne of King Gezo, who ruled Dahomey from 1818 to 1858, is among these objects (fig. 18).

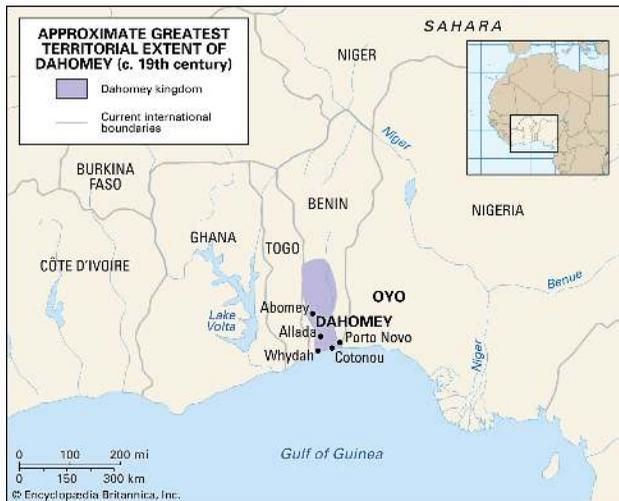


Figure 17

Historic kingdom of Dahomey, Western Africa in Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Dahomey". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 May 2019. Digital image courtesy of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

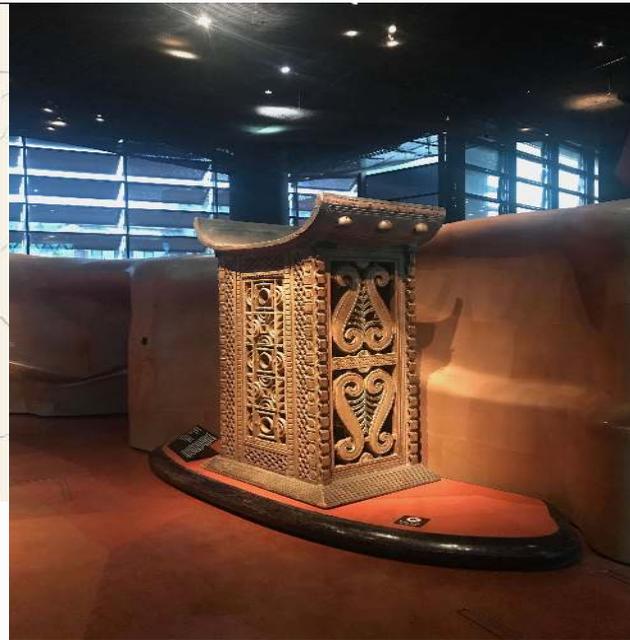


Figure 18

Throne of King Gezo of Dahomey, Benin, nineteenth century. Collection of Quai Branly Museum, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Ana Lucia Araujo (all rights reserved).

In the early eighteenth century, the rulers of Dahomey waged wars against neighbouring polities. They sold most war prisoners into slavery to European and American slave merchants, who transported them to the Americas.⁴⁹ As the Atlantic slave trade intensified, Dahomean kings increasingly appreciated foreign luxury objects obtained through the trade in enslaved Africans.⁵⁰ Gezo's throne is part of a rich Dahomean material culture embodying these complex exchanges.⁵¹ It also symbolizes a king who waged war, killed, enslaved, and looted his defeated rivals.

Hicks reminds us that objects are not opposed to human beings, but rather are extensions of living and dead bodies. Gezo's throne is one of these sacred objects. The throne outlived the king. During the *Hwetanu* annual ceremonies, the king displayed his throne and the thrones of deceased rulers that continued evoking their presence. European observers documented these festivities during which Dahomean agents sacrificed war captives to honour their *voduns* (deities). Their lavish parades also displayed the wealthy royal collections of luxury artefacts, performances designed to impress the king's subjects.

Representing his importance, Gezo's imposing wooden throne was particularly high, measuring nearly 38 inches. Like other thrones produced in Dahomey between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, its formal elements combine different cultural traditions. This kind of throne draws from the interactions with Akan-speaking groups established west of Dahomey, in the region of present-day Ghana. The curved seat embodies the divine powers of the king, evoking the *Dan Aido Hwedo*, the serpent deity symbolizing the kingdom.⁵² The throne's central column features a sophisticated lattice wood work comprising not only carved lozenges and squares signifying the cardinal points, but also a rich combination of geometrical forms such as circles, demi-circles, rectangles, and triangles.

The Atlantic trade is also evidenced on the throne's two lateral sections. Its formal elements are influenced by the presence of a Luso-African-Brazilian community established in the region since the end of the eighteenth century, who nurtured commercial and cultural exchanges with Brazil and Portugal. These reciprocal influences may have inspired local artisans to create a throne following a baroque-inspired style that mixes motifs derived from natural forms, such as shapes of scallop shells, cowries, and palm trees, a tree found both in Brazil and the Bight of Benin.

In 1895, French General Alfred Amédée Dodds gave part of the artefacts stolen from Abomey to the then Museum of Ethnography of Trocadero, including Gezo's throne, which remained on view after the museum was transformed into the Musée de l'Homme in 1937. In 2006, the throne was transferred to the newly created the Quai Branly Museum, where it remained displayed to this day.

Another similar throne, although more modest, is also associated with Gezo. Featured in nineteenth-century French postcards, the throne is mounted on four human skulls, very probably the remains of rulers of neighbouring kingdoms against whom Dahomey waged war. Although French agents left this throne behind, they took the human skulls to France, where they were displayed at the Nantes Museum of Natural History.

Gezo's throne complicates Hicks' proposal of a "necrography" of looted objects. Once repatriated, the government of the Republic of Benin plans to give Gezo's throne a central place in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Épopée of the Amazons and the Kings of Dahomey expected to open in Abomey in 2023.⁵³

Gezo was proud to display the skulls of his enemies in his palace, including the ones that literally supported one of his thrones. While exposed for more than one century in Paris, the throne represented French supremacy over African men, women, and children. Back in Abomey, the throne will acquire a new life. To the king's descendants, the throne represents their rich heritage. To the descendants of the victims of Gezo's crimes, the throne may contribute to open old scars, and perhaps to generate a new "necrography".

About the author

Dan Hicks is Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford, Curator of World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and a Fellow of St Cross College, Oxford. He was Visiting Professor at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris in 2017-18, and was awarded the Rivers Medal of the Royal Anthropological Society in 2017. Dan's new book, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* was published by Pluto Press in November 2020. It's been described by Ben Okri OBE as "a startling act of conscience", and reviewing it for the *New York Review of Books*, Coco Fusco wrote that, "Hicks's urgent, lucid, and brilliantly enraged book feels like a long-awaited treatise on justice". *The Brutish Museums* was listed as one of the *New York Times* Best Art Books of 2020, with the recommendation: "If you care about museums and the world, read this book". More details: <https://www.danhicks.uk/brutishmuseums>.

Footnotes

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 12. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76*, translated by David Macey (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 243.
 13. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
 14. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40; and Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
 15. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, DOI:10.1215/-12-2-1.
 16. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, 11.
 17. James E. Young, “Memory and Counter-Memory”, *Harvard Design Magazine* 9: Constructions of Memory: On Monuments Old and New (Fall 1999), www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory.
 18. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, 4.
 19. Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).
 20. Sally-Anne Huxtable, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas, and Emma Slocombe (eds), “Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties Now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery”, National Trust, September 2020, <https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf>.
 21. See “The Times View on Returning Artefacts: Spoils of History”, *The Times*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-times-view-on-returning-artefacts-spoils-of->

- history-pb9stpkcs; and “Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government Position on Contested Heritage”, UK Government, 28 September 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-culture-secretary-on-hm-government-position-on-contested-heritage>.
22. In France, this is exemplified by Macron’s commissioning of this report, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle” [“The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics”], November 2018, www.restitutionreport2018.com; in Germany, by the founding of the German Lost Art Foundation, <https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Webs/EN/Start/Index.html>; and in the Netherlands, by the recent publication of this report by the Dutch Council of Culture “Colonial Collection: A Recognition of Injustice”, The Hague, January 2021, <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/english/documenten/adviezen/2021/01/22/colonial-collection-and-a-recognition-of-injustice>.
 23. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House”, in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017).
 24. “Project History”, *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in One Object*, <https://100histories100worlds.org/project-history>.
 25. Neil MacGregor, “The Whole World in Our Hands”, *The Guardian*, July 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/24/heritage.art>.
 26. Gerald R. Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
 27. Harold Tichenor, *The Collector’s Guide to Point Blankets of the Hudson’s Bay Company And Other Companies Trading in North America* (Bowen Island, BC: Cinetel Film Productions, 2002), 4. The passage continues: “...they were the product of the industrializing textile manufacturing villages in England and they were a practical ‘tool’ ... for many of North America’s First Nations cultures”.
 28. This notion is explored imaginatively in Marlene Kadar, “History, or a Blanket Marriage”, in *Broken Fiction*. ([unpublished manuscript], Toronto, 2021). Typescript. Just a note: the Trapper Point blanket is not a Hudson’s Bay blanket, but a later relative.
 29. Carolyn Steedman, “Archival Methods”, in Gabriele Griffin (ed.), *Research Methods in English Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 17–19. See also Gabriella Giannachi, *Archive Everything: Mapping the Everyday* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016). See also Mark Celinscak, “Unlikely Documents, Unexpected Places: The Limits of Archive”, *Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3 (2018): 593–594.
 30. Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 115.
 31. See Britzman's title above. See also Deborah P. Britzman, “If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge”, in Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert (eds), *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 27–57.
 32. See Eva C. Karpinski and Ricia A. Chansky (eds), *Life Writing Outside the Lines: Gender and Genre in the Americas* (London: Routledge, 2020), especially Linda Warley, “Mar and Me: Following the Traces”, 34–41.
 33. Leigh Gilmore, “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdiction of Identity”, *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 128–139. See also Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*:

- Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), for Gilmore’s examples. Another example: Elisabeth M. Raab’s *Receptek* (Hungarian for “recipe book”) made with trash Raab found while an inmate at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. See Elisabeth M. Raab, *And Peace Never Came* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 80–84, 88–89; and Dan Hicks, *Provocation: “Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum”*.
34. Jennifer Geddes, “Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge: Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Delbo on Evil After the Holocaust”, in Jennifer L. Geddes, John K. Roth, and Jules Simon (eds), *The Double Binds of Ethics after the Holocaust: Salvaging the Fragments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119–132.
 35. See Harold Tichenor on pricing, who writes: “In 1800 the traditional one point to one Made-beaver was a workable convention”, 46. The term Point Blanket stemmed from the French *empointer*. The Hudson’s Bay Company attests: a “full point measured 4–5.5 in.; a half point measured half that length. ... Points ranged from 1 to 6, increasing by halves depending upon the size and weight of the blanket”; see “Hudson’s Bay Point Blanket”, Hudson’s Bay Company, <http://www.hbcheritage.ca/things/fashion-pop/hbc-point-blanket>. The double-bed sized blanket in Figure 7 has four dark pink equal sized points, each one is four and half inches long. For a definition of *Empointer*, see www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/empointer#littre *Retenir les plis d’une pièce d’étoffe par quelques points d’aiguille* (1872–1877). I understand this to mean that weavers made threaded stitches on top of the wool. These stitches formed thin lines or bars.
 36. Field Marshall Jeffery Amherst, Letter to Henry Bouquet, 1763, https://people.umass.edu/derrico/amherst/lord_jeff.html.
 37. Fernando Domínguez Rubio, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
 38. Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 33.
 39. Sacha Llewellyn and Richard Sorrell, *Alan Sorrell: A Life Reconsidered* (Bristol: Sansom, 2004).
 40. Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1957), 47–48.
 41. Maura Sala, “The Archaeological Expeditions to Tell es-Sultan (1868–2012)”, in Bart Wagemakers (ed.), *Archaeology in the “Land of Tells and Ruins”: A History of Excavations in the Holy Land Inspired by the Photographs and Accounts of Leo Boer* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 117–130.
 42. Cape Town was colonised by the Dutch in 1652, occupied by the British in 1795, relinquished to the Dutch in 1802, and re-annexed by the British in 1806. South Africa became a republic in 1961. Slave labour was central to the making of urban and rural Cape Town, with slavery being legally abolished in 1834 while under British rule.
 43. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
 44. “Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization”, a webinar with Achille Mbembe, hosted by Theory from the Margins and CoFutures, 22 October 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=376151030094483&ref=watch_permalink.
 45. Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 26, nos 7–8 (2009), 160.
 46. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

47. The first democratic elections took place on 27 April 1994—the date from which the “new” South Africa is measured.
48. “Loi du 24 décembre 2020 relative à la restitution de biens culturels à la République du Bénin et à la République du Sénégal”, *Vie Publique*, 28 December 2020, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/275500-loi-sur-la-restitution-de-biens-culturels-au-benin-et-du-senegal>.
49. See Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727–1892* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).
50. Gaëlle Beaujean, *L’art de la cour d’Abomey: Le sens des objets* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2019).
51. See Ana Lucia Araujo, “Dahomey, Portugal, and Bahia: King Adandozan and the Atlantic Slave Trade”, *Slavery and Abolition* 3, no. 1 (2012): 1–19.
52. See Joseph Adandé, “Les sièges des rois d’Agbome et le siège akan: analyse d’un contexte de civilisation à partir de la culture matérielle et artistique (1625–1890)”, (PhD dissertation, Université de Paris I, 1984). See also Suzanne Preston Blier, “Trône royal jandémé (gandeme) de style akan”, in Purissima Benitez Johannot and Jean Paul Barbier Mueller (eds), *Sièges d’Afrique noire du Musée Barbier-Mueller* (Milan: 5 Continents and Musée Barbier Mueller, 2003), 138.
53. Musée de l’épopée des amazones et des rois du Danhomè et les arènes d’expression des vodun non-masqués d’Abomey, Les Crayons, <https://www.lescrayons.com/musee-de-l-epopee-des-amazones-et-des-rois-du-danhome.html>.

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