

the Benin bronzes, writing a *necrography* of human and cultural loss. He attempts to locate bronzes by tracing the histories of the various white men who stole them, and convincingly argues for their repatriation. The destruction of culture and the display of its remains work to subjugate those who are deemed inferior. The museums that hold such pieces are implicated in transforming sacred items into objects and continuously perpetrating violence every time they open their doors to the public. Hicks views this as part of the failure of ethnological museums. Perhaps, however, the museum has succeeded, if indeed its original purpose was to keep so-called 'primitive' people in place, reducing them to objects and using them for profit. In this way, Hicks' work clearly reveals the slippage between neat categories such as object and subject. It also demonstrates how personhood can extend beyond the human body.

Archaeologists and museum specialists will benefit greatly from utilizing the concepts of *necrology* and *necrography*. I do, however, have some suggestions to keep in mind. First, be sure not to ask too much of your colleagues of colour and treat descendent communities with respect. Second, as Katherine McKittrick points out in her book *Dear Science and Other Stories*,¹ do not accept Black death, suffering and degradation as legitimate scholarly findings. Often, when researching African and African diasporic populations, we focus on Black *bodies* rather than Black *people*. My own area of expertise is bioarchaeology; I interact with and arguably profit from dead Black bodies, and so I must not neglect Black personhood and life. This holds true when dealing with both human remains and material culture. From our necrographies we must create space for Black livingness, part of which includes repatriating all that has been stolen.

Aja Lans

Harvard University

alans@fas.harvard.edu

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In 1979 Eddie Ugbomah shot the movie *The Mask*. In light of the intransigence of British institutions to reconstitute or, at the very least, to lend museum objects of African provenance to the continent, the Nigerian filmmaker staged the retrieval of the Queen Idia mask from the British Museum as heroic theft carried out by the Nigerian secret agent Major Obi, acted by Ugbomah himself. In a flyer, the production team declared the film to be the dramatization of what Nigeria should have done in the real world to get back symbols of its cultural heritage. In a devastating critique published in the magazine *West Africa*, the writer and poet Niyi Osundare described the film as an accumulation of embarrassment. First and foremost, he lamented that *The Mask*, with its James Bond-style plot and aesthetics, had degraded the serious and existential topic of cultural objects into a vulgar affair. In this context, Osundare referred to the 'unaccounted damage' that the presence of looted art objects in European and North American museums meant to Africans. To him, these African objects in Western museums represented 'monuments of a past injustice and menacing testimonies of Africa's ongoing exploitation and expropriation by Euro-America'.

At this point, the considerable efforts of African (and some international) institutions and individuals during the 1960s and 1970s to move Western governments and museums to reconstitute objects had failed. Institutions and politicians in the global North successfully blocked all such requests. In a book published earlier

¹K. McKittrick (2021) *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

this year in German, the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who teaches in Berlin and Paris, described these unsuccessful attempts as ‘the history of a post-colonial defeat’. Savoy recently played a crucial role in turning the tide. Her 2018 report, co-drafted with Felwine Sarr and commissioned by the French president Emmanuel Macron, made a strong case for the restitution of the mostly looted art objects in European museums and almost immediately made massive waves. The so-called Benin Bronzes soon moved to the centre of attention, not least in Germany, where the newly erected and highly controversial Humboldt Forum in Berlin was planning to exhibit a number of objects from its ‘Benin collections’ at its belated physical opening scheduled for summer 2021.

At first sight, the story behind the Benin Bronzes is a familiar one. In 1897, the British launched a military expedition to Benin City in what was then the British protectorate of Nigeria to retaliate for the massacre of a small delegation of traders. The expedition turned into an act of unrestrained violence during which more than 10,000 bronzes, ivories and other objects – we will never know the exact numbers – were looted by marines and soldiers from the royal court. The objects are now dispersed across more than 150 known museums and galleries all over the world, and, in addition, are scattered in probably half as many unknown public and private collections. At least 145 objects stolen from Benin are held in the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, where Dan Hicks works as Curator of World Archaeology.

In *The British Museums*, Hicks not only offers a powerful, sharp-tongued and critical account of the Benin Punitive Expedition and the supposed official nature of the looting and sale of the Benin Bronzes but also deconstructs with verve the narrative of the so-called ‘universal museum’, which, behind the façade of Enlightenment values, resurrects the violent legacies of European imperialism. Hicks nevertheless emphasizes that there is still a place for the anthropology museum and, in fact, that it needs to be defended ‘against the proto-fascism that co-opted them in the late 19th and early 20th centuries’. There can be no doubt, however, that ‘these institutions have an immense task to change themselves, dismantle, repurpose, re-imagine, disaggregate’. Without acts of return, Hicks adds, ‘this means nothing’. He regards restitution as necessary but unstoppable anyway, and part of ‘tackling the ongoing effects of racial violence, paying a debt, rebuilding a relationship’. One might add, however, that, following Achille Mbembe, whose work very much informs Hicks’ reflections, there should be no illusion about the fact that Europe has taken away things from Africa it can never return.

At the core of Hicks’ study is a substantial revisionist account of the British expedition to Benin City. He argues with good reason and evidence that this event was not isolated, as much earlier research has claimed, but was part of a broader ‘militarist colonialism’ to remove ‘uncooperative’ Benin sovereignty and replace it with colonial governance. He narrates the brutal asymmetry of warfare with much detail and, based on these observations, employs the concept of the three decades of European colonial rule in Africa since the Berlin Conference as ‘World War Zero’. While there is definitely no need to ‘nuance’ the brutal colonizer’s violence that took place in Benin City, the image of colonial powers as irresistible violent war machines is problematic, not least because Africans appear as mere victims without any agency at all. Most Africanist historians of colonial Africa would instead subscribe to a perspective on colonial rule that Sara Berry has aptly conceived as ‘hegemony on a shoestring’, with colonial powers regularly in need of local cooperation and intermediaries, a context in which violence was often the manifestation of weakness, not unbounded power.

Knotty timber requires hard wedges, and Hicks does an excellent job in challenging many of his museum colleagues who resist the return of Africa's cultural heritage by hiding themselves behind the need for careful 'provenance' research, which might take forever, resembling the notorious 'dictionary projects' of German learned academies which, after 100 years, have reached the letter F. Hicks' timely intervention is a must read.

Andreas Eckert

Humboldt University of Berlin
andreas.eckert@asa.hu-berlin.de
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The British Museums is a timely, radical critique of the museum as an institution pivotal to the making of empire. Hicks makes his case in terms that are brutally honest, calling out museum directors, curators and his own colleagues in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford to reject the legacies of empire. But the book not only rejects the museum as an institution of segregation; it rejects the entire subdiscipline of Material Culture Studies as implicated in the duress of empire. Engaging with the now canonical view on the circulation of objects conceived by Igor Kopytoff in 1986, the author rejects the idea of object life histories as justifying the non-return of looted objects. Instead, he proposes to refocus on the museum as institution, or, as he states, 'to slice open the museum to see what cancer is inside' (p. 151). The next page shows a photograph of a set of carved ivories on display in the Royal Palace of the Benin Kingdom before they were carted off to London. The photograph represents the ivories as the booty of a bloody expedition, the contents of an ancient palace bombarded, subdued and prised open by the military force of an expanding British empire. This visceral photograph comes with an equally unambiguous caption, taken from the 1971 brochure 'The Treasures of the British Museum': 'Guns paved the way of the explorers. Much of the collection is the plunder of punitive military expeditions. The relics of the Benin tribe in the section on Divine Kingship in Africa are here as a result of war with the British.'

Thus, in a nutshell, runs the argument of the book. The punitive expedition by British troops that led to the sacking of the City of Benin in February 1897 was a pivotal event in the expansion of the British Empire in Africa, resulting in the looting of an unknown quantity of art and material culture from the Royal Palace and the distribution of this precious cultural heritage across museums and private collections in Europe and the USA, where these objects were employed to tell the stories of race science. Informed by ideas on necrology, *The British Museums* presents a 'necrography' of the punitive expedition – a story of violence, death and loss. Littered with quotations from the participating marines and soldiers, the book interprets the expedition as a premeditated ambush in which men, women and children were killed indiscriminately and the palace treasure looted, a democide unrecognized as crime against humanity.

Given the painstaking research it is based on, we have to accept the author's assessment that the subsequent distribution of the loot was less well organized than is often believed and that, although part of the loot was entrusted to the British Museum, much of it was auctioned off, given away or otherwise dispersed in private, family collections. This wanton distribution of loot discredits any claim that this appropriation by the British ensured a better protection of this cultural heritage than the ruler of Benin City was capable of providing. Critically, it also raises the question to what extent the life histories of these objects were entangled with those of their carers – the Oba of Benin, or the looters, happy to sell the