

The Brutish Museums



The Benin Bronzes,
Colonial Violence and
Cultural Restitution

Dan Hicks

The British Museums

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PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2020 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4176 7 Hardback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0683 3 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0685 7 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0684 0 EPUB eBook

PREVIEW - FULL TEXT CAN BE PURCHASED AT

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Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

For Judy and Jack

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The methods by which this Continent has been stolen have been contemptible and dishonest beyond expression. Lying treaties, rivers of rum, murder, assassination, mutilation, rape, and torture have marked the progress of Englishman, German, Frenchman, and Belgian on the dark continent. The only way in which the world has been able to endure the horrible tale is by deliberately stopping its ears and changing the subject of conversation while the devilry went on.

W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The African Roots of War', 1915

And what of the museums, of which Europe is so proud? It would have been better, all things considered, if it had never been necessary to open them. Better if the Europeans had allowed the civilisations beyond the Continent of Europe to live alongside them, dynamic and prosperous, whole and un mutilated. Better if they had let those civilisations develop and flourish rather than offering up scattered limbs, these dead limbs, duly labelled, for us to admire. After all, by itself the museum is nothing. It means nothing. It can say nothing. Here in the museum, the rapture of self-gratification rots our eyes. Here, a secret contempt of others dries up our hearts. Here racism, no matter if it is declared or undeclared, drains all empathy away. No, in the scales of knowledge the mass of all the museums in the world could never outweigh a lone spark of human empathy.

Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, 1955 (my translation)

Preface

In his manifesto for the ‘Dig Where You Stand’ movement, Sven Lindqvist wrote, typed out in all-caps:

FACTORY HISTORY COULD AND SHOULD BE WRITTEN
FROM A FRESH POINT OF VIEW.

BY WORKERS INVESTIGATING THEIR OWN
WORKPLACES.

In their workplaces, Lindqvist explained, people have ‘competence and know their jobs’; ‘their working experience is a platform’ from which they can see what is being done, and what is not being done.¹ The example that Lindqvist gave was the Swedish concrete industry, and this book too is about the building and anchoring of foundations, about composite and liquid forms, and about how such forms are reinforced and harden over time – but also about the degradation and fatigue of institutional constructions, their structural weaknesses and collapse, the dismantling and demolition of brutal façades – and how among the rubble a prone edifice might be repurposed as some kind of bridge.

My own workplace, which is the subject of this book, is the University of Oxford’s Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology, where I am curator of ‘world archaeology’. In what follows, I have sought to follow Lindqvist’s invocations: to do research ‘on the job’, to dig into what we know, to use our specialist and sometimes esoteric technical knowledge to excavate new pasts and presents, perhaps even to seek to carve out better futures too. In the case of the Pitt Rivers Museum, this knowledge begins with what might be reasonably called a form of ‘Euro-pessimism’, by which I mean that the knowledge that Europeans can make with African 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 – by which I mean the physical dismantling of the white infrastructure of every anthropology and ‘world culture’ museum – is begun.

It is thus a book written from Oxford, a self-consciously ‘anglocentric’ account,² written to address how ‘British imperial historiography has catered to British interests’, especially in the case of Benin,³ with the conviction that European voices have a service to fulfil in the process of restitution: one of sharing knowledge of the process of cultural dispossession, and of facing up to the colonial ultraviolence, democide, and cultural destructions that characterised the British Empire in Africa during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, an episode that I reframe here as ‘World War Zero’. One of my main aims in addressing this past is to help to catalyse a new acknowledgement of the scale and horror of British corporate-militarist colonialism, as has begun to happen in the sense of the colonial past in some other European nations, including Germany and Belgium. Anthropology museums represent crucial public spaces in which to undertake this social and political process, which is a necessary first step towards any prospect of the ‘decolonisation’ of knowledge in these collections. But this cannot be short-circuited by the mere re-writing of labels or shuffling around of stolen objects in new displays that re-tell the history of empire, no matter how ‘critically’ or self-consciously.

In light of the sheer brutishness of their continued displays of violently-taken loot, British museums need urgently to move beyond the dominant mode of ‘reflexivity’ and self-awareness in museum thinking, which often amounts to little more than a kind of self-regard, turning the focus back upon the anthropologist, curator, or museum as both object and subject of enquiry, performing dialogue with certain ‘source communities’. We need to open up and excavate our institutions, dig up our ongoing pasts, with all the archaeological tools that can be brought to hand, sometimes a teaspoon and tooth-

brush, other times a pick-axe or a jack-hammer. Any museum object has a double historicity, of course – its existence before and after the act of accession. But in the case of what loot became under the intellectual regime of ‘race science’ in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in the museum, the second, most recent of these two layers is dominant. Far from any normal history of collecting or ‘provenance’, which could co-exist alongside studies of the lives of these objects before that act of taking, under the ultraviolet conditions of military looting through the sheer intensity of the violence witnessed under corporate colonialism, which took the form of an incendiary shattering of the bombs scattering loot from the event of 18 February 1897 to hundreds of museums across the western world – the damage is renewed every day that the museum doors are unlocked and these trophies are displayed to the public. The ongoing British/brutish histories of ‘acquisition’ must be reconciled before African pasts, presents and futures can be meaningfully understood from the standpoint of any Euro-American museum collection. The primary task for anthropology museums must therefore be, I suggest here, to invert the familiar model of the life-history of an object as it moves between social contexts, new layers of meaning and significance added with each new phase of its biography, sovereignty, of the attempted destruction of cultural significance, to write action-oriented ‘necrographies’ – death-histories, histories of loss – of the ‘primitive accumulation’ of museums, in order to inform the ongoing, urgent task of African cultural restitution, intervening through new kinds of co-operation and partnership between Europe and Africa, in which the museum will variously dismantle, repurpose, disperse, return, re-imagine, and rebuild itself. Excavating the knowledge of where Benin loot is located today, and urging each of the hundreds of institutions, individuals, and families that hold it today – universities, museums, charitable trusts, local government, nation states, descendants of the soldiers who did the looting, private collectors – to take meaningful action towards cultural restitution, informed by the understanding that the violence is not some past act, to be judged by the supposed standards of the past, but an ongoing event, is a big task. At the end of this book

is a first provisional attempt to list where the Benin loot taken in 1897 is today – please help to correct and expand this knowledge, so that in a revised edition of this book we can update the list, and can start to count up the returns.

I am indebted to the generosity and friendship of many people who have helped me in writing this book. A seed of this book began two decades ago in conversations with David Van Reybrouck, whose key work *Congo: the epic history of a people* (2014) has been an ongoing inspiration, renewed in Berlin in summer 2017. Through my participation on behalf of the Pitt Rivers Museum in the Benin Dialogue Group, it has been an immense privilege to meet colleagues from Nigeria, Germany, and the UK who are so knowledgeable about Benin art and history, and who come together in such mutually respectful ways to discuss what some call ‘difficult’ histories, and others, myself included, see as quite straightforward, enduring pasts. Within the Group, special thanks are due to Enotie Ogbemor, Barbara Plankenstein, Jonathan Fine, Henrietta Lidchi, and Lissant Bolton.

The arguments in this book were developed during lectures and public dialogues at a range of venues, including the Berlin International Literature Festival, CARMAH at Humboldt University Berlin, the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg, the Edinburgh Centre for Global History, the Anthropology Department of the University of St Andrews, the University of Nanterre, Free University Amsterdam, Tübingen University, and the musée du quai Branly.

I have also learned an immense amount from an amazing community of scholars, activists and thinkers over Twitter, not least in the #BeninDisplays thread in June–July 2019, without which the analysis in Chapter 16 would have been impossible. Thank you to everyone who has helped me form the ideas for this book through that platform, especially members of @MuseumDetox, @KimAWagner, @SFKassim, @littlegaudy, @waji35, @CirajRassool, @NatHistGirl, @JuergenZimmerer, and colleagues at other British non-national museums, including Manchester, Liverpool, the Horniman, Brighton, Cambridge, Bristol, Exeter, and beyond.

Many of the ideas developed here were first explored in a series of lectures given during my Visiting Professorship at the musée du quai Branly in 2017–18, and I am grateful to the students, researchers and colleagues from whom I learned so much during that year. The opportunity of sharing platforms with Clémentine Deliss at Humboldt University in Berlin, with Hamady Bocoum and Marie-Cécile Zinsou at the Collège de France in Paris, with Kokunre Agbontaen Eghafona at Technische University in Berlin, and with Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, have all represented important opportunities to shape the ideas presented here, and I am grateful to all those who made these events possible, including Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy.

Special thanks must go to the leading scholars of Benin 1897, Felicity Bodenstein in Paris and Staffan Lundén in Stockholm, for their help and encouragement. Special thanks are also due to Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Michael Barrett, Ines de Castro, Philippe Charlier, Victor Ehikhamenor, Mark Elliott, Sandra Ferracutti, Monica Hanna, Frédéric Keck, Anne Luther, Sharon Macdonald, Sarah Mallet, Nick Mirzoeff, Wayne Modest, Chris Morton, Ciraj Rassool, Anthony Richter, Mike Rowlands, Bénédicte Savoy, Olivia Smith, Adrenele Sonariwo, Carole Souter, Jonas Tinius, Laura Van Broekhoven, Onyekachi Wambu and William Whyte, and very many more who have helped to shape this book in different ways.

The opportunity to contribute to the Symposium on Art, Law and Politics at King's College, Cambridge in March 2019, at the kind invitation of Sarah Rabinowe, Mary-Ann Middelkoop, Luise Scheidt, Honor May, and Freya Sackville-West, was also an important milestone in the development of the book.

The research for this book was supported by an Art Fund Headley Fellowship.

* * *

A note on the black-and-white photographs interspersed in this text is necessary. They are from the album-diary of Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker (1864–1932) of the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles),

who was a Special Service Officer in the Benin Expedition. A recent accession to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, these photographs are offered without captions and copyright-free, as a reminder of the commonalities between two mnemonic regimes of taking and visuality: the taking of objects and the putting of some of these on display in museums, and the taking of photographs. This book seeks to intervene with these modes of appearance, in which taking is turned from a moment in time into an ongoing duration. The aim is to bring British colonial violence and present into view and into focus, so that we can begin the process of cultural restitution. By digging where we stand.

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1

The Gun That Shoots Twice



The seven-pounders are most excellent guns, as they are made to stand any amount of knocking about, and also to be mounted and dismounted in a very short space of time. They are much disliked by the natives of the country, who call them ‘them gun that shoot twice’ – referring to the explosion of the shells, which they consider distinctly unfair, taking place as it does so far away from the gun, and mostly unpleasantly close to themselves, when they are, as they fondly imagine, out of range.

Captain Alan Boisragon, Commandant
of Niger Coast Protectorate Force (1897)¹

Along the Niger River since 1894 Alan Boisragon had seen scores of military ‘punitive expeditions’ in the bush, with warships, Maxim machine guns, rocket launchers and Martini-Henry rifles. In the passage above, he is describing the rifled muzzle-loading mounted carriage field gun, known as a ‘seven-pounder’ because of the weight of the shell that it fired (about 3.2 kilograms), in his popular account of the military attack on Ubini² (Benin City) by Niger Coast Protectorate and Admiralty forces in February 1897. Boisragon does not record the number of casualties from the shelling of the city, of scores of surrounding town and villages, of incessant firing of machine guns and rockets into the bush, during this 18-day attack. He does not take stock of the numbers of killed and wounded soldiers and displaced people in the many, many previous ‘expeditions’ and attacks, or reflect on the extent of death and injury in the many as yet unplanned expeditions of the coming months and years, as yet unnamed: Opobo, Qua, Aro, Cross River, Niger Rivers, Patani, Kano, ‘opening up new territories’, ‘journeying into the interior’, ‘pacifications’, exacting punishment for supposed offences against civilisation.

Undetained by any question of African deaths, this description in fact came from an autobiographical adventure story, in which Alan Boisragon told of his own escape in the face of attack, one of just two survivors of the earlier supposedly peaceful expedition to the City in January 1897, during which perhaps seven (or perhaps five) Englishmen were killed, and how he and his comrade had to walk through the jungle for five days before finally returning to safety and civilisation – ready to exact a brutal revenge on his ‘barbaric’ attackers and the heart of their ‘uncivilised’ power – the so-called city of blood.³

The *Daily Mail* and *The Times* led the newspaper coverage of this *Boys’ Own* yarn of ‘massacre’ and heroism and to which the February ‘punitive expedition’ was the necessary response. A year later, the War Office was issuing medals commending soldiers described as members of ‘the squadron sent to punish the King of Benin for the massacre of the political expedition’.

This is a book about that violent sacking by British troops of the City of Benin in February 1897. It rethinks the enduring effects of this destruction in Britain today, taking stock of its place in a wider military campaign of regime change, underscoring its status as the pivotal moment in the formation of Nigeria as a British protectorate and British colony, exposing how the many ‘punitive expeditions’ were never acts of retaliation, and trying to perceive the meaning and enduring effects of the public display of royal artworks and other sacred objects looted by marines and soldiers from the Royal Court now dispersed across more than 150 known museums and galleries, plus perhaps half as many again unknown public and private collections globally – from the Met in New York to the British Museum, from Toronto to Glasgow, from Berlin to Moscow, Los Angeles, Abu Dhabi, Lagos, Adelaide, Bristol and beyond. Some of these objects have a truly immense monetary value on the open market today, selling for millions of dollars.

Objects looted from the City of Benin are on display in an estimated 161 museums and galleries in Europe and North America. Let us begin with this question: *What does it mean that, in scores of museums across the western world, a specially written museum interpretation board tells the visitor the story of the Benin Punitive Expedition?*

One of the largest of these collections of violently stolen objects, trophies of this colonial victory, is the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum – where I am Curator of World Archaeology. Are museums like the Pitt Rivers just neutral containers, custodians of a universal heritage, displaying a common global cultural patrimony to an international public of millions each year, celebrations of African creativity that radically lift up African art alongside European sculpture and painting as a universal heritage? The point of departure for this book is the idea that, for as long as they continue to display sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres, they will remain the very inverse of all this: hundreds of monuments to the violent propaganda of western superiority above African civilisations erected in the name of ‘race science’, littered across Europe and North America like war memorials to gain rather than to loss, devices for the construction

of the Global South as backward, institutions complicit in a prolongation of extreme violence and cultural destruction, indexes of mass atrocity and iconoclasm and ongoing degradation, legacies of when the ideology of cultural evolution, which was an ideology of white supremacy, used the museum as a tool for the production of alterity: tools still operating, hiding in plain sight.

And so this is a book about sovereignty and violence, about how museums were co-opted into the nascent project of proto-fascism through the looting of African sovereignty, and about how museums can resist that racist legacy today. It is at the same time a kind of defence of the importance of anthropology museums, as places that decentre European culture, world-views and prejudices – but only if such museums transform themselves by facing up to the enduring presence of empire, including through acts of cultural restitution and reparations, and for the transformation of a central part of the purpose of these spaces into sites of conscience. It is therefore a book about a wider British reckoning with the brutishness of our Victorian colonial history, to which museums represent a unique index, and important spaces in which to make those pasts visible.

The Pitt Rivers Museum is not a national museum, but it is a brutish museum. Along with other anthropology museums, it allowed itself to become a vehicle for a militarist vision of white supremacy through the display of the loot of so-called ‘small wars’ in Africa. The purpose of this book is to change the course of these brutish museums, to redefine them as public spaces, sites of conscience, in which to face up to the ultraviolence of Britain’s colonial past in Africa, and its enduring nature, and in which to begin practical steps towards African cultural restitution.

* * *

Stand in the Court of the Pitt Rivers Museum and go up to the Lower Gallery. Walk with me to the east wall and stop in the still, dark space; the vast silent expanse of the museum is behind us and before us is a cabinet of sacred and royal objects, dimly lit, returning our gaze. Let

us step before the glass ‘in order to soak up the fugitive breath that this event has left behind’.⁴

Hold your phone up against the plate glass of the triple vitrine. The silence and stillness are not natural conditions for the displaced objects on display here. They are the effect of a stilling, as when detention interrupts transit, and of a fracturing, as when a shrapnel shell explodes at its target, and of a silencing, as when a gun is silenced.

The Victorian wooden case is nine feet high. There are more than a hundred objects contained within: bronze and wooden heads, brass plaques, ceremonial swords, armllets and headgear, boxes and carved ivory tusks, one burned in the fire of the sacking. The title reads: ‘Court Art of Benin’, and then an interpretation panel states:

Benin is a kingdom in Nigeria, West Africa. It has been ruled by a succession of kings known as Obas since the fourteenth century. Benin is famous for its rich artistic traditions, especially in brass-casting. In January 1897 a small party of British officials and traders on its way to Benin was ambushed. In retaliation a British military force attacked the city and the Oba was exiled. Members of the expedition brought thousands of objects back to Britain. The Oba returned to the throne in 1914 and court life began again. The artists of Benin continue to make objects for the Oba and the court, and rituals and ceremonies are still performed. The objects displayed here were made between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

How little has changed over the decades since February 1899 when Charles Hercules Read and Ormonde Maddock Dalton, the Keeper and Senior Assistant respectively in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum introduced their catalogue *Antiquities from the City of Benin* by telling the same story of ambush and retaliation – ‘objects obtained by the recent successful expedition sent to Benin to punish the natives of that city for a treacherous massacre of a peaceful English mission’⁵ – with the following note of explanation:

Captain Gallwey, of the East Lancashire Regiment, [was] sent on a political mission in 1892. Four years later a larger mission, under Consul Phillips, was attacked on its way up from the coast, and the majority of the party were massacred. This outrage led to the despatch of a military expedition, which destroyed Benin City, and made accessible to students of ethnography the interesting works of native art that form the subject of the following pages.⁶

The museum may operate to stabilize and reproduce certain narratives, and to repress and diminish others – but only ever provisionally. Insofar as the museum is not just a device for slowing down time, but also a weapon in its own right, then to what extent are its interventions with time like the brute force of field guns manned by Captain Boisragon's African forces, carried through the jungle by men selected for their physical strength, a projection across time and space, where some kind of explosion is yet contained in each brass object within this vitrine, unfinished events from which the curator might feel safely out of range, having taken place so far away across time and space: another continent, another millennium? By intervening with time, decelerating memory, displaying loot, what kind of ordnance has the museum brought within its glass cases, caught between one shot and another, between the projection and the return? What do we see when a light is shone into these most hesitant, uncertain of spaces, unresolved and raw? What connections will be made when human time and space re-align and the thing is still here? Each stolen object is an unfinished event, its event-density grows with each passing hour. The Victorian soldiers and museum curators said these were 'ju-ju' fetishes whose power needed to be broken. Spend time in front of this case and the solid and the visible seem to soften, as when brass is cast, to blend with memory and with knowledge, at a tipping point. A new conjunction is coming about for museums and empire. What is this moment? How does loss come into view?

Objects from Benin's Royal Court, burnt to the ground by British troops, are displayed in the 'court' and galleries of this Oxford museum. What kind of archive is this replica, this stagey performance in a windowless space today curated to enchant, a century and a half ago built to shape knowledge, to redraw the world? Anthropologists have a word for it: Myth. And myths are temporal devices. Myth serves, as does music, as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously argued, to 'immobilize the passage of time', so 'overcoming the antinomy of historical and elapsed time'. The technologies of the museum and the archive – the museum label, the zip-lock bag, the conservation lab – are analogous interventions. They are forms of notation: *dal segno* ('go back to the mark'). Among the outcomes of these technologies are provisional and contingent stoppages in time, rendering fragments as objects, which are wrought as cadences. A form of secondary deposition emerges in the museum, like curtain calls.⁷ In 2017, Edward Weisband⁸ observed that various spectacular or dramaturgical political and symbolic forms, which he calls 'the macabresque', tended to accompany mass violence during the 20th century – a kind of sadistic, performative self-creation that emerges hand-in-hand with the inflicting of loss, the myth of the 'primitive' in violence extended across time: the weaponization of time itself.

Benin City lies on a high sandy plain to the north of the Niger Delta in Edo State, Nigeria, in an area of former tropical forest. Today, it is a city of 1.5 million people and the centre of a major precolonial kingdom of the Niger Delta, which once controlled the land and river systems that connected the African interior with the maritime world of the Bight of Benin and the Atlantic Ocean. The city first emerged during a period of urbanisation and state formation along the tropical belt of West Africa, some one thousand years ago, which saw the emergence of the great centres of Edo, Yoruba, and Akan pre-colonial states: Benin, Ife, Ilesa, Oyo. Kumasi, Begho – with Aja and Fon states and urban polities such as Dahomey emerging later, from the 16th century. The Kingdom of Benin has been ruled by an unbroken line of Obas (Kings) that began with Ewuare I who reigned from 1440 CE – a century before Queen Elizabeth I came to the English

throne – and had its origins in the late Iron Age urban societies of the 10th or 11th century CE onwards: when he was crowned in 2016, the current Oba, Ewuare II, became the fortieth Oba in an unbroken line across eight centuries. The Kingdom grew in power and scope during its involvement in European and transatlantic trade from the 16th century, at first with Portuguese traders, and later British and French – central among which was the slave trade. By the 19th century, Benin City was a sacred monumental landscape of courthouses, compounds, and mausoleums, the centre of royal and religious power encompassed in an ancient network of ditched and banked earthwork enclosures, and with central repositories of thousands of unique artefacts that bore witness to the kingdom's past – a kind of unseen city, a centre for changing forms of religious observance and royal power over centuries. The sacking of this city, more than twelve decades ago, involved the looting of more than ten thousand royal and sacred objects.

In the artificial, darkened secondary landscapes of this museum, let us understand this place not as some dazzling gathering of the flotsam and jetsam of the colonial past, but, following the lead of Laurent Olivier,⁹ understand these fragments of cultural history as forms of human memory. As the visionary archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes once put it, archaeologists are 'instruments of consciousness who are engaged in reawakening the memory of the world'.¹⁰ The memory here which must be recalled to allow other pasts to re-emerge, to be no longer silenced, is a memory of loss through extraction, where the bronze plaques and other royal and sacred objects looted from Benin City were no more side effects of empire than palm oil or rubber were side effects of empire; in fact, they form an enduring part of the ecology of militarist colonialism.

The immense loss involved in the British cultural atrocity at Benin City is coming into view for white museum staff in Europe and North America in the 2020s, but in truth it has always been hypervisible for some museum visitors, and for so many more unable or unwilling ever to step their foot inside an anthropological, 'ethnological', 'ethnographic', '*Völkerkunde*', or newly rebranded 'world culture' museum.

The new awareness among curators, refracted through a new enthusiasm for ‘decolonisation’, in word if not in deed, comes not through some sudden enlightenment to the intertwined history of anthropology and empire, or to the processes of institutional racism, on the part of either the bureaucrats or the connoisseurs of these red-bricked, steel-girdered railway-station-like edifices. This new scramble for decolonisation throws up new dangers: of obfuscation, of tokenism, of the co-option of activists, of the appropriation of the labour of ‘source’, descendant and diasporic African communities, of the cancellation of outstanding debt, of a hundred varieties of side-step that allow violence to persist. But there the loss can be seen in a new way, nonetheless. Why is this, why now?

* * *

Since one of the principal arguments of this book will be that ethnological museums should be seen as a kind of device, an implement or weapon just like those displayed in the traditional cabinets of so-called ‘primitive technology’, but forged for a new Anglo-German ideology of imperialism made in the final third of the 19th century, then an analogy might be drawn with one of the main lessons of the anthropology of science and technology. We became familiar in the 1980s with the idea that our knowledge of the world is shaped by society – ‘socially constructed’, as the theorists used to say. Back then, the study of science and technology gradually introduced material things into those accounts of knowledge production – the social agents including objects as well as humans: in Bruno Latour’s business school theory of ‘actor-networks’ in which ‘technology is society made durable’,¹¹ and in the techno-feminism of Donna Haraway, where the overarching figure of the cyborg rose up in answer to the question of the day: ‘*the social construction of what?*’¹² Those debates in material culture studies, those rhetorical switching of position between subject and object to suggest the agency of things in human life, or the making of our bodies and worlds through doing rather than just saying, are long behind us.¹³ But a lesson from the early days of that phase of academic study may yet be pertinent here. Before academics generalised their

idea of ‘object agency’ to all spheres of the material world, a primary body of work – known at the time as ‘the weak programme of science and technology studies’ – showed how visibility is produced when things fail.

Perhaps the most famous example was Ruth Cowan’s study of the relative efficiency of gas and electric domestic cooling: ‘How the Refrigerator Got its Hum’.¹⁴ The influence of factors other than pure rationality, Cowan argued, can be seen when a more efficient technology like the gas fridge loses out to the less efficient electric fridge. So too, Mike Schiffer showed, for the story of how the electric car lost out to the internal combustion engine.¹⁵ We might express these observations – where the failure of a technology causes it to emerge as an object for anthropological study – in less convoluted ways today, by simply observing that most technology is taken for granted most of the time, it goes unnoticed and so remains effectively unseen, even when we’re looking straight at it – until it fails. A key snaps in the door lock. Your shopping bag splits when you’re only halfway home. The car won’t start and it is suddenly visible in a way that it wasn’t only five minutes before. A tanker spills oil into the ocean and its contents are suddenly, shockingly, revealed. Burning ancient fossil fuels sets the Global South alight. The gasket blows and the train grinds to a halt. Technological failures are, at whatever human or global scale, primarily visual moments; the thing is suddenly seen, flashing up in the moment and demanding our attention because action is required. It can happen very quickly. In such moments, we see the device, as if for the first time. Those anticipatory periods of time before such moments, sensed but not seen, operate at a very different pace, like a museum vault that is filled with all the darkness of a coal mine. Often with the first possible signs of failure come new gestures of anxiety, or of denial of course, as the driver kicks the tyres to check the pressure of thin air contained in rubber.

The colonial museum has failed. This failure is why it can be seen by white curators now, myself included, with a new clarity and intensity, an event horizon of colonial ultraviolence is illuminated at once suddenly and yet unfolding over decades and centuries – like the

impact and human after-effects of cartridges shot from a machine gun, like an oil slick, like some Victorian smog leaching in through the cast-iron air-vents of the museum. This failure of the ethnological museum is a breakdown in its temporal and visual regimes, which use displays to make it seem like the moment of military victory against 'primitive' people is timeless and unending. The perspective of contemporary archaeology might trace this, working as it does between place and memory in the material remains of the recent past and the near present: exploring its 'photology', which is to say knowledge made by the casting of light,¹⁶ but also needing to find a new language for the knowledge of loss.

The invention of ethnological displays was surely as significant a technology in the history of Victorian colonialism as the Maxim machine gun: Hiram Maxim's invention of 1884 (the same year as the opening of both the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Berlin Conference) was adopted by the British Army in 1889 and by the Navy in 1892, was the first recoil-operated machine gun. Known variously as the 'Pom Pom', or 'piss-gun', due to its use of water as a coolant and its ability to spray bullets from its barrel, this weapon could fire ten bullets per second, six hundred per minute.¹⁷ The Maxim transformed jungle warfare, at first when mounted to gunboats on rivers and creeks, and then increasingly when carried for miles by teams of carriers through the bush. Procedures of looting too became a new dysfunctional kind of artillery weapon, making a bang but still *en route* to some further distant target, a double explosion, its aim to denigrate and to shame the enemy beyond the present moment, while also making some memoir in the name of the idea of superiority and victory in the face of the sheer immensity of loss wrought through machine guns and rockets against bows and arrows and muskets. There was never any coherent or scholarly strategy to this de facto policy of cultural under-development, by which culture was not just throttled but decimated, wilfully; therein lies the truly unquantifiable horror that came to overwhelm the whole.

The troops took royal and sacred objects, dividing them amongst themselves, and the administrators took photographs, developing multiple copies for inclusion in soldiers' diaries and albums, just as the artefacts were negatives for future histories. These parallel acts of taking began a dislocation of time as well as place. In the spring of 1897 in press reports of the attack, earlier photographs of the Palace of Benin, taken by trader Cyril Punch on his visit to the city in 1891,¹⁸ and by Liverpool trader John Swainson of Pinnocks when he joined a visit to Benin City in March 1892, were circulated to the press and widely used in the press coverage, presented as if they were new images.¹⁹ Six or seven cameras were present at the Phillips incident in January 1897; Alan Boisragon recorded how when they arrived at Gwato: 'some of our demon photographers – I believe there were six or seven cameras amongst our party of nine – began taking photos of everything they could get within range of. Amongst our photographers was a Mr. Baddoo, a man from Accra, on the Gold Coast, the Consul-General's chief clerk.'²⁰

Perhaps there were a dozen cameras when the city was sacked, perhaps more. The photographic archives are scattered across museums, archives, and private collections, just like the objects, and are poorly documented at present.²¹ The photographers almost certainly included three Protectorate staff: Dr Robert Allman, aged 42, Principal Medical Officer; Hugh Nevins, District Officer for the Benin Division, and Reginald Kerr Granville, District Officer for the Warri Division.²² Through a camera, through a museum display, through a gun that shoots twice, an event, through violence, can encompass a kind of fragmentation that means it can't quite end.

Surely taking trophies from the battlefield is a universal and timeless human practice in times of war? No, there was a new dimension to these acts of taking, far more than just moving something from a to b. This is a story of documentary interventions in the fabric of time itself, to create a timeless past in the present as a weapon that generates alterity – appropriations in form not so much as property as unspecified rights, interests, privileges and claims, including the rights of mimesis and parody. This taking was no side effect of how the vio-

lence grew, mere mementoes or keepsakes for scrapbooks and cabinets, but 'relics' through which the violence, as both an idea and a reality, would be continually surfaced and made to last. The photographs are here in this book to remind us of how the museum operates as a camera: objects, images, time, knowledge drawn out into the future. Acts of collecting slowed the pace of a violence wrought to turn the enemy into the past – but never quite to a standstill. In the public museum and in the private collection, artworks themselves became weapons – but they are also much more.

One contribution of archaeological thinking – and one major theme of this book – is to understand artefacts such as photographs not as frozen moments of time, but ongoing durations. There were a dozen or more cameras, in addition to those of the *Illustrated London News*, present during the Punitive Expedition. In image after image, bronzes, ivories and figures are laid out, sometimes in front of soldiers in pith helmets, sometimes just stacked against the walls of palace buildings. The soldiers and administrators took objects and they took photographs, and there is a temporal affinity between these two types of taking. As a technology, archaeology emerged hand-in-hand with both photography and 19th-century European colonialism. All three operated as devices for the marking of time. The very rawness of the image and the thing means that the forms of knowledge and memory that they constitute are open-ended, unresolved exposures. As in the mimetic practices of the museum vitrine, so with the visual multiplications from negatives, images, objects and human lives were taken hand-in-hand as modes of appropriation, dispossession and warfare. The photographs that are reproduced in this book, from the archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum, are not stills, just as the objects have not reached their endpoint in the dark rooms of the museum: not stills, but extensions of colonial violence. In this light, we might reflect on Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's account, in his 1922 book on what he termed 'primitive mentality', of photography and the parting of body and soul among Tsonga people in South Africa in the early 1890s:

Almost everywhere photographic equipment appeared especially dangerous. ‘Ignorant natives’, says [Henri-Alexandre] Junod, ‘instinctively object to being photographed. They say: “These white people want to rob us and take us with them, far into lands which we do not know, and we shall remain only an incomplete being.” When shown the magic lantern you hear them pitying the men shown on the pictures and saying: “This is the way they are ill-treating us when they take our photographs!”’ Before the 1894 war broke out, I had gone to show the magic lantern in remote heathen villages. People blamed me for causing this misfortune by bringing back to life men who had died long ago.²³

In January 1898, the 24-year-old Lieutenant George Abadie of the West Africa Frontier Force recorded in a letter home to Jersey a trip to the royal palace at Ilorin, the first visit of white men since the attack by the Royal Niger Company eleven months previously – an attack that will be discussed later. Abadie explained how his attempt to buy horses from the Emir was unsuccessful, as he complained that the Company had ‘burnt the greater part of his town last year and had taken most of his horses’ – but he made a gift of five horses to Abadie’s group nevertheless. The King also agreed to Abadie photographing him – ‘but his chiefs would not, as they were afraid the camera was a sort of gun.’²⁴ Discussing this incident a century later, the historian Laurence James interpreted the chiefs’ actions as their mistaking the brass and wood of the tripod for the mounting for a Maxim machine gun, so that as the soldier began to set up his photographic equipment, his attendants fled, recalling the violence of the sacking of Ilorin less than a year before.²⁵ But another interpretation is possible, in which there was a clear understanding of taking photographs as a form of dispossession that operates by making a duration – just as the taking of loot and its display in a museum creates a blurring – the weapons employed by troops in destroying a city, the cameras employed as a weapon of administration and governance, the object as a weapon; the gun sights folding into the sextant, the camera lens and the glass vitrine; the delay built into the cylinder of the bombshell and the

aperture of the camera measuring out the period of exposure, and the vast dark room of the museum – this blurring is ongoing today in the colonial museum as a persistent regime of visibility and violence.

The photographs that punctuate this book are just such incendiary projectiles, held in the archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum, a few metres away from the looted objects in the gallery case. The passage of time can be neither turned back nor halted, but the illusion of a stoppage, even that made through the legerdemain of the museum curator, is always in truth a duration. Museums are devices for extending events across time: in this case extending, repeating and intensifying the violence. But endurance must also always open up a space for something new to happen because each object, each photograph, each memory, each fact, each thought or thing in the case of Benin 1897, is a live event, behind the glass of the cabinets. Every sheet of glass holds within it the certainty of a thousand future shards. What soldiers and anthropologists and the brutish museums of Europe and America saw as relics or curios are of course forms of cultural endurance unfolding over centuries, which will outlast this wooden case, these steel mounts in which they are held, but for which colonial histories need to be not so much reversed as somehow dug into.

* * *

The purpose of this book is to take stock of the use of the anthropology museum during the 1890s as a weapon, a method and a device for the ideology of white supremacy to legitimise, extend and naturalise new extremes of violence within corporate colonialism – in order to reclaim the vital function of these institutions in the future, to transform their purpose, to put an end to their function as the warehouses of disaster capitalist-colonialism: dismantle, repurpose, retribute, recognise their status as sites of conscience. The book aims to break three dominant narratives about key aspects of the sacking of Benin City. First, to expand the story of the punitive expedition to become a wider history of colonial violence in the 19th century. Second, to expose the truth about the supposed official nature of the looting and sale of the Benin Bronzes, and thus to trace how the sheer force with which a

cultural centre was destroyed still fractures and splinters across time and space throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. Third, to reveal the intimate links of the narrative of the so-called ‘universal museum’ with enduring processes of militarist-corporate colonialism in 21st-century global capitalism. In each case, this is about stepping back from a focus on nation states, understanding the intertwined nature of German and British traders on the Niger River and museum curators from Berlin to Oxford, and seeing African cultural restitution today as about more than just nation-to-nation, especially where the European nation is often limited to the former colonial power: the global geographies of the Benin Bronzes holds lessons for many other cases.

In dialogue with Achille Mbembe’s account of ‘necropolitics’ – the politics of who lives and who dies²⁶ – this discussion of the human cost of pillaged objects, displaced and displayed in western museums as some kind of global treasure, introduces and experiments with a series of analytical tools and lenses: an anthropological theory of taking (Chapter 2), the longer-term histories of World War Zero (Chapter 4), the ‘necrography’ of loot, a kind of ‘necrological’ rather than ethnological knowledge (Chapter 12), the ‘chronopolitics’ through which museums were weaponised in the name of ‘race science’ (Chapter 14), in order to try to clear the ground for new kinds of global dialogue and – crucially – action around cultural restitution. Along the way, the three main forms of violence enacted in Benin 1897 – democide, the destruction of cultural sites, and looting – are outlined, in the context of their being outlawed under the Hague Convention of just two years later (Chapters 8–11). A reassessment of the history of militarist-corporate colonialism in Africa is also called for, widening out our awareness of the building momentum and scale of British ultra-violence during ‘World War Zero’ as it was conducted in the three decades between 1884 and 1914 – where the British atrocities and body count should be considered alongside how we think of German and Belgian atrocities in Western and Southern Africa at exactly the same time. Running throughout, I want to question the agency and complicity of the anthropology museum – as a project put to work

in the name of brutal colonial and racial violence. These are legacies that our museums need to reject and to address – not defend. A major conclusion of the book is that Britain needs to come to terms with its Victorian colonial-militarist past in a totally new way – and that anthropology museums offer spaces for doing this, sites of conscience, and of restitution, reparation and reconciliation. In this respect, I want this book to be read as a kind of defence of the unfinished project of the anthropological museum – as long as we are happy to invert, reverse, flip, repurpose and dismantle most of it.

The book has been written with this motto in mind: *as the border is to the nation state so the museum is to empire*. Like the border uses space to classify, making distinctions between different kinds of human, so the museum uses time. Like the telegraph, the camera and the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology themselves, the museum seeks to annihilate time and space, to weaponise distance. Like the camera, the museum does not freeze time but controls exposure, measures out duration. A time of taking is giving way to a time of returns, like the gun that shoots twice, a second moment is coming. From the outset, therefore, we need *a theory of taking*.