Deaccessioning Empire
Coco Fusco

The Metabolic Museum by Clémentine Deliss. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 127 pp., €22.00 (paper)
The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution by Dan Hicks. Pluto, 345 pp., £27.00

About ten years ago I read a news story reporting that one thousand human skulls from Germany’s former African colonies had been “discovered” at the Charité hospital in Berlin. In the 1980s I had traveled the world as a caged American trying to be discovered by the West, in a performance art piece I’d concocted as a response to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnological expositions—the human zoos—mounted for research and popular entertainment in Europe and America. So I was familiar with the sordid ways that scientists of the period had collided with colonial regimes to obtain human specimens, living and dead: I see colonial history—and the ethnological museums filled with colonial artifacts—as a one-sided affair that was fascinated by the idea of “the primitive” and refused to recognize the intellectual complexity and beauty of African, Asian, and Latin American cultures and the humanity of non-European peoples. From research for my performance, I had a pretty clear idea of how the African skulls could have gotten to Berlin, but their stagger- ing number and the fact that they had remained hidden in a hospital for more than a century struck me as remarkable. A few years after I read the story about the Charité I was invited to create a new work for an art center in Berlin, which gave me a chance to find out more about those skulls. I assumed that at least some of them had come from Namibia, the former German colony that had been the site of a genocidal campaign against the Nama and Herero peoples between 1904 and 1908. To this day gruesome lore circulates about how prisoners of war were forced to scrape flesh from the skulls of comrades to prepare them for shipment to Germany. After Namibia achieved independence from South Africa in 1990, the new government demanded that Nama and Herero remains in Germany be returned, which eventually led to the repatriation of twenty skulls in 2011. I could see in the photographs of the official repatriation ceremony in Berlin that there was some kind of writing on the crania. I wanted a closer look to be able to read the notations. Shortly thereafter, I learned that the rediscovery of the skulls at Charité had caused some embarrassment, leading to their transfer to Berlin’s Museum of Prehistory and Early History. But when I asked a museum staff member about scheduling a visit, I was told there were no more Namibian remains in the collection and that the documents that might have identified the rest of the bones had been destroyed in World War II. I was also informed that the museum’s effort to treat its human remains “with the greatest sensitivity, and the utmost respect” forced it to deny my artistic motivation for access to the collection. It seemed strange to me that only the twenty Namibian skulls were identifiable. And I couldn’t help but suspect that the museum’s insistence on being sensitive and respectful was a way to avoid discussing the colonial violence that had made possible the transfer of the remains to Germany. I did not know at the time that there was a politically daring curator in Frankfurt named Clémentine Deliss who had just spent five years inviting artists to the Weltkulturen Museum, the ethnographic museum in her charge, asking them to devise creative responses to the thousands of artifacts taken from Africa during Germany’s colonial expeditions. I did not know that while I was inquiring about the skulls in Berlin, she was unceremoniously ejected from her post, in 2015, for orchestrating the very kind of research that I sought to undertake. Nor could I have predicted that two years later the French president, Emmanuel Macron, would reverse the longstanding position of his government on repatriation of African artifacts by advocating for their return, boosting the efforts of European and American museum professionals and African governments to bring about such homecomings.

The much-discussed scene in the 2018 film Black Panther in which two characters steal a Wakandan axe from a fictional British museum made the history of European looting of African treasures a popular subject, and the recent toppling of Confederate monuments in the South has catalyzed public debates about how our built environment tacitly condones racism. But the thorny process of figuring out what to do with the colonial war booty that is scattered throughout hundreds of public and private collections in Europe and America has not been resolved. Two recent books offer extended reflections on the many dilemmas involved in rethinking the purpose of the “world culture” museum in our era of decolonial reckoning. In The Metabolic Museum, Deliss presents a proposal as an art curator at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, outlines her radical curatorial vision and chronicles her attempts to transform the Weltkulturen Museum from a moribund storehouse of artifacts into a laboratory and educational center for critical engagement with the material cultures of non-European societies. In British Museums, Dan Hicks, a professor of archaeology and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, makes a persuasive argument for the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes.

Widely considered to be magnificent examples of West African art, the more than one thousand plaques and sculptures that once decorated the royal palaces of the king of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria, were pillaged during a raid by the British in 1897. Historians call such incursions “punitive expeditions” in order to underscore the retributive intent of strikes aimed at foreign targets. Most of the stolen bronzes are currently held in Britain and Germany, but many more reside in private collections and American museums like the Metropol- itan and the Brooklyn Museum. Hicks provides a devastatingly thorough account of the destruction and plunder of Benin and a political analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by museums to evade ethical issues relating to their African acquisitions. It is a long account of loss.

Deliss and Hicks differ slightly in their proposals for transforming ethnological museums, but they both seek to reenvision anthropology’s fraught relationship with non-Western artifacts. Each writer emphasizes different reasons why European institutions have evaded that history until recently. According to Deliss, as heavyweight anthropologists of the postwar era shifted their focus from material to immaterial cultural expressions such as language, belief systems, and ritual, objects became less relevant to the discipline, and the question of the sordid origins of collections like those at the Met could be pushed aside. As a result, many ethnological collections (like the one housed in the museum she directed) fell into relative neglect and, when displayed at all, were shown in outdated ways. Imagine a museum that had not changed anything about its displays since the 1960s, with sealed windows, bad lighting, and linoleum covering wooden floors. Deliss calls the old way “the museum as emporium… that department store museography with its creeping class differentiation.”

Nowadays most visitors to such collections tend to be primary school groups. Faced with this situation in Frankfurt, Deliss proposed a series of “experimental… remediation” measures, reorganizing the materials, displaying them in ways designed to prompt critical engagement, and inviting artists to interpret them in performances and other works presented in the museum.

Hicks also advocates for major changes in curatorial practices, but he sees Western institutions’ reluctance to address their claims of ownership of artifacts pillaged in colonial raids

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as a form of sustained aggression, as the unfinished business of imperial- 
ism. For Hicks, to exhibit the spoils of wars waged against colonized peo-
ple—materializing such objects in a great educational service to the world—
amounts to “the exhibition of the greatest of all the objects of imperial aggre-
gation.” What Hicks objects to is the manner in which European exhibitions—
which he notes that attendance at the museum led to her being fired. 

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The story that lies behind the Benin Bronzes is chilling. Hicks explains that there are no definitive records of how many royal and sacred objects were extracted or where they all are now. In the aftermath of the raid, the British claimed that selling artifacts allowed them to pay the expenses they incurred. Treasures were sold by traders and colonial administrators and brought back by British soldiers, some of whom turned over their booty to specialized dealers and auctioneers. Within seven months of the punitive expedition, looted artifacts from Benin were exhibited in London. The fact of their display is for Hicks only part of the problem: it is the way such artifacts are sold, often coupled with the reluctance of curators to divulge what they know about their provenance and the defensive strategies of museums that refuse to relinquish them, that turn the stolen objects into what he calls “unfinished events.”

Hicks argues that the ways African artifacts are exhibited generate an image of otherness, casting African cultures as distinctly primitive. Cultural and geographic differences have been rendered temporal, because the living culture of Benin was, from the objects’ first presentation in England, treated as a sort of ethnological knowledge for decades. Exhibitions of such stolen artifacts have also supported pseudo-scientific racial theories and normalized the display of human remains in material form.” Racist thinking embedded in Western ethnological knowledge propagated an “ideology . . . of cultural otherness in mind” with regard to the civilization that was ransacked. This, Hicks argues, constitutes a “chronopolitics” that denies Africa “a place in the conceptual fold.”

While few claim to hold onto this kind of thinking in the present day, contemporary resistance to repatriation among institutions, curators, and some government officials bespeaks a view of Africa that is still informed by racist ideology and imperial hubris. Disaster capitalism has produced common arguments against returning artifacts. The first is that they were taken in accordance with values of another era and thus owner- ship rights, if any, would not permit restitution to Britain’s entitlement to its property. The second argument claims that returning the objects would endanger their future. Africans can’t be trusted to care for their treasures, and the third rejects the idea that the looting was an attack on African sovereignty, calling this view too “political.”

The Declaration emerged as part of a wider instrumentalization of “heritage” and culture as soft power in the rhetoric of multicultural and global exchanges, including international loans as a kind of cultural diplomacy, during the so-called “war on terror” launched by the Blair and Bush administrations, using the universalist storyline to operationalize museums as global spaces in the era of what George W. Bush described as “a new world order.”

The good news for Hicks is that conservatives are losing ground. African demands for repatriation began more than eighty years ago, and the Nigerian government continues to purchase stolen artifacts at auction. The pressure on European and American museums has increased in recent years as public opinion has shifted and now favors repatriation. Hicks notes that despite the rhetoric about preserving “world culture” collections for the public good, for decades many museums have been discreetly returning human remains to descendents and repatriating artifacts to “source communities.” For example, several museums (including the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum) have returned thousands of cultural artifacts to Aboriginal communities in Australia. The Smithson- ian has two repatriation offices and has returned human remains and artifacts to Native American communities and to indigenous communities in New Zealand.

But Hicks wants museums to do more. He heralds the current moment as the end of “innocence and complacency.” He calls for a revision of the euphemistic descriptions of colonial violence and looting in the wall text that support museum displays, noting that the Metropolitan does not even mention the 1897 raid in its label for the Benin Bronze it owns. He seeks to usher in a national process of reflection on “colonial ultraviolence” and its links to contemporary global disaster capitalism. Finally, he would like to turn anthropological museums into “sites of remembrance” where the return of stolen treasures would be memorialized through new works by contemporary artists. Like Deliss, Hicks invokes the restorative power of art to attend to traumatic violence and loss. For those who still bear the weight of these colonial legacies today, Hicks’s urgent, lucid, and brilliantly enaged book feels like a long-awaited treatise on justice.