

Killmonger in the Museum: Fantasy, History, Restitution

JONAH SIEGEL

Killmonger's Values / Newman's Immaculate Conception

WE MEET THE character Killmonger near the beginning of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), at the Museum of Great Britain, during a wonderfully realized sequence where a misattributed object is first correctly identified and then stolen (fig. 1). The object, which turns out to be a mining tool, is not from Benin, though it was captured there, Killmonger explains, turning the tables on the Museum Director who has been speaking to him in a scene combining condescension and surveillance. It is from the nation of Wakanda, he informs her, leaving the world of historical evils that includes the notorious British raid on Benin in 1897 and returning to the fantasy of the film. The object is correctly identified and then stolen, I wrote. But, are we meant to feel the item was, in fact, *recovered*? The issue is addressed directly in an exchange that raises the key topics at issue, while not resolving anything about them.

KILLMONGER: It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it's from Wakanda and it's made out of vibranium. Don't trip, I'mma take it off your hands for you.

MUSEUM DIRECTOR: These items aren't for sale.

KILLMONGER: How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else.

MUSEUM DIRECTOR: Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

The effectiveness of the scene is based on a number of transpositions and reversals. The African American man under surveillance in a space where his clothes and manner of speech are understood to



Fig. 1: Killmonger in front of the vitrine.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

mark him as out of place is revealed to be in control of the situation from the outset. His partners are about to enter the museum disguised as paramedics, ready to shoot the guards.

Killmonger is not a baffled philistine confusing museums for shops in the tradition of Christopher Newman in Henry James's 1877 *The American*, who buys a copy of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Immaculate Conception* in order to relieve his bewildering aesthetic fatigue on his first visit to the Louvre by carrying out an action of a sort with which he is comfortable. The comedy of an exchange between that earlier transatlantic traveler and a compatriot arises from their inability to fully grasp two constituent elements in the fantasy life of the institution—freedom from mercantile exchange and originality:

“It’s a pity you were not here a few minutes ago. I have just bought a picture. You might have put the thing through for me.”

“Bought a picture?” said Mr. Tristram, looking vaguely round at the walls. “Why, do they sell them?”

“I mean a copy.”

“Oh, I see. These,” said Mr. Tristram, nodding at the Titians and Vandykes, “these, I suppose, are originals.”

“I hope so,” cried Newman. “I don’t want a copy of a copy.”

Unlike Newman and Tristram, Killmonger has no doubts about what he is seeing, about originals or origins. He transmutes the moment of implicit contempt for his provincial confusion into a challenge to the project of museum acquisition of objects through imperial violence. His unanswerable demand, “How do you think your ancestors got these?” evokes a term that will gain greater weight as the film progresses and questions of ancestral responsibility, continuity, and breaks become central to the conflict between Killmonger and T’Challa, the Black Panther. But the word resonates uncomfortably in any discussion of responsibility and cultural heritage: Who are the *ancestors* whose actions stocked the museum? How did they acquire the objects in its vitrines? What is the responsibility of their descendants? Indeed, who is and isn’t a descendant? These are all questions woven into the texture of the movie’s fantasy: T’Challa, already the Black Panther, establishes what it will mean for him to be king of Wakanda by defeating Killmonger while also recognizing the merits of Killmonger’s values, which put into question the wisdom of their shared ancestors.

Killmonger asks about price and fairness, but does not stop for an answer. “You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else.” To say “everything” is to say a great deal. To say “ancestors” is to biologize the cultural processes of inheritance. The words do not feel like the inaccurate hyperbole they are because we hear in them a way of talking about things that are otherwise difficult to describe: How are the conditions of nineteenth-century imperial rule manifested today? What are the inheritances and who are the inheritors of those conditions? And how might the display of antique objects intersect with our understanding of the answers to these questions? What is fundamentally troubling about the question, when asked by an African American, is that *both* fair price and taking are distressingly appropriate and utterly inadequate terms when it comes to the history of chattel slavery.

As the instances of Christopher Newman and Killmonger suggest, the museum is a place where unresolved questions of ownership and the proper response to what has been marked out as culturally

significant might well make themselves felt. The answers to these questions are directly related to the function of the institution in relation to property. Buying and stealing are relatively clear and straightforward actions, but they are out of place in the gallery *because they have already occurred*. What makes the scenes I have cited comic in *The American* and thrilling in *Black Panther* is that they trouble the work of disarticulation the institution carries out by implying its own practices of establishing ownership are distinguishable from the common ones. The emotions these moments release suggest the interplay of two distinct unspoken thoughts: the assumption or premise that a museum gallery is not the place for certain kinds of actions (for theft or purchase), but also that the material we see accumulated with such abundance must have been acquired somehow, and may well *not* be free of relationships to property familiar to us from more mundane contexts. These recognitions lead to antithetical conclusions: either the very nature of ownership is different in a museum, though some people may be too naïve or uneducated to recognize that fact; or the apparent naïveté of outsiders may reveal a truth about the institution that the institution itself is designed to hide.

Material in the museum may be understood as an inheritance in the limited version of ownership we might associate with the term *heirloom*, a word that describes an object that at a given moment will be in the control of a particular family member, but the possession of which comes with the implicit or explicit imperative to pass it on to a limited set of people—or a particular person—because it marks a continuity within the group (or, *the* continuity of the group). This is ultimately why Killmonger's question does not seem strange, even though it is unlikely that the museum director's ancestors acquired the vibranium mining tool. He is aggressively identifying the way possession may be understood to consolidate an inheritable past. The energy of the scenes I have cited in *The American* and *Black Panther* comes from the challenges they present to this consolidation.

Murillo is a seventeenth-century Spanish painter. His work, originally a devotional image from a Christian house of worship, is encountered in a nineteenth-century French museum, an institution

it would have been impossible for him to understand. A copy of the Spaniard's large canvas is bought by a confused American in response to a feeling of baffled overstimulation that illustrates the traveler's lack of clear connection to the culture of Europe.

If the presence of objects from Africa in the Museum of Great Britain makes the artifice of cultural continuity stand out in a more marked way to the contemporary viewer, that is not because a canvas painted for a chapel in a home for aged and disabled priests in Seville—the *Hospital de los Venerables Sacerdotes*—belongs as a matter of course in a secular structure in Paris. Indeed, the *Immaculate Conception* was a prized part of the spoils carried out of Spain in the aftermath of the extraordinarily violent international struggle provoked by Napoleon's invasion of that country in the first decade of the nineteenth century. After the French defeat, the canvas was held in the storied collection displayed in his home in Paris by Nicolas-Jean de Dieu Soult, the Duke of Dalmatia, better known as Marshal Soult, the leader of French forces—the man responsible for its original looting from Seville.

The purchase of the Soult *Immaculate Conception* by the Louvre in 1852, some sixteen years before Christopher Newman saw its tranquil form, was much discussed in Europe, as it was the most expensive painting ever sold, with interest in its acquisition coming from the National Gallery in London, the Czar of Russia, and the Queen of Spain competing for it at auction. Still, although most of its nineteenth-century life belongs to the great deracinating project we might call the history of collecting, that phase of its existence had only begun sixty years before Christopher Newman's eye fell on the copy of the canvas being carried out by a pretty painter in 1868. Prior to that point, this emblematic representation of the sexual purity of the mother of God had spent the first 130 or so years of its existence as a cult object in a distant land.

Killmonger is no new man, no Columbus in reverse discovering a perplexing Old World, acquiring an object in a confused attempt to reduce the uncertainty he is experiencing by transmuting it into the type of relationship he knows he understands, that of buying and



Fig. 2: The poisoning of the Museum Director.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

selling (“*Combien?*” [How much?]) is the first word Newman speaks in the novel, in the museum). Still, the persistent affective power of both scenes licenses one to believe that purchase or theft, the kind of clear everyday actions we might hold to be antithetical to those warranted or suggested by the museum, in fact indicate where the vulnerabilities of the institution reside. Who owns the objects in the museum, and with what title to that property? It is hardly a coincidence that the key element in the term “cultural heritage” is a word that invokes the profoundly limited concept of transmission within the family. It in no way takes owners out of the picture to talk about things handed down within a group, though the term may be felt to avoid agency, and so blame. This is where Killmonger’s question takes on its special force. Perhaps theft itself is a heritage, he seems to suggest, a matter of ancestors and descendants. The fairly basic ideas of property in the fictions I have cited (“I’mma take it off your hands for you,” “*Combien?*”) run counter to the ambiguous ones the museum promotes and provokes. Then again, concepts of property wielded in recent discussion of restitution are themselves often hardly more sophisticated than those expressed by these fictional characters.



Fig. 3: The shooting of the guards.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

This essay is not intended as an argument against the restitution of objects in museums, but it does seek to arrive at some clarity about the stakes of that aspiration. Unfortunately, the introduction of complexity or nuance to the discussion of this controversial topic has, of late, often been understood to support fundamentally reactionary values with retention as their practical goal. My hope is to put the issue in an ampler context than it is sometimes granted, and in that sense to honor the feelings and ideas (and feelings about ideas) that make the museum a location for productive crises where simplifying actions, like those of Killmonger or Christopher Newman, reveal not a simple truth but a complex condition. In order to carry out this project I will need to say more about a fictional location, Wakanda, before turning to the textual life of a real place, Benin, as it has been evoked in recent treatments of the topic of restitution. To talk about Wakanda is to talk about unreal fantasy, while to talk about Benin is to talk about real violence. *Black Panther* joins these apparently distinct registers at its opening, but I will be insisting throughout this piece that this deeply generative, if challenging, combination is always present in recent polemics.

*Isolation or Diffusion:
The Birth of the Wakandan International Outreach Center*

Killmonger's focus on the violence inherent in the provenance of African objects suggests that while authentic ownership will be a key issue in the film, his own standing as a collector is going to be validated in the first instance by a knowing emulation of the procedures of empire—the display of superior expertise (not Benin, Wakanda) accompanied by the open embrace of violence. If popular responses to the film are any indication, the scene in the museum is very successful. Viewers resonate with the self-evident guilt of the “ancestors” to the point that the sadistic murder of the guards and the woman identified as the “Museum Director” become points of amusement or even relief in online forums (figs. 2 and 3). (And, indeed, Killmonger's allies' entry disguised as paramedics, pretending to be on a mission of rescue when they are about to murder and steal, is an elegantly economical satire of persistent imperial fantasies.)

Killmonger steals the object, which (with a wonderful circularity in this film about the extraction and diffusion of resources) is a vibranium mining tool, along with a mask he just grabs because he wants to (“I'm just feeling it”). Or has Killmonger stolen anything? Are these works liberated the moment they come into his possession? The question of legitimacy raised at the moment of the theft/liberation appears to be resolved by what we eventually learn, that Killmonger is of royal Wakandan blood, the cousin of T'Challa, the Black Panther, son of an uncle who had intended to take vibranium outside of Wakanda, to use its extraordinary properties to liberate people of color around the world. That aim was frustrated by T'Challa's father, who enforced the traditional Wakandan imperative to hide the power of vibranium from the outside world in a violent confrontation that left the revolutionary brother dead. In that sense the liberation of the object from the vitrine, at once tool and weapon, is just one moment in the course of a violent project of freedom intended not to repatriate anything, but on the contrary, to diffuse vibranium around the world in order to promote the enfranchisement of a subject people. In a typically



Fig. 4: Dissolve: From Wakanda to Oakland.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

Wakandan fantasy, Killmonger's project is doubly validated, by the principles which motivate him and by his royal blood. Moreover, his tragedy is not that his goals are unjustified, but that the film and the Black Panther himself fear the effects of his endeavors. What Wakanda has must indeed be diffused, but in a way different from that of the raiders on Benin or Killmonger.

And this other way may be the greatest fantasy of the film. It is so great that it is unrepresentable. The film ends after we learn that T'Challa has bought the tenement where his own father murdered his uncle in order to found in that location an outpost for the peaceable diffusion of Wakandan technology and culture—a center of urban renewal in the troubled inner city intended to do good in a more acceptable way than Killmonger's, a perfect and peaceable museum combining the greatest antiquity with the most futuristic science—unalienated knowledge and power. In a telling dissolve, the film moves from the isolated privilege of Wakanda, with its African landscape and vernacular-modernist architecture, to the slums of Oakland (fig. 4). A tenement building comes into focus behind a chain-link fence, and a milk-crate basketball hoop that we have seen before. The point of view is that of T'Challa and his sister, standing

where Killmonger had stood as a boy the night his father was killed. The site of fratricide, the viewer learns, will be torn down to become “The Wakandan International Outreach Center,” a perfect museum diffusing the good of Wakanda to the people who need it, atoning for the violence against T’Challa’s uncle and the abandonment of the boy who would become Killmonger.

Injury and Enlightenment / The Museum and Revolution

While the figure of Killmonger has become a touchstone for discussions of restitution since the release of *Black Panther*, perhaps even a cliché, commentators rarely venture past the scene when we meet him, even though the meanings of that event are glossed and complicated throughout the film as a whole. I will be proposing in the balance of this essay that the issues the film raises and the complicated irresolutions that shape the emotions it provokes together constitute an unusually subtle intervention in a discussion about museums and restitutions that all too often assumes the clarity of the profoundly challenging intellectual and ethical stakes at issue.

Every fantasy presents us with vivid evidence of the lack for which it compensates. In that sense, the unseeably ideal museum with which *Black Panther* ends reveals the productive failings of the institution as it is, as it always has been. For historical as well as conceptual reasons it makes sense to think of the museum as embodying the aspirations of the Enlightenment. Like the great constitutions drafted in the eighteenth century, the museum—a heterogenous assembly making experiences that were once limited widely available in the hope that access will expand the dissemination of knowledge—concretizes hopes and ideas, thereby demonstrating the contradictory nature of both when brought into the practical realm. And like that other great Enlightenment invention, the *Encyclopédie*, the museum has lost its revolutionary cachet as it has become associated with what has come to feel fixed and limiting, the institutionalization of knowledge. The encyclopedia sits unused on the shelf, and the compendia we consult online today offer innumerable individual moments

of specialized endlessly revisable information, rather than the grasp of a clear whole wrested away from privilege. As to the museum, it can seem, if one follows the logic of some of the texts I will discuss, that the best destiny for that institution in a utopian future will be to serve as an object that needed to be superseded, merely a warehouse of weapons to be used to claim freedom, like a vibranium axe ripped from a display case. Or perhaps each museum will become a Bastille, an emblem of control and actual site of imprisonment whose revolutionary destiny is to be destroyed, to become a symbol of what needed to be left behind. Or we may dream that a museum of unalienated, entirely local knowledge will one day spring up, free from the injuries of history.

This abstract list of hopes for the institution and fears about its nature make most sense when the items it contains are recognized for what they are: so many ways of partially remembering while not fully acknowledging a foundational relationship involving violence and injury that is intrinsic to the Enlightenment origin and function of the museum. That this relationship tends to enter contemporary discussions of the institution as an embarrassing exposure rather than as an understood historical fact says more about recent political dispositions than it does about the past. When Ariella Azoulay declares in *Potential History* that “false stories about museums as vehicles of the democratization of art obscure their creation as instruments of violence,” she is assuming an unbridgeable gap between democratization and violence that would have puzzled every revolutionary who has ever lived. Tellingly, this claim can only do its work by in fact ignoring the museum of art that it initially evokes and pushing the argument toward conventional accounts of a later invention, the museum of anthropology, hence her gloss of what she means by the museum as instrument of violence: “modern spaces in which others’ material cultures are showcased and stories about the backwardness of those other cultures are presented as fact.” It is not always easy to come up with an opposite to “others” understood as it must be in formulations of this sort. The exercise is especially awkward when it is abstracted from particulars, as it is here.

Azoulay is clearly uncomfortable with the relationship between democracy and violence and assumes her readers are as well. In any case—and this is where it matters that we distinguish between museums of art and of anthropology more than Azoulay does—the first “others” present in modern museums were separated from *non*-others not by the seas dividing modern imperial holdings from the metropolis, but by the political space separating revolutionary from reactionary, republican from royalist, even atheist from believer. The revolution that takes the king’s collection and makes it a public one, that pulls the statue from plinth or niche, that tears the painting from the altar, marks a break with the past that cannot be partial, but that also, given its intersection with modern ideas of property and of culture, will always involve injury. Indeed, if violence and loss are features, not bugs, of revolution, that is because it is precisely what the Enlightenment called for. Revolution was a heroic project in the age of despots, because the logic of reason is inevitably an injury to conventions only supported by tradition or raw power, or—what is more common—by traditions doing the work of sustaining power and sweetening subjection by making it feel (to someone) like a shared project.

If expropriating the king’s property in order to make it available to the people is a reasonable thing to do, what is the limit of that premise? Was the Musée Napoléon the logical next step following the founding of the Louvre? Why *not* pack up a magnificent canvas in a sleepy church in a seldom-visited part of Rome, or in a monastery in Parma, and bring it to a great free public museum in a reasonably accessible part of Europe? What is it that scandalizes the modern imagination about that idea? Is it the shocking indifference to property rights, or is it something that feels more self-evident, the need to defend the rights of a people to their art, or even the need to protect what we are liable to think of as the original cult function of works of art? While it will be hard to find many today who do not agree that art objects should remain where they are part of the system of worship that formed them, it is striking that that notion is often held to be a progressive one.

Harm and Good

“Looting became something new during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of World War in 1914, through the actions of anthropology museums,” writes Dan Hicks, an engaged reader of Azoulay, in *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. To be sure, new or newly ascendant race theories, the open participation of cultural institutions, and raw economic interest were all component parts in events that caused extraordinary damage to people and to social structures in Africa: this is impossible to gainsay, and vital to recognize. Nevertheless, one might pause over Hicks’s formulation, in which cultural markers linked with epochal violence and still unresolved social conditions (the Scramble for Africa associated with the Berlin Conference, the First World War) are leveraged to talk about the continuing moral failure of institutions for display. While it is undeniable (even self-evident) that events and attitudes between 1884 and 1914 are related to a recalibration of the meaning of looting in the same period, it ought to be hard to argue that the actions of museums are the chief *causal* component in that recalibration. This would go without saying, except that the role of the institution in that looting process is central to Hicks’s argument. Indeed, his insistence on the harm *caused* by museums in the climactic period of European imperial expansion is emphasized not to address a historical fact to be condemned in retrospect but as part of an argument that holds that the continued display of those objects in museums is part of an ongoing process of injury that implicates every viewer. “The damage is renewed,” Hicks writes, “every day that the museum doors are unlocked and these trophies are displayed to the public.”

Hicks, a curator at the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford, is desperate for readers to hear the violence of bombs and rifles that echoes in his argument exploding in the institution itself, which is what drives moments of hyperbole such as “the invention of ethnological displays was surely as significant a technology in the history of Victorian colonialism as the Maxim gun.” Tactical exaggeration aside, it is hard to

know what Hicks means by “surely as significant.” There is almost no way, for me at least, to understand the claims of that sentence that strikes me as morally or conceptually sound. No more than “in the same way” is a straightforward formulation in the following sentence: “Displays of loot are an endurance in the same way as apartheid was an endurance, or how the poisoning today of the Niger River by oil companies is an endurance.” These are strong claims, impassioned and forceful. But their power and clarity makes it all the more important that they should be recognized for the work they are doing, which is to say, to be clear about the premises on which they are based and which they ultimately endorse. *Significance* is a claim of retrospective analysis. It is only by looking back that we may be able to recognize (or, at least, claim) that the development of the ethnographic display was as important as that of the machine gun in the history of colonialism. But *endurance* suggests an ongoing condition. It is an intriguing formulation—a verb made into a countable noun designed to suggest duration and hardship at the same time. But the forcefulness of these comparisons might provoke some qualms in the reader: “in the *same* way”? The claim of identity invites one to be as concrete at one end of the analogy as at the other. The museum where Hicks currently works has on display in a crowded vitrine in a corner of a gallery on an upper floor many items looted from Benin. How are the injuries to generations caused by the openly mandated and aggressively enforced legal separation of races in apartheid, or the damage to life caused by toxins in water, similar to the damage caused by the singularly undistinguished display of a collection of objects in a small city in England? What is the meaning of *same* here?

Evidently, Hick’s formulations are designed to forestall such questions as what one means by *in the same way* or by *as significant as* or even, *through the actions of*. As the topics of possession and display are attached to self-evident evils, they take on the opprobrium of those conditions and push us away from wanting to quibble. With compelling polemical force, Hick’s text aims toward answers, not questions. But perhaps we ought to understand something more powerful and challenging than my worrying about the adequacy of

particular comparisons might suggest. Maybe the point is that museums and collections participate as a matter of course in the very projects of evildoing we associate with European empire building at the end of the nineteenth century, with the legal formalization of race hate in South Africa in 1948, and with the poisoning of the environment by multinational corporations today. So the details of that participation, the specific cause and effect, don't matter.

The commonality of the claims are, after all, plain to see, and fairly conventional today. A continuum is being assumed between the ideas of race shaping the crafting of apartheid, the indifference to human suffering of the polluters of African rivers, and the establishment and continued existence of displays in museums. And yet, I'd like to suggest that, given the powerful issues on which the argument touches, it is all the more important to establish the methodological assumptions subtending an overwhelming case. It strikes me that while Hicks's arguments manifest an impassioned faith in the inevitable effectiveness of the object lesson of the museum—the sense that material on display will as a matter of course or inevitably teach a certain thing—nevertheless, his extensive arguments in themselves amount to an object lesson about how difficult it is to come to a clear determination of meaning and values in relation to things or display. Hick's claims are structured around three common but quite challenging premises:

1. That objects express things about their sources as a matter of course—though in Hick's work the source is understood less as the maker's or commissioner's culture than the violent moment of acquisition.
2. That it is nevertheless the duty of the curator to make what the object expresses vividly clear to the viewer.
3. That restitution is the fundamental ethical response to the fact of looting, which is to say that it is both possible and necessary.

When good is being done, it is always best to be clear on whose benefit is at issue—*cui bono*—otherwise we are operating in a realm of

simple ahistorical moral axioms, or rather, we are moving back and forth between historical claims and moral principles in order to argue not only that looting is theft and theft is a crime, but that all crime should lead to restitution and that restitution to descendants is an absolute good. While this relatively straightforward set of claims has an undeniable appeal to the moral senses, it is hardly sustainable in theory, and rarely in practice. The certainty that descendants merit all they may be said to own is, in any case, a fundamentally political one—or, at least it used to be. If someone had stolen massive sums from many families in the course of a years-long criminal campaign, but had lost those ill-gotten gains through confiscation by a more powerful individual, would we say that justice was served if that cache of funds was restored to the descendants of the original thief? If a madman had made a work of art out of the body parts of those he had murdered and dismembered, surely we would not be in a rush to restore that grotesque statue to his descendants. As I noted toward the beginning of this essay, the question of ancestors and descendants may more properly be said to be raised by the museum than settled by it.

But, why all this talk about individuals? someone might ask. Surely discussions of restitutions are about nations or peoples. Surely when we talk about returning things in the context of looting we are talking about nations seeing their rights restored, or even about damaged cultures undergoing a repair that makes the value of the encounter with art objects more compelling. Both of these claims have played important parts in arguments about restitution—say in discussions about restoring works Napoleon's troops removed from collections all over Europe, or about returning the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. And yet, the place of restitution to individuals or families in thinking about the topic has also been extraordinarily powerful in culture.

In the notorious case of the works looted from Benin, we have seen a remarkably complicated play between individual or family restitution and national restitution. The question is typically finessed, but somehow those works are being restored to a family (a royal family), to a people, and to a state—though a state that did not

exist when the works were stolen, and though the nation to which we tell ourselves those objects belonged saw them rarely, if at all. The Pitt-Rivers has recently determined to send its objects from Benin City to Nigeria, so—as I write—the process of restitution is ahead of that collection. We may take recently completed instances (or, at least completed on the British side) as illustrative of the complexity inherent in the act. For example, at a recent ceremony at Jesus College, Cambridge, during which a bronze cockerel was, as it is said, *restored* to the nation from which it was stolen, Professor Abba Isa Tijani, Director of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments, was in attendance, as was His Royal Highness Prince Aghatise Erediauwa. The determination of the college’s Legacy of Slavery Working Party in 2019 was cited at the event: the cockerel “belongs with the current Oba at the Court of Benin.” It is up to those who think restoring the Oba’s property is an important moral issue to gloss that claim and relate it to the political and institutional claims made in all the substantives in the following title: “Director of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments.” What is the link between such modern concepts as Museums and Monuments or even the bureaucratic title of Director, the modern concept of nation—and of Nigeria itself—and the older concept of a Court and the inherited privilege of a monarch? “Belongs” in the phrase I cited is not meant to identify property rights, I think, but something far less transferable. It is not akin to a phrase such as “this book belongs with me because I bought it,” so much as to “the child belongs with her mother,” and, so it is evidently not about property in a limited sense. Indeed, the report of the Legacy of Slavery Working Party at Jesus calls the piece a “royal, ancestral heirloom,” a term with acquisition through right of birth written into it. Still, the wide range of stakeholders invited to restitution ceremonies—princes as well as directors of commissions—is an indication of the unresolved nature of what we call restitution.

The operating theory of continuing harm one sees in Hicks and other related critics underwrites a powerful ethical challenge to the museum that argues with uncompromising force for a clear, simple,

and straightforward model of restitution—call it the handover. In this context, the report commissioned by the French government from Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy in 2018 after President Emmanuel Macron indicated a new openness to restitution, distinguishes itself not simply by its official imprimatur, but also by the combination of nuance and detail it offers in its treatment of specific regions and objects. To engage seriously with particular conditions and to undertake a dialogue including a wide set of stakeholders in Africa is to meet the bold demand for what the authors call, in the subtitle to their report, “a new relational ethics.” “Thinking restitutions,” Sarr and Savoy argue, in a simple formulation of notable conceptual weight, “implies much more than a single exploration of the past: above all, it becomes a question of building bridges for future equitable relations.” The report resists the sentimental tendency to believe that objects only belong in their native settings, or that the past is the location requiring ethical attention rather than the future. It also does not look away from the violence that needs to be recognized as a constitutive element of what certain objects have become in culture:

These objects which for a large part have been ripped away from their cultures of origin by way of colonial violence, but which were welcomed and cared for by generations of curators in their new places of residence, from now on bear within them an irremediable piece of Europe and Africa. Having incorporated several regimes of meaning, they become sites of the *creolization* of cultures and as a result they are equipped to serve as mediators of a new relationality. (*italics in the original*)

The rhetoric of curatorial welcome and care contrasts sharply to Hicks’s vision of the museum as the site of an ongoing violence comparable to that waged with bombs and machine guns, or by means of environmental degradation—a violence inflicted by the founders of collections, whose current descendants share their guilt as they keep opening the doors and reenacting the injury that led to the acquisition of the objects on display. While the “welcome and care” of the Report are evidently simplifications that might be felt to soft-pedal

the actions of agents at institutions that display things ripped from where they belong by violence, it is worth pausing before we assume that emphasizing an unbroken line of evil actions and results is a more accurate or useful version of the relationship between curator and object. Sarr and Savoy, in any case, propose no repair for damage that cannot be undone. They do suggest that the future is in more urgent need of our care than the past is of expiation, though the future they envision does indeed need to be shaped by a recognition of the irreparable conditions created by injury and displacement.

Sarr and Savoy's report should be read along with Savoy's recent study *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat* (2022), another attempt to address what we call restitution as a cultural project shaped by the political aspirations of the states emerging in the regions from which the art in question was taken. As part of their argument for the urgent need to repatriate a heritage easily available to view in Western capitals, but all too rare in the areas in which that heritage arose, Sarr and Savoy point out that at the time of writing their report 60 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa was below the age of twenty. The individuals they have in mind as they write are these young people. Oriented toward the future as they are, Sarr and Savoy recognize not one fallen condition, but a complex set of relationships needing to be addressed. Their concepts of restitution are not premised on nightmare visions of violent repetition of old conflicts so much as in understanding culture as always available for new beginnings—if never for completely fresh starts.

The Hopelessness of Critique

Thinking about the feelings *Black Panther* provokes and the ideas it assumes will be recognizable by its viewers, I have found myself wondering lately about the intellectual politics of the movement toward restitution of art objects, a development which I think in the final analysis is not driven by a progressive aspiration at all, but instead amounts to a confession of the failure of will of the revolutionary project in which museums once played a part. As I turn

to this topic, it will be useful to cite again Ariella Azoulay's influential *Potential History*, a text in which the question of cultural property or heritage ties into the broader tradition of postwar critique of Enlightenment thought to which she may be said to contribute a singularly undialectical sensibility and a commitment to utopian absolutes that certainly looks radical. Though her broad historical sweep often takes in earlier periods, Azoulay's conceptual touchstones are consistently drawn from the late eighteenth century, and the revolutions she deprecates are the foundational ones from that period. Her account of "unlearning" concepts including *citizen*, *art*, *sovereignty*, and *human rights*, along with the categories *new* and *neutral*, is designed to put into question the political force of values consolidated in the eighteenth century. Her description of "the historical fetishization of the French and American revolutions" is part of the same project, as is her suggestion of the need to challenge Kantian categories as a first step or precondition for a new politics. These gestures are both flamboyant examples of the desire to reject the apparently neutral formulations of the period as inextricably linked to the consolidation of violence. "Undoing imperial violence," writes Azoulay, in an extraordinarily hyperbolic formulation, "means undoing time, space, and the body politic as given forms of experience." A prescription of such splendid boldness dazzles and confuses analysis. I am not sure how one *undoes* things, so perhaps time and space do indeed need to give way in order to undertake that task, which suggests that what is being proposed is something between a correction of historical harms and a kind of apocalyptic politics—not in the sense that we can expect at some point a great undoing or revelation, or that we may hope to bring epochal change about ourselves, but that we may need to recognize ourselves to be in the midst of a pause of indeterminate duration waiting for both.

Azoulay is able to move quickly, simply to assert the relationships on which her book is based, because what she is developing at several junctures amounts to an impassioned summary of a long-running line of argument that holds that abstract ideals associated with social development are inevitably compromised by their inherent links to a

network of related but distinct phenomena—capitalism, imperialism, racism itself. “That has been the trajectory of European civilization,” wrote Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in one classic statement of the argument, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). “Abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation.” The chief novelty in recent arguments in this vein, including Azoulay’s, resides in a narrowing and particularizing of the original claim that changes its meaning utterly. It is not that abstraction does a kind of violence to the particularity of existence that is unavoidable in modernity, but that it directly contributes to the injuries imperial armies cause people. The institutions that collaborate with or even effect the abstractions of thought Azoulay deprecates (museums, notably) are therefore inevitably complicit in this violence. Her arguments and those of Hicks, who cites her, are closely related, and for both authors analogies and evocative homologies assuming this relationship of complicity stand in at those points when general claims might organize ideas.

Consider, for example, the confident symmetries shaping the opening of Azoulay’s *Potential History*:

It is no secret that millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls, have been looted from all over the world by different imperial agents. It is no secret that many of them have been carefully handled, preserved, and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments, and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world.

The text moves from what it identifies as the self-evident nature of two distinct material phenomena (looted objects and displaced people) to an argument about the fundamental relationship of the two. But the claim of lucidity with which her book begins (what we are told repeatedly “is no secret”), as much as the commonality this opening

wants to establish between people and objects, are, of course, both dependent on an extraordinary process of abstraction. As was the case in Hicks's *Brutish Museum*, two forms of injury are placed in relation, each gathering moral weight from the other. Art objects and refugees are forced to exist in uprooted exile. The object outside its original source has been stripped of things needful to it in ways related to the loss of necessary objects experienced by the displaced people of the world. Azoulay's evocative juxtaposition is hardly subtle, but it more or less leaves to implication what Hicks lays out with commendably clear outrage. While she recognizes the apparent incongruity of the elements she is putting into relation, her gestures towards nuance only serve to intensify her claim for the necessity of the connection. In any case, the terms she uses make far more sense as descriptions of the processes of museum work than as accounts of the experience of being a refugee: observation and study, conversion and care, charge and control. It will turn out that Azoulay's concern is principally with the mechanisms of alienation from the world associated with museums and other instruments for organizing and perceiving knowledge (for example, in her telling, the camera), rather than with the lived experience of refugees who have lost everything. The suffering of vulnerable individuals ultimately serves as the analogy for an intellectual experience:

These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the "new world." People and artifacts have become objects of observation and study, conversion and care, charge and control by two seemingly unrelated sets of disciplines, institutions, and their scholars and experts. In truth, however, neither the movements nor their separation are unrelated. With a certain endlessly recurring brevity, similar to that of the operation of a camera shutter, the unending instantiation of their separation is reiterated. They are continuously produced as disconnected, as if it were the nature of artifacts to exist outside of their communities, to come into being as museum objects, to be out of reach of those who felt at home in their midst—as if it were the nature of

certain people to exist bereft of the worldly objects among which their inherited knowledge and rights, protective social fabric and safety, bliss and happiness, sorrow and death are inscribed—as if these objects were not a source of worldliness and a fountain of liveliness for the communities from which they were taken.

Refugees: the condition of homelessness become an identity (“as if it were in the nature of certain people to exist bereft of. . . worldly objects”). Objects in the museum: alienation become an identity (“as if it were the nature of artifacts to exist outside of their communities”). Azoulay wants to propose not simply a homology, however, but a relationship that may even be causal. The stripping of objects from the communities where they arose is part of a broader system of abstract knowledge creation and the imposition of power that injures people—perhaps even making them refugees without leaving home by taking things away from them that gave a shape to their existence—“as if these objects were not a source of worldliness and a fountain of liveliness for the communities from which they were taken.”

While at this point in history it may make sense to doubt the revolutionary prospects opened up by the Enlightenment, the alternatives on offer need to be recognized for the compromised and constrained options they in fact are. We make recourse to small local arguments that endorse not freedom, but other forms of extraordinarily limited self-realization—notably property rights and the nation state, concepts that are themselves hardly free of abstraction. *Black Panther* offers a subtler reflection on the aspirations and limits of revolution than one finds in recent polemics on the museum. Killmonger, T’Challa, their fathers, the contested legitimacy of the relationship of this family to the state and the world: what makes the film interesting is not so much that it ends with a fantasy of the museum as a place that might make unalienated knowledge widely accessible, but that the fantasy African nation the film creates for the viewer amounts to a far more complicated location than simpler contemporary visions of restitution need the nations from which objects have been removed to be. And the richness of the world the film imagines is part of the story of revolutionary anxiety it aims to tell.



Fig. 5: T'Challa confronts his ancestors.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

If the arc of Killmonger's project in *Black Panther* begins with him stealing from the museum an artifact made from vibranium, claiming it as an authentic descendant of Wakanda, it ends with him trying to follow in his father's footsteps, and attempting to distribute weapons of immense power made from that metal to Wakandan agents hidden all over the world (known as "War Dogs") in order that they might effectively wage a global revolution. Viewers know Killmonger's project, which attempts to enact the meaning of his name, is terrible because of the implacable rage and resentment that we have learned motivates him. The loss of faith in revolutionary change and the challenge to the museum are more closely allied than it can at first appear. In the spread of weapons to disenfranchised peoples all over the world, the film makes it clear that we have reason to fear the rise of chaos and new local oppressors. The filmmakers are not subtle on this topic. Here is Killmonger describing his project to the court of Wakanda:

You know, where I'm from, when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Hmm? Yea all that ends today. We got

spies embedded in every nation on Earth. Already in place. . . . I know how colonizers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy against them. We're gonna send vibranium weapons out to our War Dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world, so they can finally rise up and kill those in power, and their children and anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us. We're warriors. The world's gonna start over and this time we're on top.

The film is designed so that the viewer will inevitably cheer inside as the various transports carrying Wakandan instruments of war are destroyed by a plucky CIA operative himself piloting Wakandan technology guided by T'Challa's brilliant sister. Like the moment of theft in the museum—which is the opening of the story of retention and distribution, violence and/or freedom in relation to the precious material of Wakanda—this elaborately staged scene is another splendid instance of a political allegory in which the reframing of an old story gives it a new ironic charge. While the CIA agent violently attempting to police what we might call order by preventing the spread of revolution beyond a national border is a familiar element in adventure fictions, we might also read the scene as a reversal, given that rather than coopting local elites in order to maintain world order through violence the agent is cajoled into playing his part by local leaders. Still, in either case, the result is the same: the revolution will not take place; the uncontrolled diffusion of Wakandan material needs to be prevented.

In the wish fulfillment that is a romance such as *Black Panther*, it makes sense that the legitimate forms of action are determined by the legitimate king. But the genius of the film is that the charismatic figure of Killmonger and T'Challa's sensitive reflection on the failures of his ancestors both work to open up a space for an unresolved relationship to legitimacy itself.

The important things get done twice. During T'Challa's initial installation as king he is challenged to the throne by the head of the Jabari tribe. Through combat undergone without the augmented powers of the sacred plant that makes him the Black Panther, T'Challa is

revealed to be inherently resourceful and magnanimous. He defeats his enemy without killing him. When he holds back against the ruthless Killmonger in the course of the same kind of test of inherent virtue, however, he is defeated and literally overthrown: he is flung down into the torrent far below the height at which the battle takes place. As quickly as that, one leader is replaced by another, and the capricious nature of traditional forms of rulership is revealed. Unconstrained by any limit, Killmonger can make Wakanda in his image, wrench it out of its isolation in a process of violent resistance to imperial power.

It is only after T'Challa revisits his ancestors and confirms his sense that Killmonger is in fact right, and they are wrong—at least when it comes to the fault of having kept the benefits of vibranium to themselves—that the film allows him to regain his own power and come back (figs. 5 and 6). In that sense *Black Panther* endorses a profoundly moderate vision of the museum and of politics only after tarrying a while with a more radical one. In neither case, however, is repatriation endorsed. What Wakanda has must be shared; the only questions are curatorial: What is the most effective kind of museum in which to promulgate the good these objects might do? Who needs to see these things, and what is the best way to show them? Then again, thinking back to the opening of the film, we remember that vibranium landed in Wakanda in the form of a massive meteor. All along the film has been about how a culture is shaped in response to powerful material that comes from elsewhere but has been naturalized. But it is also about how descendants may reflect on the failures of their ancestors in managing the values of that culture.

Restitution Fantasies and the Fear of the King

The fantasies of a Hollywood movie have provided me the opportunity to address some of the challenging elements motivating the claim that certain objects should be moved from one place to another. That may be because the categories of property and nation underlying that consensus are themselves hardly free from fantasy. Indeed, fantastic concepts of ownership and national identity are central to recent



Fig. 6: “All of you were wrong!” T’Challa to his ancestors.
Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018).

treatments of real injuries, such as Hicks’s attempt to turn the visit to the museum into a reenactment of a bloody military raid, the act of collecting into something akin to the burst of fire from a machine-gun into a crowd or the poisoning of a river. To encounter the objects on display is to return to the moment of original capture, and therefore—the argument goes—to participate in the violence that is still destroying communities in Africa. In order to suggest by contrast the alienated horror of the objects’ condition, the relationship between the refugees’ forced removal from home and the removal of objects from the territory where they were produced, Azoulay needs to imagine the objects in the collection to have previously supported a world of unalienated experience (“a source of worldliness and a fountain of liveliness for . . . communities”).

I proposed a silly thought experiment earlier in this essay, and a grotesque one. I asked about the importance of restoring money to the descendants of a thief, and the urgency of returning a statue made of human body parts to the descendants of the maker of such a horror. But, someone might say, a sacred statue is not loot until it is stolen, and it is certainly not an assemblage of destroyed human life. It is, if anything, what is whole and properly possessed, what is destined

to exist *inside* a community, to be within reach, to make one feel at home, alive, lively. Yet the evidence of the feelings of others, and of the nature of communities provided in texts devoted to the topic of looting, is hardly as straightforward as these abstractions might suggest. The complexity of an actually existing culture is amply demonstrated by the hard work these books have to do to simplify their polemics while being true to the nature of the past they aim to recover.

“The fear of the King is the wisdom of our culture,” writes Barnaby Phillips in the course of his detailed and moving *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* (2021), quoting a charming interlocutor. “So I’m told by Patrick Oronsaye, a genial man in his sixties whom I met one Sunday morning in Benin City. He is an artist, an historian and a philanthropist. He is also royalty.” A genial, elderly artist and philanthropist, royalty: it is not so much that we lose sight of what this aphoristic conversationalist is saying, but that we hear it and don’t quite feel its human weight. Perhaps we don’t need to endorse it. Maybe it’s just the kind of thing an old guy says on a quiet morning in a distant city. Still, there is much that is arresting in the brief turn of phrase. Patrick Oronsaye takes it upon himself to declare the wisdom of his culture, and who among us would dare to speak of the wisdom of *our* culture? But, what is it that this royal tells us? Wherein does that wisdom lie? “Fear of the King.” Pausing on what is being endorsed here we might let the wave of charm wash over us and pass as we realize that what we have heard sounds a little like Walter Benjamin’s most famous wartime aphorism about history, the one that holds that every document of culture is at the same time a document of barbarism—but, *in a good way*.

Our culture: fear as wisdom. But that is just a genial old man talking. Here is an account of Oba Ozolua, the leader the Portuguese met when they came to the region in the fifteenth century, as described in Jacob Eghareva’s groundbreaking 1933 *A Short History of Benin* and cited by Phillips: Oba Ozolua “in the tradition of Ewuare, was a warrior king, known as ‘the Conqueror’. . . . When he marched with drums and fifes against his enemies, the inhabitants of the towns and villages deserted their homes and fled into the bush at the sounds

of his coming. In fact Benin became a terror to all other tribes in this part of West Africa and the Benin Empire became wonderfully enlarged." Evidently the fear of the king was not reserved for the culture of the people of Benin city, but was diffused throughout the region. Then again, the terror the king spread led to a wonderfully enlarged empire, starting with the conquests of Ewuare, the founder of the kingdom.

The enlargement of terror was not limited in its scope, however, as Benin became an important node in the slave trade, an issue that is as frequently obfuscated in the literature as it is mentioned. "Nor does it seem Benin entered the slave trade with any great enthusiasm," writes Phillips in a passage that finesses a great deal at the end of each sentence: "There is an Edo saying. . . 'What does the Oba lack that he would need to sell his slaves?' Benin was victorious in war, and presumably had many captives." Like some antebellum family that would not deign to engage in the slave trade itself (or that does so without "any great enthusiasm"), but that nevertheless gloried in its ownership of human beings, the Obas are sometimes presented as accidental merchants in human beings, or even as grudgingly coopted into the practice by the Europeans *because* they mainly wanted to hold on to the enslaved people in their control, as slavery meant so much to their culture. Here is that avuncular philanthropist again, Patrick Oronsaye, drawing a distinction that may not strike everyone as vindicating either the culture or the tradition it describes: "Slave trading was not part of our culture," he explains, but "slavery was part of our tradition."

The fact that people were sometimes enslaved as a consequence of military conflict is repeatedly presented in the literature as somehow exculpatory, as is the idea that slavery predated the period of international trade, that it was part of the local "culture," and so, not simply a financial transaction. Phillips's strategy is to outsource discussion of these topics to local informants—as though twenty-first-century witness were adequate validation or sufficient information for activities that took place centuries earlier, as though the comfort of a descendant with the brutality of his ancestors were a good thing: "Patrick

Oronsaye says that a condemned prisoner—for example, a war captive or convicted criminal—was kept alive and ‘then during festivities he’s brought out and publicly executed. It showed the Oba’s power over life and death.’” Phillips then attempts to mitigate this acknowledgment of the instrumental value of a brutal practice by a relativizing gesture that has become conventional in these discussions—that, indeed, goes back to the nineteenth century. “In Britain, after all, public executions continued until 1868.”

Phillips is a principled writer with a challenging project. He knows that the practice of human sacrifice, like that of slavery itself, was used as justification for the attacks on Benin that led to the looting of the city. So, he must tread carefully. The history of this process of racist justification is even more compellingly laid out in Hicks, and it would be a moral failure to give any new life to that argument. My point is not that the people of Benin somehow gave up the right to their art because their leaders were tyrants whose holdings were gathered through violence and the displacement of other peoples; nor is it that the basis of their power was confirmed by periodic episodes of ritual murder. I am arguing that a more robust concept of restitution may well emerge once we stop pretending that dislocation and violence arrived at the moment of European contact, and that the works of art owned by this royal family were, in any simple way, a part of the communal life experience of the people of Benin or of what is now called Nigeria.

It is not only internal displacements we may lay at the door of Benin royalty—towns and villages deserted, the flight of residents from conquered territories. The quaint sayings about the fondness of the monarch for his enslaved people notwithstanding, Phillips cannot help but point out the truth: “at times Benin was selling 3,000 slaves per year.” Indeed, even this terrible number, a denominator without a real numerator, will limit recognition of the full extent of the moral catastrophe it appears to describe. Estimates range from one to three million people forced onto ships and into a future of multigenerational dislocation from this region. Numbering evils can be a kind of moral failure in its own right (what is the reasonable amount of pain

to cause in the world?). Nevertheless, to provide an annual number rather than to address the vast quantity of human suffering and—indeed—the world-historical role of Nigeria in participating in the African Diaspora is to avoid the truth by only partially acknowledging it. Passages in which the problem with enslaving people seems to be purely in its European or commercial nature recur in the work: “The Oba sold prisoners and casualties of war and civil war, but there’s little evidence of Benin waging war on its neighbours specifically in the quest for more slaves to trade with the Europeans. Slavery had existed in Edo society before the Europeans arrived, and would continue after Europeans had abandoned the trade.”

Phillips cites arguments that treat the political leadership of Benin like naïve innocents corrupted by European greed, but he has the decency to do no more than suggest this infantilizing and immoral claim:

To what extent did Benin eventually succumb to the relentless European appetite for slaves, and did the slave trade change or corrupt Edo society? Some historians have argued the transatlantic slave trade may have been responsible for an increase in human sacrifice, because it created both great concentrations of wealth in African societies and a disregard for life. . . It seems inconceivable that societies participating in this trade would not be warped by its brutalizing impacts.

It is because they traded slaves with Europeans that they sacrificed more people than they would have in the normal course of things. Laid out like this, the argument, which one does indeed find in the scholarship, is both compelling and appalling, as its terms appear to condemn, but ultimately excuse, the agents of both ritual sacrifice and the enslavement of people. What is the right amount of human sacrifice? Is it acceptable to keep prisoners of war as captive slaves, but not to sell them abroad? Phillips is wielding a compelling strategy, leveraging on evils with which we are familiar (the corruption of modern states in the global south by rapacious corporations, or perhaps by openly criminal cartels feeding the appetites of a self-indulgent

privileged class of Europeans or North Americans) to provide a causal analysis that preserves the agents of violence from any moral judgment. But this is to project onto the past a disequilibrium of power that only fully emerged well after the slave trade was established (indeed, that arguably did not really emerge fully until around the time Britain undertook to suppress the slave trade—much to the confusion of its erstwhile trading partners). And it hardly does honor to the life-world of Benin to ignore its nature.

The Obas of Benin were trading slaves with the Portuguese as early as the sixteenth century. In exchange for the human beings they sold into captivity they received brass shaped into the form of bracelets, the *manillas* that served as money all over West Africa for centuries. That brass not only sustained the wealth of the monarchs of Benin, it is the very metal out of which the so-called Benin Bronzes are formed. In a material sense, what viewers are looking at whenever they gaze upon one of these works of art is evidence of brutal dehumanizing violence. The courts that commissioned these objects benefited from the slave trade and sustained their place in society through terror and violence. The objects themselves were formed from the material exchanged for human beings being banished forever from the homes they had known.

“How do you think your ancestors got these?” Killmonger demands of the curator, “You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else.” Hicks wants us to hear bombs exploding when we consider objects created in Benin, to reflect on multigenerational traumas in the erstwhile imperial space, those “endurances” he writes about. It strikes me that if we are going to declare that objects in the museum bear witness to the trauma at their source, then the acts of violence that went into their making must be acknowledged. Doing so should, at the very least, make it difficult to try to build on the unstable terrain laid out through the moralizing analogies of Azoulay. Almost all the people of Benin had no direct relationship to the objects now in the museum. It should be impossible, therefore, to declare that their descendants have been rendered “bereft of the worldly objects among which their inherited knowledge

and rights, protective social fabric and safety, bliss and happiness, sorrow and death are inscribed.”

“Brass is a highly transformative material,” Hicks writes, recognizing the challenge the making of the Benin Bronzes presents to his arguments about the recognizability of past evil at the moment of encounter. His account of the things that brass can *become* appears to insist on what it cannot help always being—an evidence of past violence—but it does so while consistently leaving out one set of agents: “The ability to amalgamate and to cast is one source of the power of the Benin bronzes. Most were cast from brass, melting down the manillas and wire that the copper producers of Bristol, London and Liverpool traded for slaves, transforming the very substance of a transaction between humanity and inhumanity, objecthood and subjecthood, and forming memory markers for significant events.”

One would think that the most significant transformational event at issue is not whatever ritual function the Obas of Benin and their courts made of the objects their craftsmen created out of manillas. The transformation that ought to give one pause is the one that affects that most recalcitrant material, the human being—the one that changes a person into a commodity. But that is not where Hicks wants to go. Indeed, to write about what “copper producers of Bristol, London and Liverpool traded for slaves” is to cut out a large number of middlemen (most British, but some important ones African). It is also to constrain the social practice that is any “trade” into a bizarrely individual one. Hicks’s elisions are designed to make his readers recognize the ongoing responsibility of current British subjects for acts of violence in a past that is not all that distant: “How will Britain face up to the democidal ultraviolence of its colonial past, still just two generations ago, wrought by the grandfathers of British people still alive today?” Hicks needs the things on display in his museum at Oxford to be recognized as either the ritual objects of one people or the receptacles of the memory of injuries inflicted by another. In the latter case a people have a history—run through with violence and cruelty though it is. In the former they have a past that is without agency. British people had evil grandparents, while those in Benin had ancestors who

are spared the judgment of history by being removed from history altogether.

Surely if a price ought to be paid by the descendants of a group committed to the enslavement and brutalization of others for its own benefit, then the royal family of Benin ought not to be exempt. At the very least, let us acknowledge that it is perverse from this point of view to reward them with the objects that are the material evidence of the violence their ancestors perpetuated for generations. It is not ultimately a sound ethical position to blame children for the crimes of their parents, though it is sometimes a popular one in religion and in some versions of politics. The relational ethics suggested in more thoughtful reflections on restitution will ultimately find their footing in building relationships to the future that do not falsify the past. If nothing else, we must recognize the cost of ethical and even epistemic claims about the object lessons of the museum that buy their cultural power at the price of simplifying so much about history—that arguably make Africa, what it has been so often, a fantasy space in which Europe may negotiate its own ideas of self and identity, rather than a place with a textured and complicated past, and a future in which museums of European atonement are liable to play a very limited role.

Evidently we find ourselves at an inflection point when it comes to the ownership and display of looted objects. One approach to the display of the Benin Bronzes and other material of similar provenance is to acknowledge the violence that brought them into their current possession. This approach has all the melancholy vulnerability inevitable in attempts to address the results of injury in culture, and while it has gained favor among thoughtful curators, it only infuriates the party of absolute restitution. Hicks saves a great deal of his contempt for curators who create exhibitions that address the complex nature of the past, or the intersection of makers, violence, and later periods of display in the fortunes of art objects. His logic is unanswerable, given his premises, and might make my own inability to stop noticing the injuries caused by the Obas of Benin seem trivial or worse. I suppose this is why Hicks adopts the term *ultraviolence*, which Anthony Burgess coined for his 1962 novel, *A Clockwork Orange*. He

knows that violence is all too common but wants to identify a category beyond the usual level. Scare quotes proliferate when he addresses recent attempts to create forms of display that register the history of violence: “‘decolonization,’ ‘transparency,’ and a firm commitment to debating so-called ‘difficult’ or ‘contentious’ histories” are merely manifestations of the tendency to do violence because they are so many ways “to pretend that the violence is over.” It is in this context that Hicks is driven to claim that “these are no longer artworks but trophies of ultraviolence, until restitution begins,” a peculiar formulation that suggests not only that things are only artworks at home, but that they may be cleansed of the taint of a violent history by restitution.

The implicit good of restitution is not only historical, of course. The answer Hicks proposes to the continuing violence that he links to military conquest, the poisoning of rivers, and the legal codification of race hate is sending things back where they came from—an action that will, of course, affect none of the ills he describes, and will certainly not erase the history of the objects in question, whether African or European. Indifference to the fate of objects is a key tenet in the thought of the most radical devotees of restitution. Ultimately, and most poignantly, this indifference stems from an inability to address the actual fate of injured peoples either in the past or today. The best Hicks offers when he reaches for an alternative in the course of his attacks on those who propose to use the objects in the museum to talk about the history of empire is a somewhat incoherent citation of a passage in Azoulay I discussed above. He encourages what he describes as an anthropological sifting of the material in museums, glossing the term as follows: “The sifting must start with Ariella Azoulay’s awareness that the discipline of history will operate to disconnect the presence of looted objects in western museums on the one hand, and the ongoing situations of ‘millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments, and other objects, [who] continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world.’” Awareness of the abstracting quality of a scholarly discipline is unlikely to be the first step toward solving any pressing practical problems, of course. Indeed, the actual fate of peoples and

the worlds they have inhabited or currently inhabit tends to drop out of the long chain of unsettled analogies from which absolutist claims for restitution are suspended. Unless somebody wants seriously to advance the premise that displaced people will be restored to their homes, that pollution will stop, and that imperial aggression will be at an end (or even that these conditions will be improved in a small way) once objects are shipped back to areas near where they were manufactured, or when the complicity of museums is fully documented, it is worse than bad taste to keep making these ethics-adjacent arguments.

Hicks cites approvingly a tweet by Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp, of the Horniman Museum, pointing out that “Killmonger is the favorite reference for awkward defenses of retention by privileged museum professionals. Why? Because he epitomizes the threat such defense imagines it stands against: an irrational, emotional & aggressive diasporic impulsiveness.” I would not say I am writing in defense of retention, so much as in sympathy with awkwardness. Send objects back or keep them: there will be no shortage of awkwardness—or privilege, for that matter—on all sides and in any eventuality. There is no relationship between a cruel past and a catastrophic future that will not be awkward. Difficult circumstances will tend to encourage the desire to simplify, and the fundamental simplification in this tweet is not only the implausible claim that one set of curators is more privileged than another—or that one privileged group leaves behind that deprecated state by claiming common cause with those who have suffered in the past or by linking its arguments to those who are suffering in the present. Evidently nobody from anywhere arguing about where museums should be and what they should look like or contain can really be placed outside of the nimbus of privilege. The debate is not ultimately between “an irrational, emotional and aggressive diasporic impulsiveness” and a rational, calm, peaceable desire to retain things. There is plenty of emotion on both sides of the argument, and, indeed, there is a lot of rationalism and rationalization in works such as that of Azoulay, with its deeply abstracting claims for life, or of Hicks, with his carefully developed account of the past.

One moment that pulls us out of the museum may serve to indicate the moral challenges built into Hicks's argument. His account of what was lost in the conflagration that followed the attack of British troops on the city of Benin starts with some remarks on the massive ancient earthworks that still surround the ancient city, but that suffered great harm during the British attack (and continue to suffer damage from unregulated development and neglect):

As ongoing building projects across the centuries, they were part of the religious administration of slave and *corvée* labor and chiefly power, but also separated out sacred and natural spaces in a physical enacting of cosmology, and represented a focus for offerings—creating zones within the chiefly palace landscape, and representing a powerful artifact, which could be activated through sacrifice and offerings, and was built and maintained in different sections by different parts of the Royal Court.

In the sacking of Benin, a unique urban landscape of royal palaces, mudbrick residential houses, mausoleums, ancestral shrines or altars. . . was destroyed.

Hicks's aim is to highlight what has been lost in the process he describes as "the demolition of cultural heritage" which took place as part of a violent incursion that justified itself as a civilizing mission against the barbaric practices of the Obas of Benin. What he wants us to feel is the injury to the people of Benin caused by a violent military campaign leading to "the destruction of a monument of immense importance for the African past, but also crucially a key part of Benin's living present." Hicks uses an archaic term in the passage, over which the reader may or may not pause. Still, the meaning of "*corvée* labor" is far from unclear. The dictionary tells us it is an idiom with only one source, feudal law. It means the "day's work of unpaid labor due by a vassal to his feudal lord; the whole forced labor thus exacted; in France, extended to the statute labor upon the public roads which was exacted of the French peasants before 1776." The structure in question is, as Hicks notes without pausing on the fact, the result of centuries of work by enslaved people or those constrained to work

by the debt they incurred to the monarch through the simple fact of being alive. Their enforced labor created a structure in which sacred spaces were walled off from others in order to create a “chiefly palace landscape” that is activated through “sacrifice and offerings.” Sacrifice is not a metaphor in the passage, nor is the labor part of a social whole most of us would endorse as ethical.

My argument is not that the people of Nigeria or of Benin lost all right to claim property because their ancestors stole “everything” in the sense Killmonger used the term. Such a claim would be wrong in every way. I am suggesting that the desire to imagine a location where knowledge and legitimacy will align as we wish them to, where a past may be repaired with enough strength of character . . . well, that’s what we go to the movies for. In the meantime, if we intend to engage in a process of shipping beautiful, interesting, and irreplaceable objects from one place to another, if we want to support a multigenerational act of reparation—the process (as most curators today well know) needs to be recognized for the onerous, complex, unsatisfactory establishment of new relations in which the future of peoples at risk is recognized as the truly urgent project. Not the repair of a broken past, but care for an extraordinarily challenging future is the task of culture. Museums—holding so much that is broken—may provide clues to future action. But their dissolution and reconstitution with the goal of repairing past injuries is going to play a negligible and possibly negative role in the work ahead.

There is, I think, nothing I can say that will convince some of my readers that all the arguments I have advanced do not amount to so many attempts to justify keeping captive objects that need to be released, holding in exile things that should be sent home. Worse, given the logic that obtains in these discussions, it may even be felt that I am reviving the very kinds of arguments used for violent expropriations in the first place, the claim that because certain people were committed to values that we do not recognize—to human sacrifice, for example—they lost their right to autonomy, and so have given others the right to subject them to their rule. I am, of course, not arguing any of that. I am interested in placing the current debate in the context of

the history of the museum in order to allow for a clear-sighted view of the ways that violence and change have always been part of that history. The aspiration to reimagine the museum as a site of atonement, though it appeals to a powerful element in progressive thought, risks institutionalizing deeply reactionary assumptions. In the face of what is sometimes understood as the inherently conservative humanism of the universal museum, it offers an even more conservative fantasy of unalienated original culture. In a related and perhaps more pernicious development, insistence on the brutality of events that took place in non-European spaces as utterly unique (as “ultraviolence”) paradoxically risks reshaping the scale of moral judgment in ways that minimize the long and continuing history of violence within Europe.

I have briefly discussed Murillo’s *Virgin of the Conception*, the painting Christopher Newman pauses over as he tries to deal with the aesthetic headache that lays him out at the Salon Carré at the Louvre. Most readers will see nothing anomalous in the presence of a Spanish altarpiece in a French museum; this inattention shows how much European violence we look through without seeing, as if—how did Azoulay put it?—“it were the nature of artifacts to exist outside of their communities, to come into being as museum objects, to be out of reach of those who felt at home in their midst.”

As Hicks reminds us, the tale of the violent assault on Benin City is being told over and over in museums around the world, in somber tones intended to suggest that it is anomalous for the history of objects to be drenched in blood. I understand that the life world of aged and disabled priests in Seville does not preoccupy people thinking about museums today. But I fear that that is less because people care so much to redress the injuries Europe caused overseas than because of an amnesia about the true nature of museums and of Europe itself. And so, when I speak about Napoleonic marshals and old struggles in Europe I have no fund of received opinion on which to draw. The general forgetting of how brutal the battles on the Peninsula were is of a piece with other forms of powerful neglect of the past. Perhaps I can invite my reader to think about Goya’s *Third of May, 1808*, and to recognize that the image shows nothing other than Europeans

massacring their fellow Europeans in a major European capital, as several hundred were, in reprisal for a failed uprising against the French occupiers the previous day. Goya's storied *Disasters of War* (1810–1820), with their grim, still-distressing, representations of inhuman brutality, were the great artistic response to the long period of violence Marshal Soult was instrumental in bringing about.

Today, one would search in vain at the Louvre for the work sometimes called *The Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables* (when it is identified by the name of the place from which it was stolen), sometimes known as *The Immaculate Conception of Soult* (when it takes its name from the thief who owned it for decades), the most expensive painting ever bought in its day, the work of which Christopher Newman purchases an overpriced copy in order to settle his nerves. It was returned (as we like to say) to Spain in 1941, part of a strange and elaborate exchange carried out between Vichy France and Franco's Spain four years after the bombing of Guernica, a year after the occupation of Paris by German troops, one year before thirteen thousand Jews were rounded up for deportation in the Vélodrome of Paris, a year after Walter Benjamin proposed that every document of culture is a document of barbarism in the last essay he completed before committing suicide on the border between Spain and France, unable to effectuate the transition facilitated for Murillo's altarpiece. The *Immaculate Conception* is now on display at the Prado, more than three hundred miles from the Hospital de los Venerables Sacerdotes, which is now a cultural center housing a small museum.

Our challenge today is not to establish what is the proper orientation of the museum in relation to one particular site of violent dislocation, but what it might mean to recognize the place of violence and change within the museum more broadly. Objects in museums are neither weapons that will finally liberate the disenfranchised people of the world, nor are they mining tools that might release a magical mineral that would permit the world unalienated development. And, of course, curators are not descendants of conquerors, while some of the people who are demanding restitutions are. Freedom from the past is the most impossible form of liberation, and the past is not

available to us to repair. As we cannot talk to our ancestors in dreams or visions in order to correct their failings, the only option is to make anew the meaning of broken old things. To see the current ownership of these things as exacerbating an injury that may be repaired by the act of returning them to a geographical location near where they were first formed, or within the new political entity to which that location now belongs (call it Italy, call it Greece, call it Nigeria) is to misunderstand what is actually urgent. It is to emulate the saddest part of the Killmonger story, when the orphaned child of a failed revolutionary devotes himself to an angrier emulation of what he understands to be his father's wishes, but with no insight into the despair that motivates him.