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Necrography

Since the 1990s, two dominant abstract and conservative theories in material culture and museum studies have stifled any adequate engagement with colonial violence or cultural restitution. The first of these comes into view with the case of the so-called 'Elgin Marbles' – the group of Classical Greek marble sculptures made in the 5th century BCE and brought to the British Museum by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin in the year 1812 – which is the usual first point of reference for British conversations about cultural restitution. In January 2019, Hartwig Fischer, the director of the British Museum, announced that in his view 'When you move cultural heritage into a museum, you move it out of context. However, this shift is also a creative act.'[1]

In '*the cultural biography of objects*', such an argument runs, each new event is an accumulation, so an accession into a museum, like any gift

exchanged across cultures or between friends, represents another layer added to the life course of a thing; it creates new values, coherences, social links and cultural meanings.[2] A generation ago, this use of the idea of 'the social life of things'[3] became an important analytical tool for the study of material culture. But it has come, through sustained use by curators,[4] over time to be used by the press officers of Britain's national museums to distract our attention from, to relativise and thus to diminish, claims for the restitution of objects collected during European colonialism, and to encourage us in the fallacy that we might ever reasonably think ourselves back to some past 'regime of value' in which wrongful actions might have been okay, in order to justify ongoing and unresolved injustices. The proliferation of 'object biographies, their ubiquity in teaching art history, anthropology and museum studies – with little discernible change to how, sixty years ago, a classic British school essay topic was "the life story of a penny"'[5] – has brought a new confidence to the old object-oriented museum histories, overstating the stability and coherence of things as they move between contexts: as if there were multiple contexts but only singular things, multiculturalism but static objecthood, fluid meanings but solid things, as if focusing on things gave us bedrock, concreteness, 'materiality'. But in truth, it is surely only from the privileged position of the museum executive or out-of-touch trustee, relying on the dark arts of conservation and curation, that these objects can evoke fixity. The only thing that is sure about the sustained popularity of object-oriented life-histories, and the accompanying misplaced concreteness, is that it has deepened persistent colonial inequalities – repeated and exacerbated dehumanisations, reproduced and extended dispossessions.

Just as the first idea, that of *cultural biography*, has served to stifle any discussion of enduring colonial violence over time, so a second idea has served to hold back dialogue and action on cultural restitution in the present: the idea of *entanglement.* A key text here was Alfred Gell's influential, densely written, neo-functionalist 1998 book *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory*. Gell rejected the anthropological study of art in symbolic or aesthetic terms, instead adopting what he called a 'methodological philistinism', to frame the study of art as

one of social relations not aesthetics, where the focus was on the intention of the artist in extending their agency through objects as a kind of material prosthetic. Examples of museum objects from across the Pacific, Africa and the Americas were discussed in the book, but the location of these objects in western collections was never questioned. The theory of 'distributed personhood' was presented as if such scatterings were never inflicted but always willingly undertaken. The artist was presented as empowered through the movement of objects away from him or her, through a heady mix of the traditional functionalist approach of LSE economic anthropology with the so-called 'Actor-Network Theory' (ANT) that emerged from 1980s Schools of Management[6] and suggesting a kind of ultra-materialistic 'symmetrical' approach to treating people and objects as if they were entirely commensurable agents. Gell's nuancing of ANT – so objects themselves were not agentive, but were conduits or 'indices' of the artist's will – drew much of its politics, which is to say its *lack* of politics, from the idea of 'entanglement', as developed by Nick Thomas. Thomas's work allowed Gell to distinguish between the 'reception' of 'ethnographic art' and 'a genuinely anthropological theory of art', with all of the inconvenient politics of power left out. How did Thomas's influential 1991 account of *Entangled Objects* give Gell the intellectual resources with which to pull this off? It began with Thomas re-reading Mauss on gift exchange in order to question the boundaries between gifts and commodities, and to foreground the 'creative recontextualization' of material culture on both sides of colonial histories in the Pacific Ocean, so as to highlight Indigenous agency and 'the continuing dynamism of local societies'.[7] Thomas's book was a major critique, from the position of anthropological theory, of any assumption in postcolonial theory of 'the imposition of the West upon the rest',[8] and of any analytical dichotomy between 'the Western' and 'the non-Western'. Thomas argued for giving equal weight to 'the Indigenous appropriation of European things' and 'the European appropriation of Indigenous things', as if western 'constructions' of nonwestern objects were always equally met with the opposite, and mapped a theory of cultural hybridity onto descriptions of the 'mutual entanglements of

objects and people' and 'the dialectic of international inequalities and local appropriations'.[9] As objects and people are entangled, Thomas argued, so the categories of 'native' and European are too. In his preface to Gell's book, Nick Thomas welcomed its application as an anthropological theory for 'the workings of all art', from that which Gell called 'primitive' and Thomas described as 'canonical tribal art forms' as opposed to 'high Oriental' and 'western'.[10]

Developing his theory of colonial 'entanglement' into a model of 'the museum as method', Thomas has expanded his primary critique of scholars who 'employ critical discourse' and postcolonial theory, to those who 'interrogate primitivist representations in display, and otherwise explore the politics of institutions and exhibits'.[11] But all along the model of 'entanglement', the method of swapping analytical focus back and forth between the 'agency' of people and things, of 'Indigenous' and 'Western' people and communities, actively omits those moments where a relationship is constituted by separations not entanglements. In invoking Gell's abstract, playful, Duchampian notion of the object as a 'stoppage' of a network of agency,[12] Thomas erases the events to which museums bear witness when worlds fragment, networks are cut, paths are blocked, movements are forced, when instability is not just in words and ideas but in physical form: when people are killed in their thousands and tens of thousands, when palaces, temples and villages are bombarded, when cultural treasures are looted and sold. Nick Thomas imagines the potential of 'the museum as method'. Let us instead acknowledge the ongoing status of the museum as a weapon.

These two ideas, more tropes than theories – '*object biographies*' and '*relational entanglements*' – have stood, as if mapping onto older anthropological theories of descent and alliance, as the dominant modes of thinking for western museums since the 1990s.[13] It is time for that to change. Let me offer some examples of how this dominant school of thought has served to divert and hold back anthropology museums from thinking about colonial violence or taking action on cultural restitution. The examples are drawn from the Pitt Rivers, my own institution, but parallel examples could doubtless be found in

any western anthropology museum, not to mention many academic museum studies and so-called 'critical heritage' departments across Europe, North America and Australia.

When I arrived at the Pitt Rivers in 2007, quite a lot of institutional effort had recently gone in to re-describing the museum of 'Anthropology and World Archaeology' as 'an ethnographic museum' containing 'ethnographic objects'. This definition reduced the many diverse routes through which objects came to be in this place to the provenance history of just one subset of material: that collected during 20th-century participant observation. With its intellectual associations with key thinkers in the discipline, questions of acquisition became neutralised, or watered down at least, in a wider set of questions about the ethics of anthropological fieldwork in the past. In my own work, I sought to develop a model of collections-based research that understood the museum as a kind of archaeological site, where the excavation of the archives would 're-shape them, just as excavation constantly re-shapes the archaeological record'.[14] But in seeing archaeology as an intervention, rather than an ethnographic act of observant participation, I have, as I think so very many others working in anthropology museums also have, been made to feel out of step with my field and its traditions. Against that background – and today with a degree of white male privilege and institutional position that means there is really a duty to try to get some of this down on paper and out into the world – this book is a first sustained attempt to challenge the equivocations, and apologisms, and obscurantism, and gate-keeping, and the conceit that turns the anthropological museum in upon itself, as a disciplinary venue for hagiography of dead white colonialists and thus for self-regard, even when, as Tim Ingold has very sensibly observed, the very idea of 'museum ethnography, where there are only curated objects, is simply oxymoronic'.[15] The aim is to take the process of excavation further, layer by layer, object by object, and with a decent-sized trowel rather than a mere toothpick: to reveal what is present in the collections visible to the world, which is to *make* it present,[16] and to share this knowledge, to move from an

inward-looking, object-oriented to an outward-looking, action-oriented approach to curation.

I first encountered the erasure of Victorian acts of violence in the 'relational museum' project, which ran at the Pitt Rivers between 2004 and 2007, just before I arrived. Drawing together *object biographies* and *relational entanglements*, the project was a kind of hybrid of James Clifford's project in his book *Routes* (1997) to expand the language of the North American model of 'culture contact studies' to re-describe anthropology museums as 'contact zones' on the one hand, and Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory on the other. Ideas of 'object agency' were used in the project to make the quite abstract assertions that 'objects hold people together', that collections 'enable reasonably stable structures that allow people to interact productively', that 'the Museum is a dynamic entity, made up of a shifting mass of people and things', that 'objects collect people' and so past networks of human relationships 'sparking chains of connection' can be studied to understand the creation of anthropological knowledge, charting 'the full set of forces – intellectual, institutional, colonial, and biographical – which needs to be taken into account when understanding tangled histories'.[17] Just as Jonathan Friedman observed about Clifford's *Routes* – that it thought it was moving away from 'roots' but in reality was obscuring histories of violent 'routing'[18] – so the Relational Museum project, published as the 2007 book *Knowing Things* – in the very same year as the Pitt Rivers had loaned material to the largest ever display of Benin Court Art[19] – did not once mention the many instances of colonial violence and looting, or address live questions of cultural restitution, but instead invited the reader and visitor on 'an anthropological adventure':

> The site of our fieldwork starts at the Pitt Rivers Museum, but then moves out to many parts of the world from which objects came … You could start in the Museum with an object, a whole display case, or a person, and follow a chain of connections that would eventually lead you almost anywhere in the world, past or present. You need have no idea at the outset of paths along which you would

> travel and when or where weariness would lead you to stop. Some routes would be shaped by your prior interests, but many different paths would present themselves, testing your ability to step outside your existing intellectual or cultural framework … Knowing the Museum, like knowing the world, is something of an anthropological adventure.[20]

Such work was in keeping with the long-standing assertion by collections staff in the Pitt Rivers that the museum is not an unchanging Victorian space, a 'museum of museums', but a dynamic and contemporary multicultural place: assertions that sometimes gave way to a 'growing feeling of frustration at the repeated stereotyping of the Museum as a colonial institution full of Victorian evolutionary (if not racist) displays'.[21] A museum research project on General Pitt-Rivers, founder of the collection, explicitly sought to 'see him as a man of his times', 'deliberately uninterested in Pitt-Rivers' legacy'.[22] And a 'provocation' that 'the ethnographic museum is dead', produced as part of a major international conference on 'the future of the ethnographic museum' in fact concluded that 'Ethnographic museums can be places for discovery and dreaming, for memories and meetings: sites where the freedom to wonder at the variety and ingenuity of man-made things is not yet dead.'[23] Important pioneering work on the restitution of First Nations ancestral remains was done in this period, led by Laura Peers and her colleagues,[24] and on the 'digital repatriation' of photographs led by Chris Morton.[25] Nevertheless, through the twin theories of *object biographies* and *relational entanglement*, the Durkheimian emphasis of both theories upon the role of objects in the construction and maintenance of social relationships (rather than, for example, even Weber's account of booty capitalism, or Marx's description of primitive accumulation – not to mention the many other possible non-European intellectual points of reference) conditioned and facilitated ongoing silences about colonial violence and questions of cultural restitution, while allowing for the persistence of increasingly ingrained historical narratives.

Let us clearly refute both Hartwig Fischer's position on the Parthenon Marbles and also the object-biographical-relationally-entangled body of anthro-historical and sociological theory that enables it. *The theft of an object by a European museum is a negative act*. It requires us not to trot out some upbeat, or dispassionate, or supposedly neutral life-history or to reduce the museum to the venue for some 'power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull',[26] but to find a way of telling and untelling the past losses and deaths that are the primary layer, the very foundations, the deepest part of these institutions (not to mention the many other forms of taking in later episodes during the 20th century). How to gather up and offer an account of the scale of the damage that has been done? Not to undo it, but to seek to make some kind of reparation and return, to shine a light, so that violence, dispossession and loss can be not erased but cancelled out, so the thing itself can come back into view outside both the lens and the shadow of the museum as thief.

Take for example the account of human life that informs Foucault's account of 'biopolitics'.[27] Foucault described a transformation that took place during the 19th century, through which the sovereign's power to 'take life or let live' came to be joined by the emergent power of the state to 'make live and let die'; it was 'the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but … a "biopolitics" of the human race'.[28] The potential of a Foucauldian biopolitical approach, especially as it was developed by Giorgio Agamben through his accounts of 'bare life',[29] has been explored in many different ways in the study of the violent displacement of people under extractive, militarist colonialism.[30] How might it apply to the parallel case of the violent displacement of objects? Achille Mbembe's account of 'necropolitics' has provided a powerful corrective to the eurocentrism of Foucault's account of the biopolitical, and the general absence of the contexts of enduring legacies of empire from the uses of Agamben's account of 'bare life' in African Studies and beyond. Crucially, Mbembe underlines the role of colonial histories and their continued after-effects, and in doing so he expands the persistent Foucauldian focus on the living body: in Mbembe's view, it is the use of

the bulldozer for the continual destruction of the lived environment, as much as the fighter jet used for precision strikes targeting individuals, that are central to the practice of neocolonialism in Palestine – an 'infrastructural warfare':[31] 'We learn from Mbembe that necropolitical conditions can be made through attacks upon the nonhuman environment as well as just the human body.'[32]

Now, Foucault wrote very little about museums (and presumably cared even less); he was interested more in words than things – although you'd be hard pushed to tell given how much of the renaissance of 'museum studies', as it has fashioned itself since the mid 1980s, has defined its interests in para-Foucauldian terms: foregrounding order, control, genealogy, discipline, power, and so on, in that familiarly crypto-normative negativity, offering critique in a purely contemplative mode, standing firmly outside whichever institution it is that is at stake. And the present book, written from within the cabinets and galleries of the institution and its discipline, is certainly no Foucauldian study, far from it. Nevertheless we might think back to some of what he wrote about the dead body and, specifically, the autopsy, if we are to make a break from the world-view of those museum directors who write with such unforgivably wilful ignorance about curiosity and human creativity, about universal values and visitor numbers, while the violence of their institutions is repeated every day that restitution and reparations do not move ahead. Perhaps this is precisely the kind of forensic death-writing that the colonial museum, not yet dead, requires of us – an exercise in contemporary archaeology (the excavation of the recent past and the near-present) – forensic because this is about understanding the truth at the scene of a crime: *a necrography*.

Let us begin this necrography by turning the theorists' timeless model of *entangled biographies* on its head by making a simple historical observation. That most violent and purposeful of category mistakes, the mixing-up of humanity and things, had come to West Africa with the slave trade – the commoditisation of people on an industrial scale, the treatment of the body as if it is property. This blurring was achieved, as Igor Kopytoff has shown, through social transformations that changed the status of people by removing identity

and reducing personhood, which do not simply end in the relatively short period between capture and sale but involve being 're-individualised by acquiring new statuses' in different situations while always remaining a 'potential commodity' with the ever-present potential to have an exchange-value realised by re-sale.[33] In the case of objects, however, the notion of the biography serves to fix the boundaries of the object too firmly, reducing it to context as it moves between what Kopytoff called 'regimes of value'. Other things live on in material form, the thing constituting an event more than a life-history.[34] This is most clear where sacred and royal objects, in some cases constituting rather than just representing the ancestors, were turned into cargo, when things that could never be given, inalienable items, were taken, broken up, melted down, violently scattered, reduced to dust, in this case as with human subjects under slavery, so these stolen things underwent some form of what Orlando Patterson famously called the 'social death' of enslaved Africans, taken into a universe of racial ideology and a violent regime of mere objecthood, being made into an 'intrusive' presence to whites, 'symbolic of the defeated enemy'.[35] The control of the property of another, rights over their living or dying, total control over the environment itself, is the relationship of the master to the slave, and so it was in West Africa with the desecration of ancestral heritage – the saleability of what is royal or sacred, the supposed right to destroy and despoil, to make profit – a specific form of property that holds much in common with slave owning,[36] as if the ancestral past and the human present itself could become merged as what Paul Gilroy has called 'third things' –'human bodies more easily imprisoned and destroyed than others':

> The native, the enemy, the prisoner and all the other shadowy 'third things' lodged between animal and human can only be held accountable under special emergency rules and fierce martial laws. Their lowly status underscores the fact that they cannot be reciprocally endowed with the same vital humanity enjoyed by their well-heeled captors, conquerors, judges, executioners and other racial betters.[37]

Introducing his image of the 'anti-museum', Achille Mbembe considers the example of the presentation of transatlantic slavery in museums, in which 'the slave appears, at best, as the appendix to another history, a citation at the bottom of a page devoted to someone else, to other places, to other things. For that matter, were the figure of the slave really to enter the museum, such as it exists nowadays, the museum would automatically cease to be.'[38]

With this in mind, the urgent twin task for European anthropology museums is to use their status as unique public spaces and indexes of enduring colonial histories to change the stories that we tell ourselves about the British Empire, while taking action in support of communities across the Global South in building museums on a totally new kind of model. To do so, to seek to study the necrology (knowledge made through death and loss) of the ethnological museum, is to resist the position of entanglement and biography through which the logic of Nick Thomas's position leads naturally to his complaint about how 'cross-cultural curiosity has been disparaged and stigmatized', and about 'the much-rehashed issue of repatriation':[39]

> Repatriation is, to borrow the language of consumer electronics, 'pre-loaded' with potent assumptions about cultural property, identity, collectivity and belonging … Restitution appears, in the world of public politics, to be a zero-sum contest, but engagement over time, in the oddly intimate settings of museum stores and workrooms, has tended to result in an interest in sustaining relationships. Certain forms of curatorial authority, or comprehensive sets of digital images, may be 'repatriated'; a language of 'custodianship' may be adopted; objects are shared on long-term loan; metropolitan museums may fund training, internships or other programmes for members of the indigenous communities in question, otherwise seek to build skills and be seen to …

Forgive me for cutting Nick Thomas off there. You get the picture. It's clear by now what is at stake. The options are drawn up pretty firmly between interminable academic talk about dialogues about training

and loans, or meaningful anti-racist action for change, dismantling and repurposing.

Archaeology is not the study of remnants of the past: it's the science of human duration. This necrography of Benin 1897 is a forensic excavation not an anthrohistorical exercise, seeking not just to call out the crimes, to count up the dead, to think ourselves back into the past like the historian – but to take action in the present.

Our purpose must be to redefine the purpose of the anthropological museum. I propose thinking about this as a move away from being a space of representation and towards what Hannah Arendt called a 'space of appearance'[40] – in which curatorial authority is actively diminished and decentred while their expert knowledge of collections is invested in and opened up to the world. To begin this necrography, this writing of loss, we need to start with one significant pathology of Victorian 'race science': *white projection*.