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dialogue has run out: 'Dialogue is giving way to action' (p. 234). However, rather than monologue, dialogue is required for the work of repair to succeed.

At present, restitution is the future towards which Hicks' book is leading the conversation. With the steps taken by Emmanuel Macron in France and the Humboldt Forum in Germany, it won't take long before Britain, and the USA too, will have to face restitution. In the last chapter, the book asks how this process of restitution should be conceived in relation to the parallel process of decolonization. As Mbembe made very clear in the conversation in Cologne, there is an analogy between returning looted objects and returning refugees to their countries of origin. With their return, conversations can be ended. In some ways, then, returning objects to Africa would be too easy. The question is whether everyone is best served by such quick fixes. In a different strand of post-colonial theory in which the failures of the postcolony are recognized, scholars argue that Europe's responsibilities remain and that its entangled obligations towards the global South ought to be observed. In her writings on reparation, the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein has warned that hasty reparations risk turning into aggressions. She suggested that the work of repair should be a continuous process, rather than an event concluded once and for all. Maybe thinking through entanglements still has a purpose?

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Response by the author

It is a privilege to be so closely, thoughtfully and generously read by colleagues, and I am grateful to Andreas Eckert, Ferdinand de Jong and Aja Lans, whose responses to *The Brutish Museums* come from Berlin, Norwich and Cambridge, Massachusetts – that is, from three of the more than 150 cities around the world in which Benin Bronzes, looted in 1897, are currently held. Responding from my desk here in Oxford, just forty yards from the Pitt Rivers' Benin display, involves not so much a comprehensive reply as a process of circum-Atlantic triangulation, thinking about the endurance of geographies and about each one of the more than 10,000 objects, 10,000 unfinished events.

One place to start is with Aja Lans' important comments about reading necrography in the case of the Benin Bronzes through Katherine McKittrick's discussion of the 'biocentricity' of settler and extractivist colonialism. Such a reading leads us towards both Sylvia Wynter's critique of 'liberal monohumanism' and Édouard Glissant's account of the Middle Passage.[1] Part of what's at stake here is how we might expand our generalized scepticism towards the claim that is common to nineteenth-century British anti-slavery movements, to nineteenth-century British anthropology, and by extension to nineteenth-century ethnological museums: the claim to the status of humanitarianism, of salvage and of care, each in reality a kind of violence. Expand it to what McKittrick describes as

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

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'counterhumanism'.[2] Expand it beyond what Ryan Jobson calls, in his urgent paper, 'The case for letting anthropology burn', 'the Boasian Fix'.[3]

As a re-inscription of liberal humanism, the Boasian Fix, Jobson warns us, 'permits us once again to escape a reckoning with the pitfalls of anthropology as a "white public space"'. Such pitfalls could not be more clear in the anthropology museum. Those who have spoken of universalism in museums repeat what Wynter is critiquing when she writes:

> How are we not to think in terms of an ostensibly universal human history, that itself has been identified as one in which all human societies, without exception, must law-likely move from hunter-gatherer, to pastoral, to agricultural modes of material provisioning, to one based on a manufacturing economy?[4]

Maybe the biocentric Boasian Fix began in the anthropology museum, where human remains have been mixed up with displays of material culture for a century and a half. Recall how Frantz Fanon explained that 'vulgar racism' – that 'over-simple' racism that focused on 'the comparative form of the skulls, the quantity and the configuration of the folds of the brain, the characteristics of the cell layers of the cortex, the dimensions of the vertebrae, the microscopic appearance of the epiderm, etc' – came quickly to be joined by 'racism on the cultural level', where 'the systematized oppression of a people' involved 'the destruction of cultural values, of ways of life'.[5]

Some call for equivocation. Museums are complex, they say. Some collections are 'contested'. Some histories are 'difficult'. Material culture is – to use the preferred euphemistic jargon – 'entangled'. Ferdinand de Jong is quite right when he says that I reject this ideological framing. I reject it as it runs throughout Nick Thomas's work from his 1991 book *Entangled Objects* to the response by Thomas (now the director of a major museum of anthropology and archaeology) to *The Brutish Museums*. 'Don't trash-talk museums at this perilous time,' he told *The Art Newspaper*:

> We must adapt – not throw away – our cultural heritage. Cultural institutions – like religious buildings – can be spaces of good and harm, we cannot simply denounce their histories as one or the other … [S]ome commentators think the political priority of our time is the denunciation of museums. An Oxford archaeologist, Dan Hicks, argues in *The Brutish Museums* and effusively through social media that they were as integral to empire as the machine gun; they are 'places of extreme violence' and 'indexes of mass atrocity' … Unfortunately, the Hicks-style monologue learns nothing from, and contributes nothing to, an art of listening that curators have cultivated for decades. That art will continue to enrich museums for their publics.[6]

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[2]K. McKittrick and S. Wynter (2015) 'Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: conversations' in K. McKittrick (ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: on being human as praxis*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, p. 11.

[3]R. Jobson (2019) 'The case for letting anthropology burn', *American Anthropologist* 122 (2): 259–71.

[4]McKittrick and Wynter op cit., p. 39.

[5]F. Fanon (1964 [1956]) 'Racism and culture' in *Toward the African Revolution: political essays*. Translated by H. Chevalier. New York NY: Monthly Review, p. 32.

[6]N. Thomas (2021) 'Don't trash talk museums at this perilous time: we must adapt – not throw away – our cultural heritage', *The Art Newspaper*, 2 June <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/nicholas-thomas-the-trashing-of-cultural-institutions-comes-at-a-perilous-time>.

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This familiar manoeuvre repeats what *The Brutish Museums* calls 'white projection' – in which the raising of the enduring violence of the display of violently looted objects is presented as if it is itself an attack, an exercise in 'trash-talking'. It is a consistent position, at least: in the context of colonialism in the Pacific, *Entangled Objects* even-handedly presented one chapter on 'The Indigenous appropriation of European things' and another on 'The European appropriation of Indigenous things'.[7] But for living communities, entanglement and 'encounter' have always been euphemisms for the objectification of subject peoples. In the museum, and in anthropology as a wider field, this revival of a pre-Boasian mixing up of the categories of humanity and materiality has served to reinscribe the brutality of nineteenth-century anthropology. The logic is that of what Priya Satia, in her book *Time's Monster: history, conscience and Britain's empire*, called the 'balance-sheet' approach to the enduring history of empire, in which supposed pros are weighed against the cons.[8] We might turn to Fanon again: 'It is precisely this fragmented and bloody history that we must sketch on the level of cultural anthropology.'[9]

So we must resist any 'curate's egg' approach to unfinished brutality. But Andreas Eckert rightly raises the question of acknowledging agency and resistance in the past, and of the empowerment of African colleagues in the present. For the Euro-American museum curator, working in an institution built in part as white infrastructure, an incredibly white institution, that work begins in the present by sharing what we know and by listening and amplifying the voices of those demanding restitution in all its forms. No wonder, as Ferdinand de Jong observes, I don't use 'museum studies' in this work. Museum studies has generally stood outside the institution looking in, whereas writing this book is part of my practice as a curator. What the book tries to do is break down the idea of restitution as a push–pull between curators and claimants. No wonder Nick Thomas seemingly wants to demote me from my role as museum curator to that of mere 'commentator … archaeoloigst' and to present the book as 'trash-talking museums'. Time's up. And here's the hopeful bit about the times we're living in. Curators are increasingly accepting the need for transparency, honesty, restitution, repair, the giving up of authority, caring for people more than we do for things. Since the book was published, some high-profile museums have begun to commit to returning 'their' Benin Bronzes. Plans for the new Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) are progressing well. Some museums are starting to disentangle themselves – and to operate as public spaces for facing up to histories of enduring dispossession.

There are different ways of caring, of course. In museums such care needs to begin with a model of humanity that transcends 'monohumanism', the 'Boasian Fix', the idea of a common humanity based on a Euro-American conception of 'Man'. Such care – as Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung has recently reminded us – has to be 'unconditional', to make a break with that old form of care that 'implies a disparity, a gradient, a hierarchy between caregiver and caretaker':

[7]N. Thomas (1991) *Entangled Objects: exchange, material culture, and colonialism in the Pacific.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, Chapters 3 and 4.

[8]P. Satia (2020) *Time's Monster: history, conscience and Britain's empire.* London: Allen Lane.

[9]F. Fanon (1964 [1956]) 'Racism and culture' in *Toward the African Revolution*. Translated by F. Maspero. New York NY: Grove Press, p. 31.

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> a care which is not greedy, not jealous and not longing for requital. A care that is not just a figure of speech, not just a metaphor nor analogy, but an undertaking.[10]

The ultraviolence of Benin in 1897 came nine decades after abolition. The violence is still ongoing. Abolition is an unfinished project. That includes abolition of the slave-ship model of extraction, the model of 'the hold' according to which the museum curator's ancestors built the accession registers and museum storehouses and the glass vitrines filled with stolen divinity, stolen sovereignty, stolen beliefs, stolen ancestors, stolen climate, stolen land. Emancipation is an unfinished project. Any theory of taking must begin with an acknowledgement that debts remain unpaid. We don't know how this ends, but *The Brutish Museums* imagines the 2020s as 'a decade of returns' – returns and restitutions of many kinds, including, but by no means limited to, the permanent and unconditional giving back of stolen culture.

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[10]B. S. B. Ndikung (2020) *The Delusions of Care.* Berlin: Archive Books, p. 11, 58.

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