



### Museums and restitution

## Legacies of violence

The battle lines between retainers and returners are being redrawn from inside museums by a new generation of activist curators

**I**N JUNE MWAZULU DIYABANZA marched into the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris with four friends. “I’ve come to recover goods that were stolen from Africa,” he said, seizing a funerary statue from South Sudan. With 70,000 objects, the Quai Branly has France’s biggest stash of African artefacts. Three years ago President Emmanuel Macron promised they would start to be returned. “I cannot accept that a large share of several African countries’ cultural heritage be kept in France,” he said during a speech in Burkina Faso.

Yet progress has been slow; Mr Diyanza and his associates have lost patience. “We have the right to remove what belongs to us because it’s our patrimony,” the activist announced on YouTube, “and we’re going to take it home.” Instead, the friends were arrested, charged with theft and are awaiting trial.

Away from the spotlight, another group is also trying to sharpen the debate on restitution, this time from the inside. In America and Europe curators are speaking

out about the colonial past of Western museums. Many of them became curators in the early 2000s when the idea of institutions as “world museums”, where visitors could compare cultures from all over the globe, was fashionable. But underpinning this viewpoint, one Western museum director says, was a selfish attitude of “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine.”

These curators were emboldened by the report Mr Macron commissioned soon after his return from west Africa, which was published in 2018. In it, Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist, and Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian, argued that the

time had come for a “new relational ethics” in the discussion about the return of Africa’s cultural heritage. Since then, the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements have only made these curators more determined. “Conversations about monuments outside are being applied to monuments inside,” says Dan Hicks, who oversees world archaeology at Oxford’s treasure-laden Pitt Rivers Museum. “Especially where they have a common history in terms of racism.”

Some of the most eloquent activist curators include Nanette Snoep, a Dutch anthropologist who runs the ethnological collections in Cologne; Chip Colwell, until recently a curator of Native American culture at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science; and Wayne Modest, the head of the Research Centre for Material Culture in Leiden, whose research focuses on slavery in the Caribbean. Mr Hicks may be about to become the best-known among them.

After working for nearly a decade as a digger on archaeological sites, Mr Hicks went to Oxford University in 1994 to read archaeology and anthropology. For his postgraduate work, he transferred to Bristol, where he learned about the city’s role in the transatlantic slave trade—a past that was dragged into the present when protesters against racism toppled a statue of Edward Colston, a profiteer from that trade, in June. Fieldwork in the Caribbean for his PhD pitched him deeper into debates about

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▶ the history and legacy of empire.

In 2007 Mr Hicks joined the Pitt Rivers Museum. His first task was to study its collection, a mishmash of 500,000 objects. By 2015 Mr Hicks had a good idea where most of the items came from, but a social-media post by Rhodes Must Fall made him reconsider a wooden display case containing “Court Art of Benin”. The items had been “brought” to Britain, the label said, after a military skirmish. The tweet was pointed: “The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the most violent spaces in Oxford #BeninBronzes”.

Knowing that object labels can be eco-

nomical with the truth, Mr Hicks extended his research. He joined the Benin Dialogue Group, a salon of European museums and authorities in Benin City, but felt their ideas were too timid. In November Mr Hicks will publish his manifesto, “The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution” (Pluto Press). Using military and trade records, it shows how closely the Benin Bronzes, brutal expansionism and museums are linked.

By the late 1800s the Oba of Benin oversaw an empire that sold slaves, ivory and

ebony in exchange for metal coinage, blades and guns. Britain was determined to seize control of this trade. When it learned that a small party approaching Edo, the capital of the kingdom of Benin, in January 1897 had been attacked, and seven British delegates killed, it quickly retaliated with a punitive expedition. Over 5,000 men from the British Royal Marines and the Niger Coast Protectorate, armed with 38 Maxim machineguns and 2m rounds of ammunition, razed the oba’s palace and the city, but not before they had packed up its vast collection of ivory and brass objects. ▶▶

## Johnson The Greatest Phrases!



*Donald Trump’s linguistic quirks reveal the salesmanship that has made his career*

EVERYONE KNOWS how to do a Donald Trump impersonation. In speech, adopt his raspy timbre, bellowing volume and start-stop rhythm. In writing, throw in “bigly”, capitalise Emotional Noun Phrases and end everything with an exclamation mark. Such quirks of enunciation and spelling make Mr Trump easy to mimic, but they do not easily explain his political success. The way he constructs sentences, however, does offer some insight into how he captured the presidency.

Underpinning Mr Trump’s distinctive language is an extreme confidence in his own knowledge. Like Steve Jobs—who inspired his colleagues at Apple by making the impossible seem possible—Mr Trump creates his own “reality distortion field”. One of his signature tropes is “not a lot of people know...”. He has introduced the complicated nature of health care, or the fact that Abraham Lincoln was the first Republican president, as truths that are familiar only to a few. A related sound-bite is “nobody knows more about...than I do”. The fields of expertise Mr Trump has touted this way include campaign finance, technology, politicians, taxes, debt, infrastructure, the environment and the economy.

His critics have often attributed this to narcissism, but a complementary explanation is that it is also one of his strengths—salesmanship. In Mr Trump’s framing, he is in possession of rare information. He is therefore able to cut a customer a special deal “not a lot of people know” about. Should you be tempted to take your business to a competitor, he will remind you that “nobody knows more about” what is on offer than he does.

And how does he convince listeners he really does know what he’s talking

about? His language constantly indicates self-belief. Consider Mr Trump’s predecessor. Barack Obama was known for long pauses, often filled with a languid “uh...”. He gives the impression of a man thinking hard about what to say next. But Mr Trump rarely hesitates and hardly ever says “um” or “uh”. When he needs to plan his next sentence—as everyone must—he often buys time by repeating himself. This reinforces the impression that he is supremely confident and that what he’s saying is self-evident.

Perhaps the most striking element of Mr Trump’s uncompromising belief in his sales technique can be glimpsed in an unusual place: his mistakes. Mr Trump is often presented as a linguistic klutz, saying things that make so little sense that his detractors present them as proof of major cognitive decline.

All people make some slips and stumbles when they speak: not just those known for them (say, George W. Bush) but those known for eloquence (Mr Obama, for example). Mr Trump regularly makes errors but his signature quality, by con-

trast, is to lean into them. Take a recent interview with Fox News, in which he talked about governors’ differing attitudes towards masks. Some are keener than others about requiring people to wear them to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Or, as Mr Trump put it, “they’re more mask into”.

What is remarkable is not the mistake. It is easy for anyone to go down a syntactic blind alley. Many people will say something like “they’re more mask” and then realise there is nowhere to go. The sentence, in linguists’ terms, requires “repair”, which usually involves backtracking. Unless, that is, you are Mr Trump, in which case you confidently intone “into” and move on, giving no hint of trouble.

This refusal to concede blunders shows up in more serious ways, of course, such as the president’s unwillingness to take responsibility for his administration’s missteps during the pandemic. It also helps explain two mysteries. The first is the odd disjunct between words that seem nonsensical on the page and a stage presence that enraptures audiences—it is Mr Trump’s assertive persona that convinces more than his words.

The second is how this works on his fans. In a recent survey conducted by Pew, Americans were asked to rank Mr Trump and Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, on a number of characteristics. The trait for which Americans give Mr Trump the highest mark is telling. Despite a notably light schedule and a stated disdain for exercise, the president’s incessant speaking style is almost certainly the reason he received a good score on one quality in particular: 56% of voters, and 93% of his supporters, describe him as “energetic”.





► The small trading party was bait, Mr Hicks believes, a means to justify the dismemberment of the Benin empire. British soldiers seized and sold over 5,000 bronze objects (no one is quite sure precisely how many). They are now dispersed among more than 160 institutions, including the British Museum which, with around 900 pieces, has the single biggest hoard. There are also many private collectors, some of them descendants of soldiers who took part in the sacking.

"To the people of Benin and to Nigerians generally the Benin Bronzes represent a great artistic and spiritual loss," says Ben Okri, a Nigerian poet and novelist. They "are a constant reminder of the Western disrespect for their traditions and their history." Museums that fail to acknowledge this loss, and the destruction associated with it, collude in that violence, Mr Hicks argues. "The arrival of loot into the hands of Western curators, its continued display in our museums and its hiding away in private collections, was not some art-historical incident," he says, "but an enduring brutality that is refreshed every day that a museum...opens its doors."

The title of his book, "The Brutish Museums", is spelled out in the same font that the British Museum uses, and the cover's hue matches the museum's stone-clad walls. It is a clear challenge to the 267-year-old institution, which mostly refuses to hand back artworks to the countries that produced them. "I think it's misleading to call the British Museum the brutish museum," says Hartwig Fischer, its director, who has not read the book. "The museum is engaged with the partners in Benin City in a long-term, comprehensive collaboration that aims at a sustainable development of cultural heritage."

The royal court in Benin City plans to build a museum of its own, though work has not begun and it has yet to make a formal request to the Pitt Rivers or the British Museum. "But how many times do they really have to ask?" Mr Hicks says. "We shouldn't have anything in that's nicked. It's as simple as that." Last month Oxford University, which oversees the Pitt Rivers, published its formal procedures for dealing with restitution claims for objects taken under duress.

Beyond his own museum, Mr Hicks has joined forces with Ms Savoy, the co-author of the French report, on a £700,000 (\$915,000) research project into the origins of collections in Britain and Germany. The Open Society Foundations (OSF) has also pledged \$15m to help African organisations reclaim artefacts. Using \$1m of that grant, Mr Hicks is establishing a museum network called Action for Restitution to Africa, working with curators in Europe as well as in Egypt, Ghana and South Africa. "We understood...that we could with our in-

vestment create some real binding connective tissue between academics, activists, artists, civil-society actors and governmental actors," says Patrick Gaspard, president of the OSF.

There are still hearts and minds to win over within institutions. In 2019 Mr Hicks launched #BeninDisplays, a Twitter campaign which urges museums with Benin collections to provide honest contextual information. He hopes that the efforts of curators, as well as activists, will cause a reckoning over restitution that many believe should have happened long ago. ■

### Climate change

## A glacier's pace

**On Time and Water.** By Andri Snaer Magnason. Translated by Lytton Smith. *Serpent's Tail*; 352 pages; £16.99. To be published in America by Open Letter in March 2021; \$26

**I**N AUGUST 2019 an extraordinary plaque was unveiled at Borgarfjörður, in western Iceland. It commemorates Okjökull, the first of the country's glaciers to be completely lost to climate change. Okjökull was declared "dead" in 2014, when it was no longer thick enough to flow across the landscape, as it had done for centuries. Framed as "A letter to the future", the plaque reads (in Icelandic and English):

In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.



A slippery slope

Along with the date, the memorial carries the words "415ppm CO<sub>2</sub>": last summer, atmospheric carbon dioxide was measured at 415 parts per million, higher than at any point since humans have lived on Earth.

The text was written by Andri Snaer Magnason, an Icelandic author. As he notes in his haunting new book, "On Time and Water", the amount of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere has soared at shocking speed. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the ratio was about 280ppm; by 1958 it stood at 315ppm. It is now rising by about two to three parts per million every year.

The author's aim is to give readers a proper sense of geological time, so that they grasp, at a visceral level, how human activity is damaging the planet. He calls the current transformation "mythological", affecting "the roots of everything we think, choose, produce and believe. It affects everyone we know, everyone we love."

These high-speed changes, including the rise of the world's waters, will alter life irrevocably within a more familiar time frame: "All this will happen during the lifetime of a child who is born today and lives to be my grandmother's age, 95."

There are plenty of books about the climate crisis. But Mr Andri Snaer Magnason's perspective on his country's environment is unique and compelling. His earlier book, "Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation", was a hymn to Iceland's highlands and a critique of the government's decision to build dams to provide power for aluminium smelting. Now he traces his family's links to the landscape, notably those of his grandparents Hulda and Arni. They were early stalwarts of the Icelandic Glaciological Society, and spent their honeymoon in 1956 investigating the frozen world of Vatnajökull, an ice cap of 8,000 square kilometres—for now, at least—which was almost entirely unexplored in the mid-20th century. In old age Hulda recalls the indescribable smell of the glacier. "When you're up on Vatnajökull," she tells her grandson, "everything disappears; you forget everything. An infinite vastness. An absolute dream."

"On Time and Water" is part family memoir, part scientific analysis, part meditation on subjects as wide-ranging as the "Poetic Edda"—Iceland's medieval literary treasury—and the role of the Dalai Lama in 21st-century climate politics. The author tries to understand, and tries to make the reader understand, why the climate crisis is not widely perceived as a distinct, transformative event in the manner of, say, the fall of the Berlin Wall or the attacks of September 11th 2001. The fundamental problem, as this book elucidates, is time. Climate change is a disaster in slow motion, and yet "slow" is a great deal faster than many people seem able to comprehend. ■

New American fiction

## The girl next door

**The Party Upstairs.** By Lee Conell.  
Penguin; 320 pages; \$26

**B**EFORE THE pandemic pushed millennials to seek shelter with their parents, student debt, wage stagnation and unaffordable housing had already driven many in the “boomerang” generation home. For Ruby, one of the main characters in Lee Conell’s debut novel, being part of that trend is humiliating. Having graduated from college after the financial crisis of 2008, Ruby tells her mother and father: “It turns out you birthed a living, breathing think-piece. The failure to launch millennial blah-dee-blah.”

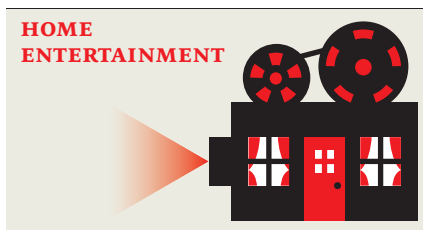
“The Party Upstairs” takes place over the course of a single day, not long after Ruby’s return to the basement apartment on Manhattan’s Upper West Side where she grew up. Her mother Debra is a librarian; Martin, her father, is the building superintendent and the novel’s other focus. In alternating chapters, father and daughter reckon with their past and present interactions with the building’s wealthy tenants.

Martin has recently taken up meditating and bird-watching in an attempt to lower his blood pressure and anxiety. Being a super means accommodating the tenants (and their complaints) while scheduling maintenance work. The tasks haven’t changed much in Martin’s 25 years on the job, but the building has, and the fancier it has become, the wider the gap between him and the residents. “And every year,” he observes, “the tenants behaved worse, it seemed.” Ever since Martin found Lily, the last occupant of a rent-controlled apartment, dead on her toilet, his patience for his spoiled neighbours has worn thin.

For her part, Ruby grew up between her father’s world and theirs. As a child, she spent many hours playing with Caroline, who lived in the penthouse and had more expensive toys and a stranger imagination for games; one involved role-playing “Holocaust-orphan-sisters-survivors”.

Martin worries that his daughter’s education has alienated her from him. Yet over the course of this page-turning story, which culminates in the party of the title, Ruby realises that Caroline and her trust-fund cronies will never understand what her life is like.

HOME ENTERTAINMENT



Saxophone dreams

## In the woodshed

**The benefits of learning an instrument in lockdown**

**W**HEN THIS correspondent formed a band in his early 20s with four other jazz maniacs, little did its members think it would still be going decades later. But then Night In Tunisia’s business model worked impeccably until the pandemic. Rather than charge money, the band bribed listeners with food and drink. Alas, that approach, now defunct, made this saxophonist lazy. His sound lacks control, squawking involuntarily like a duck being taken to the plucking shed. Fingers refuse the brain’s bidding. Ears cannot tell the phrygian mode from the aeolian.

Recording himself on a smartphone brought a brutal reckoning: intonation and technique were woeful. But then a strange thing happened—instead of dismay came mounting anticipation. Improving your playing can be a more pleasant prospect for an adult than for a young music student hectoring by tiger parents. You are not aiming for the sky, yet gratifying progress can be swift. Even a few minutes’ focus on a study brings audible improvement.

As well as time for practice, the pandemic has bestowed another bonanza: teachers of all sorts of instruments. For instance, Chris Caldwell is a British saxophonist of the highest calibre, a member of the world-class Delta Saxophone Quartet and in normal times in demand from London to Pyongyang. As with so many freelance performers, these months have been brutal. But he now has time for lessons beamed anywhere via Zoom.

They are a revelation. Teacher and student are going back to first principles: turning air into breath into sound. A saxophone is a sinuously complex bundle of harmonic compromises—intonation varies not just in different octaves, but from one note to the next. Think not about taming the instrument, Mr Caldwell urges, but rather of living with the wilder acoustics that embody the saxophone sound. Amateurs may aim to reach the high notes of a soprano sax by belting them out. The approach, Mr Caldwell says, should be more like “walking on eggshells”.

Happily, today’s music students are also locked down with history’s masters. Every jazz great learned from those who went before, painstakingly copying solos from records—probably the most critical part of “woodshedding”, that is, practising by yourself. How much easier, technically, is the task today. Spotify provides a boundless library of recordings. Transcription apps let you slow down solos to commit every scoop and grace note to memory.

Other programmes provide a backing band to help you learn the “changes”—ie, the chord progressions in jazz tunes. Charlie Parker said that the secret to improvisation was to learn the changes and then forget them. To judge by this student’s progress, Night In Tunisia should not ditch its business model yet. But his homebound musical journey is its own reward. ■

