ABC Arts & Museums

Traces. Public History and Heritage Studies

Edited by
Marko Demantowsky and Noémie Étienne

Volume 6

ABC Arts & Museums

Colonial History and Indigenous Voices

Edited by
Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

Scientific Committee: Carine Durand, Noémie Étienne, Christine Le Quellec Cottier, and Placide Mumbembele Sanger

This publication was made possible thanks to the support of the City of Neuchâtel, the Fonds des publications du MCAH of the Canton de Vaud, the University of Fribourg, and the Gold Open Access Fund of the University of Neuchâtel which respectively supported the translation costs and the open access.

This book is a revised version in English of *ABC arts & musées. Histoire coloniale et voix autochtones*, ed. by Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity (Zurich, Seismo). Accessed August 11, 2025, https://www.seismoverlag.ch/fr/daten/abc-arts-musees/.

UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG

ISBN 978-3-11-914453-7
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-221825-9
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-221852-5
ISSN 2941-4334
DOI https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025942314

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

The book is published open access at www.degruyterbrill.com.

Cover image: Sammy Baloji, Mfuba's Extract Wunderkammer, 2020
Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyterbrill.com
Questions about General Product Safety Regulation:
productsafety@degruyterbrill.com

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Noémie Étienne for her constant support, generous feedback, and inspiring conversations, as well as for her participation in the study days that laid the groundwork for this volume and for making its publication possible. A special thank goes also to our publisher, De Gruyter, and to Sophie Wagenhofer. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Claire Brizon, whose thoughtful advice has been a constant companion throughout this journey, and Régine Bonnefoit, Chantal Lafontant Vallotton, and Valérie Kobi, whose advice and encouragement fueled this project from its very inception. We are deeply indebted to the members of the scientific committee – Carine Durand, Noémie Étienne, Christine Le Quellec Cottier, and Placide Mumbembele Sanger – for their invaluable contributions.

Our warmest thanks go to Aldo Trucchio, Pierrette Birraux, Doris Farget, and Nicole Steity for reviewing our texts and providing constructive feedback, as well as Colette Girard, Adrienne Harrison, Kyriaki Katsarelia, Ana Rita Parreiras Reis, Émilie Thévenoz, Iris Terradura, Ashok Danavath and Lorraine Odier for their work on the translation, proofreading, and editing of texts in both French and English. Finally, our deepest appreciation goes to Véronique Dasen, Rémi Orsier and all those who supported us, near or far: authors, friends, family, university and museum colleagues, archivists, librarians, and students. Their trust and patience made it possible to turn this ambitious venture into the book before you today, the embodiment of a collective dream.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-202

Disclaimer

The racist terms “negro” and “negress” have been redacted from the main text. Historically used during the colonial and slavery eras to refer to people of African descent, these words were employed to dehumanize and oppress entire populations.

A disclaimer (!) warns readers of their presence in certain passages.

N***

(Preface, Service, Zoo)

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Noémie Étienne

Preface

Decolonial and Plurivocal: An ABC of World (Re)making

The decolonial approach within the realms of art and museums tracks and critiques the legacy colonialism has left behind. The seizure of artworks and their removal from their original communities, for instance, is a historical and political issue that lies at the heart of museum collections, the knowledge the artworks embody, and the institutions that house them. While these debates have gained momentum globally, particularly in former colonial powers such as France, the United Kingdom, or Belgium, they have also started to resonate in countries not traditionally associated with colonial empires. The imperialist paradigm of other European nation-states is not entirely relevant in the case of Switzerland since it did not possess an empire as such. However, a case can still be made that specific groups of Swiss individuals drove forward various colonial enterprises and that the country's banking sector played a decisive role in colonialism by underwriting the quadrangular trade.

In this broader context, the city of Neuchâtel, located in Switzerland, has emerged as a key site for critically engaging with these legacies. Neuchâtel has a long involvement in colonial projects and in the trade of enslaved people. Institutions and politics have been pressured for years by artists and activists to address those issues. In this perspective, and despite the fact that Neuchâtel was and remains a small city, it has been taken in this book as a point of departure for a broader thinking about colonial realities in peripheric geographies. As Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné stated in their book *Colonial Switzerland*:

> It becomes clear that colonialism cannot be fruitfully understood as the exclusive interaction between a handful of imperial "metropolitan countries" and their respective colonies. States without former colonies and their inhabitants (as well as states that were not formally colonized and their populaces) were part of colonial relationships in myriad ways and were intensely involved in colonial core practices such as military conquest and economic extraction, as well as engaged in the production and reproduction of colonial knowledge, representations and discourses.[1]

1 Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds., *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-001

In 2022, the Neuchâtel Museum of Art and History (Musée d'art et d'histoire de Neuchâtel, MAHN) reorganized its permanent exhibition around the theme of "movement", reflecting on the city's slave trade past, as well as the history of immigration.[2] Back in 2009, the *Eternal Tour* project, on the invitation of the "Neuchâtel Art Center" (Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel, CAN) and its director Arthur de Pury, was already examining the colonial legacy of this small city, so far from the seas and oceans. As part of this project, we invited researchers and artists (such as Sasha Huber, Kader Attia, and Sammy Baloji) to present their work and to utilize various spaces, including the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel, MEN), the Natural History Museum (Muséum d'histoire naturelle de Neuchâtel), and the Museum of Art and History (Musée d'art et d'histoire de Neuchâtel, MAHN). They didn't address necessary particular aspects of Swiss history, but resurrected the broader colonial phantom of the city.[3]

What role did the Swiss, in general, and the people of Neuchâtel, in particular, play in a history entangled with racial theories, the trade of enslaved people, and the history of collecting practices – not just in Switzerland, but across the entire world? How can examining the relationships between countries with and without direct colonies help deepen our understanding of colonial history and its ongoing consequences today? More broadly, how do we continue to think and write today, in a fractured and increasingly polarized world? Such questions have long been at the core of the work of students, artists, and activists. Today, as we witness an extreme resurgence of colonial violence, in places where people are killed and land is seized for the sake of commercial and personal interests, those questions gain always more urgency.

The project *Exotic?* was based at the University of Bern in Switzerland between 2016 and 2022, and conducted in collaboration with Claire Brizon (contributor to the present book, see "Naming"), Sara Petrella (the co-editor of this volume), Chonja Lee (see "Fragments"), Étienne Wismer, and Patricia Simon.[4] As part of this research project, which I view as a continuation of *Eternal Tour*, albeit in an institutional setting and with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), we demonstrated the variety of types of participation of Swiss individuals in colonial and slave-trading ventures dating back to the 17th century. The

2 "Mouvements", permanent exhibition at the Museum of Art and History of Neuchâtel, inaugurated in January 2022.

3 Donatella Bernardi and Noémie Étienne, eds., *Eternal Tour, X, Z, Y* (Neuchâtel: Gilles Attinger, 2009).

4 "*The Exotic? Integration, Exhibition, and Imitation of Non-Western Material Culture in Europe (1600–1800)*" is a collective research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and based at the University of Bern in Switzerland from August 2016 to December 2022.

Swiss founders of New Bern, a town in North Carolina, for example, traveled to what is now North America in the early 18th century to conduct a survey of the mineral resources that might be found there. Other movements are linked to major maritime companies like the East India Company. The drive for wealth does not necessarily involve land occupation; in this context, it is the domination of trade networks. At that time, the quadrangular trade connected Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, developing around various types of markets such as goods, raw materials, and even enslaved humans (see "Zoo"). The history of slavery is tied to colonial history: the enslaved individuals were deported to work in colonial territories, for instance to cultivate cotton (see "Industry"). In return, cotton was imported to clothe Europeans, but also to produce the printed cloth that served as currency in exchange for the enslaved individuals.

For six years, (as part of the *Exotic?* project), we worked in museum storage rooms, searching for objects whose iconography or provenance could shed light on Switzerland's links to the global colonial history. Storage spaces are where collections are kept, and the majority of these pieces (over 90%) are rarely exhibited. Our investigation was pragmatic and based on the collections themselves, which became the basis for the questions we addressed to the public. Objects discovered in storage bore witness to a Swiss colonial history that had often been erased or trivialized. Yet, the vast number of artifacts in museum collections enabled us to recount quite different stories: those of soldiers, merchants, and missionaries involved in colonization and the slave trade. In this regard, the *Exotic?* exhibition held between 2020 and 2021 at the Palais de Rumine in Lausanne explored what artifacts, regardless of their type (ethnography, fine arts, decorative arts, natural history, archives, library), could reveal about Switzerland's colonial and global history.[5]

Artistic creation has a power, an openness, and an immediacy – a capacity for anticipation and initiation – that captivates researchers. Art exposes, prepares, and repairs. Yet, critical historical analysis and contextualization cannot be delegated to artists. In this perspective, we can question the involvement of racialized artists (for the *Exotic?* exhibition, Senam Okudzeto, Susan Hefuna, Denis Pourawa, see "Naming," and Fabien Clerc), who have on occasion been invited to produce the critical aspect of the curatorial project. There is a risk in assigning this function to racialized artists, as they have already been conducting this work in great detail and over an extensive period of time. A video or even a room dedicated solely to colonial issues is not enough. These reflections permeate every mu-

5 Étienne *et al.* 2020, *Exotic? Regarder l'ailleurs en Suisse au siècle des Lumières*, exhibition from September 24, 2020, to February 28, 2021, at the Palais de Rumine in Lausanne. A virtual tour is available online, accessed April 17 2025, https://www.archeotech.ch/fr/visite-virtuelle/exposition-exotic-regarder-l-ailleurs-en-suisse-au-siecle-des-lumieres.

seum space, the narratives conveyed (not merely temporary exhibitions), conservation processes (including museum storage), hierarchical structures, and governance modes. Who speaks, and who leads? As Olivier Marboeuf says:

> Today, the institution is decolonizing through discourse, but also by inviting the minority body, inviting it to appear, exposing it like a sign, inventing it by producing it in a place of comfort (for the institution). There is thus a form of appropriation of the minority body as a tool for enunciation, an instrument. [. . .] The minority body is absorbed in a form of narcissistic consent. It is made to speak, and it is spoken of and exhibited as bait. This turns out to be both its moment of glory and its most stinging defeat.[6]

What role should art and culture play in these contexts, given the risk of a form of "decolonial washing" that also affects, for example, feminist struggles? Coloniality, the driving force behind colonialism, underpins systems of domination based on gender, race, and class discrimination. This legacy directly impacts museum and academic institutions, which are themselves characterized by strong hierarchies. In this context, our exhibition *Exotic?* encountered certain challenges, often linked to the difficulty of close collaboration with research, mediation, communication, and scenography teams. Firstly, the open-ended nature of the title may have caused confusion by suggesting an exhibition that naturalizes the exotic, whereas the aim was, in fact, to historicize and criticize this notion. Secondly, there was the difficulty of embodying provenance issues in the exhibition space. How can we visually and immediately convey complex stories that are not always visible? And how can representations stemming from colonial history be displayed without re-enacting their violence on the public? In the exhibition, we used a *Trigger Warning* (a note to acknowledge and alert viewers to the violence of certain images) and display texts, but written texts are of limited impact. Finally, while the role of mediation teams is essential, we were unable to work with them as closely as required. Museums themselves are hierarchical, organized, segmented institutions. They inherit and reproduce forms of domination. They separate management teams, curatorial teams, scenography teams, and mediation (or, rather, co-production of knowledge) teams.

While this volume emerged from Swiss academic and curatorial initiatives, the issues it addresses go far beyond those national boundaries. The selected contributions engage with the broader dynamics of coloniality and its ongoing effects, showing that the entanglements between colonial histories, cultural institutions, and global inequalities are shared concerns across regions and disciplines. The present ABC, or *Abécédaire* in French, originated from a series of

6 Olivier Marboeuf and Joachim Ben Yakoub, "Decolonial Variations," *Toujours debout* 5 (2019), 5, accessed November 29, 2023, https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/05/09/variations-decoloniales/.

events organized by Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity at the University of Neuchâtel in September 2022. The *Abécédaire* format provides a structure within which a multitude of entries can be organized, thus bringing together voices within a shared work while also allowing individualities to persist. The present English edition offers a curated selection of entries from the original French-language volume, with a particular focus on contributions that speak to international audiences and contexts. This selective approach reflects an intent to foster transnational dialogues on decoloniality. The project presented here is multivocal and offers specific stories or objects. If, we must, as the French sociologist and historian Bruno Latour suggests, "Reassembl[e] the Social", this must surely be through a plurality of perspectives. The *Abécédaire* is neither an exhaustive form nor a unifying discourse but, rather, provides a structure that allows for the coexistence of diverse approaches, experiences, and beliefs. If we are to avoid false harmony and mere surface-level agreement, abiding the unsettling, the discomfort and differences is, as Donna Haraway suggests, essential, particularly because the postcolonial discourse, requiring univocity and unison, is weakening.[7] And it proves particularly ineffective in conflicts over territorial occupation, resource seizure, and human extermination. Ultimately, this plurivocal *Abécédaire* invites readers to think across geographies and temporalities, emphasizing that the work of decolonization – in museums, academia, and beyond – is both a local and global endeavor. In this shared space of reflection, differences in perspective are not just expected, but necessary. Without trouble and tension, decolonization is definitely at risk to remain a superficial trend, addressed by universities and museums only as much as their general politics are not challenged.

How do we carry out this work? What are its limitations? Can a decolonial project, for instance, be pursued within the framework of a foundation financed by commodity trading and big corporate companies, in the knowledge that these funds also largely support museums? Analyzing the roles of colonial empires alongside countries without formal colonies, such as Switzerland – a prominent financial center and significant actor in the global commodity trade – enhances our understanding of the broader mechanisms of European colonialism in Europe and abroad, often connected to the global trade in raw materials that continue to shape contemporary power dynamics.

In Neuchâtel, a conference was held in 2023 on decolonizing the Natural History Museum of this small town. Speaking on the same panel as myself was an exhibition curator working for the foundation of a Swiss businessman who had

7 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

amassed his fortune through oil extraction in Africa, where the oil company has been accused of corruption. The founder and chairman of the company sued a journalist for defamation over these allegations and ultimately received damages from the newspaper (*Le Temps* 2021), although an appeal was later filed against this decision. Although the funding of museums by major oil or pharmaceutical companies has been under debate for several years, the funds remain an integral part of these institutions' history and constitute a significant, if not essential, source of financing – despite all their promises of decolonization and ecological sustainability.

How can we envision a more equitable world in this context? Indeed, in recent years, the call for best practices has become widespread in cultural circles. Recently, an important exhibition entitled *Naming Nature* has been opened at the Natural History Museum of Neuchâtel under the inputs of the artist Denise Bertschi and the scholar Tomás Bartoletti.[8] Along these lines, the goal of diversifying museum teams by incorporating more racialized individuals (BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, People of Color) is part of the inclusivity movement that has developed in North American museums, particularly since the 1990s. As we are now witnessing in the United Sates and in Europe, academic freedom and freedom of speech are not, however, guaranteed, and anti-colonial stances are often penalized. These freedoms also vary depending on people and circumstances, and the rhetoric of diversity reveals its limits when so-called "included" individuals cannot express their views openly.[9] Members of the Documenta 16 committee (the major contemporary art exhibition in Kassel), for example, resigned in the fall of 2023 to support their colleague Ranjit Hoskote, who was forced to leave the selection committee due to his stance on peace.[10] Numerous people in the world of arts and culture are facing criticism for calling for a ceasefire in the war against Gaza.[11] Differing perspectives are sanctioned when they do not fall in line with the policies of the institutions and countries that host them. What is more, the

8 *Naming Natures. Natural History and Colonial Legacy*, from December 15, 2024, to August 18, 2025, at the Natural History Museum of Neuchâtel. This preface was written in 2023, and updated in 2025.

9 Maya Pontone, "Questions Arise As Indigenous Curator Suddenly Departs Toronto Museum," *Hyperallergic*, November 21, 2023, accessed November 29, 2023, https://hyperallergic.com/857994/questions-arise-as-indigenous-curator-wanda-nanibush-suddenly-departs-toronto-art-gallery-of-ontario/.

10 Simon Njami, Gong Yan, Kathrin Rhomberg and María Inés Rodríguez, "Documenta Resignation Letter," *E-Flux Notes*, November 16, 2023, accessed November 29, 2023, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/575919/documenta-resignation-letter.

11 Jessica Bateman, "A Creative Community in Germany Speaks Out for Gaza," *Hyphen*, November 11, 2023, accessed November 16, 2023. https://hyphenonline.com/2023/11/16/germany-creative-community-speaks-out-for-gaza-censorship/.

leaders of museum institutions hosting so-called decolonial exhibitions often fail to speak out against contemporary conflicts and killings related to land occupation and resource exploitation.

However, Indigenous voices help broaden and complexify the narratives, reminding us that decolonial issues extend far beyond art and museums. In December 2022, during a conference on conservation organized at the Art History Institute in Paris by Lotte Arndt (also an author in this volume, see "Afterlife") and myself, John Moses, the Indigenous North American Mohawk curator from the Canadian Museum of History (Gatineau, Quebec, Canada), reiterated this. There can be no (de)colonization of museum institutions, as discussed in the present *Abécédaire*, without an explicit struggle for territories, collections, and the people connected to them (see "Justice"). Through his father, John Moses himself inherited the legacy of the Indigenous residential schools, places where children were taken after being removed from their families by missionaries to be assimilated (see "Reappropriation"). The violence of severing the child from their family and history created traumas, the effects of which are still felt today. The maltreatment of these children, in many cases, led to death. For Moses, it is now essential to reconnect the struggle for lands, the repatriation of cultural goods, and the return of children to their families, land, and history: "Hence today's Indigenous activists' understanding of the interconnectedness between principles such as Land Back; Children Back; and Ancestor Objects Back".[12]

Colonization is not merely a phenomenon of the past. Colonization is still an active, ongoing force.[13] It is particularly characterized by the appropriation of lands and resources, such as water or precious metals. Conquest begins with territories, through expropriation, deportation, extermination of both humans and non-human beings, and the destruction of forests or soils. Settlers transform nature into a resource they can exploit. This process eliminates life, whether through visible, media-covered armed conflicts and political assassinations, or by depriving inhabitants of water, food, language, or memory. Its powerful influence also shapes the history of collections. Artifacts were often brought to Europe, for instance, through territorial conquest, and former networks continue to facilitate the illegal arrival of antiquities in museums. At the same time, shelters, cultures, languages, heritages, and *matrimoines* are seized or destroyed despite the various

12 The conference *Conservation divergente*, organized in December 2022, was held at the National Institute of Art History in Paris, at the invitation of the GAP laboratory (Globalisation, Art et Prospective). Two issues, co-edited with Lotte Arndt, have been published in the journals *Museum and Social Issues* 17 and 18 (2023) and *Trouble dans les collections* 7 (2024).

13 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigenity, Education & Society* 1, 2 (2012): 1–40.

forms of resistance to these forces. This process is followed by a second phase aimed at reinvesting colonized lands. The primary motivation is capital enrichment and expansion, which involves occupying spaces and exploiting them, for instance, by commercializing oil and gas, or gaining access to arable land.

These forms of domination within cultural institutions merit further discussion. Moreover, the concept of the West should not be simplified, with other geographies being explored, such as the power dynamics that exist within Europe itself, for instance. As a professor at the University of Vienna, I frequently work with students and colleagues from the former Eastern bloc. When we discuss Europe's colonial history, they frequently ask for clarification regarding which Europe I am referring to. They readily identify with populations whose languages or religious practices were banned, whose national borders were arbitrarily drawn, and whose art, language, and even existence are continually relegated to silence and oblivion. Power dynamics also exist within countries themselves: between North and South, cities and rural areas, plains and mountains. In Europe, too, fractures are territorial and social. Tensions are not confined to a single geography or category.

Are the questions surrounding decoloniality merely a trend, or are they a useful tool in the discussion of contemporary conflicts? Do they help to address the deadly, dramatic reality we live in today? And can art history and museum work actually be carried out without acknowledging (or addressing) the present? The idea that scientific rigor aligns with the neutrality of research and its sources is an illusion. Escaping the present is difficult. Sources are obviously not neutral[14] but are products of their context, shaped by the individuals who produced them as well as by the gaps within them. They provide both an entryway to the past and a limitation. They are all we have, but they are not sufficient. Relying solely on written testimonies preserved in European archives or on collections kept in European museums cannot fully account for history. At times, extending the notion of sources to embrace spoken accounts, practices, and memories is required.[15]

Editing this project into English is not just about changing languages. It also means sharing ideas shaped in specific local contexts with new audiences. This raises important questions about how decolonial knowledge travels, and how it may change – or stay the same – across epistemologies and sites. How can we do science today, and how can the past be resurrected without silencing the present

14 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26, 12, 2 (2018): 1–14.

15 Toyin Falola, "Ritual Archives," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, ed. Adeshina Afolayan, and Toyin Falola (New York, Johanessburg: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 703–728.

in historical work? One key may lie in naming the moment from which we are writing. It is essential to contextualize by acknowledging that the terms we use are always rooted in a specific time and by rendering one's position visible: in my case, that of a European university professor in a stable and privileged academic position. Researchers can "thus show, to those interested, how, within this present that dominates and cannot be denied, there is always, before our eyes, the past at work and a future in the making. History can thus strive to ensure that, if we cannot escape the present, neither can we escape the plurality of times that exists within it" (our translation).[16]

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16 Étienne Anheim, "L'histoire présente de François Hartog," *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques* 14 (2015), accessed November 29, 2023. http://journals.openedition.org/acrh/6655.

857994/questions-arise-as-indigenous-curator-wanda-nanibush-suddenly-departs-toronto-art-gallery-of-ontario/.

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Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity

Introduction

Rethinking Arts and Museums: From Participatory Research to Provenance Research

Should we burn ethnographic museums?
(Jean Jamin, our translation)[1]

The ethnographic museum is an endangered species. In a hundred years, there will quite probably be none left, and we will need to understand why it disappeared. It will be essential to explain how this type of institution, by critically examining itself, could only reinvent itself by profoundly transforming its essence, ultimately leading to its demise and transformation into something else. For decades, international debates about the meaning, function, and even the legitimacy of ethnographic museums have been opening new paths for museum practices. However, reflections on the presentation, exhibition, and preservation of ethnographic collections are far from over.[2]

The "ABC of" is an expression that can be used in various situations. Here, we have sought to debate the history of collections, the identification of controversial or sensitive heritage, the biography of objects, restitution, new ethical frameworks, the multiplicity of voices within institutions, collaborations with source communities, and many other "decolonial" discourses and practices which become more accessible through this engaging format. Moreover, the "ABC of" might also be applied to the basics of an art or practice, implying the idea of starting from scratch. Through this ABC (*abécédaire* in French), we aimed to rethink arts and museums from a pluralistic perspective, starting with the questions raised by the inclusion of Indigenous and diasporic voices and a critical reflection on colonial history.[3]

Colonial expansion certainly occurred worldwide, but not in the same way throughout, as we distinguish between settler colonization (Canada, United States)

1 Jean Jamin, "Faut-il brûler les musées d'ethnographie?," *Gradhiva: revue d'histoire et d'archives de l'anthropologie*, Dossier: *Musées d'ici et d'ailleurs* 24 (1998): 65–69.

2 Fabien Van Geert, *Du musée ethnographique au musée multiculturel: chronique d'une transformation globale* (Paris: La documentation française, 2020).

3 This introductory text is the result of a discussion we had on November 17, 2023, in Bevaix, Switzerland, which was transcribed and edited. In the first part, Sara Petrella, who is conducting postdoctoral research on Western representations of northeastern America and Indigenous material culture, is speaking, and in the second part, it is Mylène Steity, who is pursuing a PhD on African collections. The third part is a discussion between the two of us.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-002

and exploitation colonization (France, Belgium, England). Two perspectives on this topic will be outlined here: on the one hand, the voices of Indigenous Peoples in North America, and on the other, museum collections in Europe and their relationship with the African continent. The goal is not to be exhaustive but rather to present two movements driven by formerly colonized continents on both sides of the Atlantic, which have given rise to projects, exhibitions, and critical literature that help redefine artistic and museum practices.

Becoming Multiple, Sara Petrella

> Your professors had not taught you to dream like we do.
> (Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert)[4]

Since the 1970s, Indigenous activism and artistic movements have initiated a radical renewal of practices in the fields of art and museums. In Canada, for example, the Indian Act (1876) remains in force, while the issue of Indigenous governance and the role of Indigenous Peoples, who live both on reservations and in major urban centers, has become a central concern.[5] Indigenous perspectives offer alternative conceptions of space and time. For instance, the distinction between past and present, and early modern and contemporary art, is not clearly defined, or as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson puts it, the "present [. . .] collapses both the past and the future".[6] The past occupies a central place, as colonization still has lasting effects today – the term "coloniality" refers to the power structures that persisted after mid-20th century decolonizations – and its economic model, based on resource extraction, will have consequences for future generations, with regards to the climate crisis in particular.

The inclusion of Indigenous artists in the art world has become a priority, as proved by the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, entitled "Stranieri Ovunque – For-

4 Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky. Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 11.

5 Sara Petrella, "Entre deux mondes." *Asdiwal. Revue genevoise d'anthropologie et d'histoire des religions, Dossier: Arts et territoire, de la Nouvelle-France au Québec*, edited by Sara Petrella, 15 (2020), accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.persee.fr/doc/asdi_1662-4653_2020_num_15_1_1176.

6 "I began to start my own talks with a narrative of what our land used to look like as a quick glimpse, albeit a generalized one, of what was lost – not as a mourning of loss but as a way of living in an Nishnaabeg present that collapses both the past and the future and as a way of positioning myself in relation to my Ancestors and my relations. I want to do the same here in this book" Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

eigners Everywhere" (curated by Adriano Pedrosa), where the main façade of the Arsenale was created by a collective composed mainly of Indigenous artists from the Huni Kuin people in Brazil, Mahku (see "Vende"). Other artists, like Barry Ace, an Anishinabeg artist, have explored the theme of social justice in an even more explicit way. He developed an installation project on treaties in the colonial history of North America, involving participants drawn from the audience. To illustrate the dispossession of Indigenous lands, he symbolically gave each of them one dollar in exchange for their complete renunciation of rights to the artwork.[7] There are other similar artistic movements in Canada, such as "Action Art" or "art that takes action" from the Wendat artist collective.[8] This form of anachronistic art, situated between past and present, is rooted in the idea of social justice. This is far removed from "art washing", those social events like exhibition openings, for example, where non-Western artists are invited for an evening to sing or dance in traditional costume, and the next day, it is all over. Here, it is not about spectacle or entertainment at all but rather about revising narratives, imaginations, and, by extension, power and domination structures.

In cultural anthropology, the pursuit of a singular truth has faded, giving way to narratives written in the plural and to stories told through multiple voices. In the so-called *ontological turn*, Philippe Descola explains that there are relationships to the world that are specific to different cultures, historical periods, or geographical areas.[9] For example, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas do not necessarily have the same relationship to the world as I, a Swiss-born individual, do. An object or thing that has been classified in the West as belonging to the realm of crafts or fine arts, detached from its environment, does not hold the same place in other "*ontologies*", where it forms part of a whole, an ensemble of relationships with the land. When the relationship to territories, or "territoriality", becomes the starting point for all reflections, we can then seek to conceive more inclusive and critical ways of thinking about Indigenous arts and, more broadly, geography and ethnohistory.[10]

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7 The performance took place at the Geneva Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Genève) on April 27–28, 2022, and the installation was presented at the NONAM as part of the temporary exhibition *Wāwīndamaw – promise: Indigenous Art and Colonial Treaties in Canada, at the Nordamerika Native Museum* (NONAM), from April 8, 2022 to January 8, 2023, NONAM, Zurich, Switzerland.

8 Guy Sioui, *ATSA. Quand l'art passe à l'action (1998–2008)* (Montréal: Action terroriste socialement, 2008).

9 Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) ; Philippe Descola, *Les formes du visible* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

10 Pierrette Désy, *Fort George, baie James. Une ethnohistoire des marchands de fourrures (Canadiens, Britanniques et Français au XIX^e^ et au début du XX^e^ siècle)* (Chicoutimi: Les classiques des

In Latin, the word for "Indigenous" literally means someone who sprung from the very soil of the land they were born to. To understand the current use of the word "Indigenous" in the fields of art and museums, one must revisit the history of political struggle and social demands on territorial rights. In the 1970s, these struggles found resonance in the realm of international law.[11] Indigenous delegations from around the world traveled to Switzerland, to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, aiming to assert their right to self-determination: Indigenous Peoples from the three Americas firstly, followed by the Sámi from the Arctic, the Maori and Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific, as well as the Amazigh from Africa and the Ainu from Asia. They came together around a shared definition of indigeneity, which included the fact that they inhabited territories which had been conquered, even colonized, at their expense. Their material and spiritual lives depend on their territories, as do biodiversity, natural resources (mineral, energy, etc.), sacred geographic features, as well as "material culture" and all forms of art.[12]

After a long struggle, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted in 2007 (see "Justice").[13] Several articles directly address the arts, such as Article 11, aimed at "maintain[ing], protect[ing] and develop[ing] the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature." Intellectual property and cultural heritage are thus seen as inseparable. Whether in storage or displayed in a museum showcase, a pair of Creek moccasins is and will always be part of Indigenous cultural heritage. In this case, it is an item of clothing, an object tied to daily life, but other cases involve objects that are considered to be living beings by Indigenous Peoples, such as ceremonial items or human remains. From this perspective, all claims for restitution, or "repatriation" or "rematriation",[14] would be coherent movements that follow the logic of reconnecting communities with images, in the broad sense, endowed with agency.

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sciences sociales, 2014), accessed March 27, 2025, http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/desy_pierrette/fort_george_baie_James/fort_george.html; Irène Hirt, "Peuples autochtones et frontières," in *Frontières. Capes-Agrégation Histoire-Géographie*, ed. Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary (Paris: Armand Colin, 2020), 119–127.

11 Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff, *La question des peuples autochtones* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1997).

12 Pierrette Birraux, "ONU, la stratégie des peuples autochtones," *Choisir* 693 (2019): 30–33.

13 Geneviève Motard *et al.,* eds. *Déclaration des Nations Unies sur les droits des peuples autochtones: des pistes d'interprétation (volume 1)*, *Cahiers du CIÉRA*, avril (2023), accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ciera/2023-ciera07983/.

14 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, 2 (2016), 30, accessed March 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019.

These Indigenous movements, between art and activism, challenge a conception of history as a series of past events, classified and ranked in a chronological line. School manuals and history books have disseminated reductive portraits of people who suffered colonization, from old romantic *clichés* (connection with "nature", supernatural powers) to various forms of powerlessness (disease, dependency, poverty). In contrast, one can deconstruct a Western conception based on these prejudices by starting from notions of dignity and the inclusion of Indigenous voices.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that supposedly objective, single-voice discourses have been built up over time, throughout history, as a way to oppress peoples, assigning them to a "primitive" stage of humanity.[15] It is against this "theft of history" that we rebel.[16] Since colonialism developed knowledge to oppress, creating spaces for Indigenous voices thus becomes an effort to challenge the legitimacy of a certain form of authority wielded by those states that illegally seized land and continue, to this day, to extract its wealth.

When I lived in Canada, I visited Kahnawake, a Mohawk reservation south of the island of Montreal, as part of my research on Joseph-François Lafitau (a Jesuit active in the Sault-Saint-Louis mission in the 18th century). In 2018, I met with Teyowisonte Tom Deer, the curator of the permanent exhibition at the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center. When I told him I was born in Geneva, he spoke to me of a Geneva I was unaware of, an ally of the Six Nations Confederacy, where the Haudenosaunee passport is accepted at the airport – the Haudenosaunee contest the legitimacy of the borders between Canada and the USA.[17] He then told me the story of Deskaheh Levi General, one of the first Indigenous leaders to go to the League of Nations in 1923, later to become the UN, to advocate for his people's rights. Before that conversation, I had associated Switzerland more with corporations profiting from mining extraction, such as Glencore and nickel in Kanak lands in New Caledonia, or banks like Credit Suisse funding pipeline projects in Indigenous territories in Canada, or with the Geneva Freeport, described as "the world's largest museum"[18] and its infamous art traf-

15 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London-New York: Zed Books/ Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999).

16 Jack Goody, *Le vol de l'histoire: comment l'Europe a imposé le récit de son passé au reste du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

17 The Haudenosaunee passport was displayed as part of the temporary exhibition *Injustices environnementales-Alternatives autochtones*, curated by Carine Durand, at the Geneva Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Genève), from September 24, 2021, to August 21, 2022.

18 Anne-Claire Bisch, "Les Ports-Francs & Entrepôts de Genève," February 24, 2021, accessed March 27, 2025, https://geneva-freeports.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/pfeg-article.pdf.

ficking scandals (see "Gold"). What an abrupt awakening to the fact that I had lived my whole life in total ignorance of the resistance movements in the very neighborhood where I grew up! Years later, I worked with an NGO, Docip – the Indigenous Peoples' Documentation, Research, and Information Center – on the history of Deskaheh Levi General, but the starting point, the trigger, was my visit to Kahnawake.[19]

Stepping aside and creating spaces based on dialogue with Indigenous Peoples and those outside institutions – artists, thinkers, experts, elders, all those who have, in one way or another, been marginalized by these institutions – allows us to move beyond certainties, collective amnesia, and inherited conceptions of history, including the belief that the world cannot be changed.

The Words of Things, Mylène Steity

I: "*Objects have their own language. The wind speaks. The wind speaks its own language. The birds speak. They speak their own language*"
(Issa Samb and Antje Majewski, our translation)[20]

Telling the history of arts and museums means first acknowledging the museum's role in the domination processes and then recognizing that it is, in the words of Françoise Vergès, "a battleground – a terrain of ideological, political and economic contestation".[21] The accumulation of material culture and knowledge associated to it are directly tied to the history of territorial, commercial, and colonial expansion, a story told through the products of looting and thefts that are preserved in Western museum institutions. This history bears witness to ongoing violence: the oppression of peoples and the exploitation of lands solely for profit, the dispossession of cultural heritage – at times even its destruction – and the appro-

19 I was the scientific collaborator for Docip on activities related to the centenary of Deskaheh Levi General's visit to Geneva, including two exhibitions: *Deskaheh 1923–2023*: *Defending Haudenosaunee Sovereignty*, curated by Jolene K. Rickard, in collaboration with Docip and the City of Geneva, held at Quai Wilson, Geneva, from July 3 to August 16, 2023, as well as the capsule titled *100 OHẸ:DǪ:* curated by Heather George, as part of the temporary exhibition *Mémoires. Genève dans le monde colonial*, curated by Floriane Morin, Geneva Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Genève), from May 3, 2024, to January 5, 2025.

20 "La Coquille. Conversation between Issa Samb and Antje Majewski", accessed January 10, 2025, http://www.antjemajewski.de/2016/09/16/la-coquille-conversation-entre-issa-samb-et-antje-majewski-dakar-2010/.

21 Françoise Vergès, *A Program of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum*, trans. Melissa Thackway, London: Pluto Press, 2024.

priation and decontextualization of Indigenous culture. The "universal museum" that emerged in the 19th century was awarded a scholarly position and considered capable of hosting discourse of reconciliation and consensus. Today, however, in a context where the museum is simultaneously a site of political and symbolic stakes but also of contestation and social action, it can no longer ignore the criminal aspects of its history and of the unsustainable colonial legacy of which it has been appointed the universal guardian. The notion that "museums are not neutral or 'timeless'"[22] has gained considerable traction today, particularly in the press. Consequentially, it can no longer hide behind its apparent neutrality; voices now resonate in unison, in a crescendo striving to be heard, denouncing the inequalities and violence that persist within these very institutions. Yet, achieving consensus on these issues, especially in Europe, is a long way off. The reactions to the report on the restitution of African cultural heritage by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, published in 2018 and known as the Sarr-Savoy Report, reflect the differences between the present-day colonialism, such as in North America, where the issue of Indigenous heritage is undeniable, and that of former European colonial powers, where a form of coloniality persists, and where the issue might be contested or subtly evaded.

In each case study discussed within this book, whether in reference to the concept of coloniality[23] or to art and museology in the current colonial context, a certain form of past and present violence emerges. This violence is evident both in what is said and in what is left unsaid, in what is visible and in what is invisible. It is thus a question of narrating the unseen: the omissions, the invisible, and, at times, the inaudible. From today's perspective, therefore, provenance research methods shed light on the microhistories of objects, people and communities (see "Knowledge"), with the specific aim of documenting objects that, once uprooted from their original context, have lost their historical character, their function, their techniques, their iconographies, and, at times, have been rendered anonymous (see "Naming"). This invisibilization reflects the power dynamics and relationships of domination at play. This is the case, for instance, when addressing the history of certain objects collected from former colonized territories, particularly in Africa. In the colonial culture of the time, the idea emerged that only Western knowledge possessed an understanding of the arts, which entitled Westerners to name things, thus bringing them into

22 Pierre Ropert, "L'histoire de l'art doit faire l'histoire de ce que l'on ne voit pas", accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/l-histoire-de-l-art-doit-faire-l-histoire-de-ce-que-l-on-ne-voit-pas-3598594. See also: International Council of Museums (ICOM), accessed January 10, 2025, https://icom.museum/fr/news/musees-pour-legalite-le-moment-est-maintenant/.
23 Aníbal Quijano, "'Race' et colonialité du pouvoir," *Mouvements* 51, 3 (2007): 111–118.

existence in the world – the result being that these objects became locked into distinct categories and typologies, erasing their relative polysemy and plural identity, silencing the voice of the true owners and creators of the objects (see "Hybridity").

Placed behind a glass case, set on a pedestal, or carefully stored in a museum's archive, the object may appear mute or even inanimate. Yet, objects are very much alive; they exist across multiple worlds and realities, telling and transmitting stories. Some have existed long before us and will continue to exist beyond us. Over the course of its history and journey, the object transforms, changes status, and sometimes leads multiple "lives" (see "Life").[24] It is at once creation, invention, and (re)interpretation, and before entering the museum, it underwent a series of functional and symbolic manipulations. From the moment of its creation to its recontextualization and inclusion in museums, it has been made, shaped, used, sanctified, handled, desired, ignored, bought, sold, traded, collected, lost, recovered, stolen, owned, packed, transported, transformed, cataloged, organized, named, labeled, inventoried, forgotten, contemplated, interpreted, purified, disinfected, cleaned, treated, exhibited, preserved, repaired, restored, nourished, claimed . . . and sometimes repatriated.

Through all these processes, which fall under the umbrella term "museum effect",[25] the object has been presumed dead, frozen in a new identity. Perhaps it is now time to consider heritage as relational, thus allowing for the writing of new histories that question the empty spaces and the silences left by traditional sources, because, as Noémie Étienne states, "behind all that is shown lies what is missing?[26]" To envision a "post-museum" is to consider history as a continuous process of questioning, deconstructing, and reconstructing knowledge. It is also about deconstructing old narratives to make way for the stories that have never been told, to give voice to those who were assumed mute or who had been silenced, and to open history to what is not immediately visible but must be rediscovered. It is also about letting someone else finish a story that we began to write on their behalf. The museum can no longer be a place of singular, persistent narrative but must become a space for dialogue, confrontation, and even divergent

24 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 [1986]).

25 Dominique Poulot, ed. *L'effet musée: Objets, pratiques et cultures* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022).

26 Noémie Étienne, "Que font les objets au musée ? L'exposition 'Exotic ?' et la place des collections," in: *L'effet musée: Objets, pratiques et cultures*, ed. Dominique Poulot (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022), 307–320.

or irreconcilable opinions.[27] For symmetrical relations to exist within institutions, it is important to reflect on issues of accessibility to collections and their associated knowledge in order to enable the reappropriation and sharing of responsibilities, and this may well have been the catalyst for the recent transformation of the museum into a space for exchange, encounters, and multivocal discourses where we do not tell *the history* but *histories*, where we do not pass on *a* memory but *memories*, and where we do not exhibit *art* but *arts*.

These changes highlight the importance of assuming our shared responsibilities, being able to question our own systems of representation, and creating new relationships based on more equitable exchanges for all. In this sense, the museum will be able to transform itself into a space for experimentation, participation, and co-construction of knowledge, a plural place where we work towards polyphony and the multiplicity of voices and actors. This "Postcolonial Museum Laboratory" as Clémentine Deliss calls it, will emphasize human relationships, bringing the museum alive, rather than contemplating its death.[28]

World Tour, Words Tour, Sara Petrella and Mylène Steity

Don't forget this story that's being told to you;
one day, perhaps, you will find the traces
(Denis Pourawa, our translation)[29]

Achille Mbembe speaks of Switzerland's strength in international finance and its correlation with a racist unconscious.[30] He argues: "through its banking system and the illicit financial flows that pass through it, Switzerland contributes to the impov-

27 Rebeca Lemay-Perreault and Maryse Paquin, "Perspective Agoniste: Proposition pour l'Inclusion des Communautés Culturelles et leur Participation dans les Musées," in *The Decolonisation of Museology: Museums, Mixing, and Myths of Origin*, ed. by Yves Bergeron and Michèle Rivet (Paris: ICOM/ICOFOM, 2021), 145–149.

28 Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

29 Statement made during the second day of the study days, during the presentation with Claire Brizon (MCAH) and Denis Pourawa (Kanak poet), "Se partager la responsabilité des collections. Utopie ou réalité?", September 16, 2021, at the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel).

30 Achille Mbembe, "L'inconscient raciste de la Suisse la préserve de reconnaître son rôle négatif en Afrique," *Le Temps*, July 26, 2021.

erishment of the African continent."[31] In recent years, reports and publications have shattered the heavy silence surrounding Switzerland's so-called neutrality.[32] It is now essential to reconsider colonial history not solely through the prism of former empires and their colonies, but also by taking into account the involvement of countries that have since emerged as major financial hubs – so as to engage with history from a truly global perspective. Since the 2000s, projects on colonial Switzerland, traveling objects, and non-European collections have multiplied,[33] aiming to retell a story in which Switzerland is no longer detached from the rest of the world but complicit in.[34] Switzerland thus helps us understand the rest of Europe and colonization through its hidden or secondary networks.

This publication aims to contribute to a global history of art and museums, taking into account the roles of various countries, beyond the traditional framework of empires and colonies. The 28 articles address among others Switzerland, France, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Congo, New Caledonia, Afghanistan, and India. Questions relating to the decolonization of art and museums arise in different ways, depending on the continent, the country, and the individuals involved, who are encountering these ongoing power dynamics.

This book is the result of a project that began in Switzerland and presents a selection of contributions from a larger French-language volume.[35] This English edition offers a revised and focused set of texts that reflect the international dimensions of the debates around decolonization, arts, and museums. While many contributions emerged from Swiss-based research and events, they engage with themes and case studies that extend across multiple continents and cultural contexts. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview, this *Abécédaire* (or ABC)

31 Mbembe, «L'inconscient raciste de la Suisse . . .».

32 Hans Fässler, *Une Suisse esclavagiste. Voyage dans un pays au-dessus de tout soupçon* (Paris: Duboiris, 2007); Patrick Minder, *La Suisse coloniale: les représentations de l'Afrique et des Africains en Suisse au temps des colonies (1880–1939)* (Bern: Lang, 2011); Béatrice Veyrassat, *Histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses dans la marche du monde* (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2018).

33 Noémie Étienne, Claire Brizon, Chonja Lee and Étienne Wismer, eds. *Exotic Switzerland? Looking Outward in the Age of Enlightenment* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2021); Claire Brizon, *Collections coloniales: à l'origine des fonds anciens non européens dans les musées suisses* (Zurich-Genève: Seismo, 2023).

34 *Colonialisme: Une Suisse impliquée*, Marina Amstad, Pascale Meyer, Raphael Schwere, Marilyn Umurungi (curators and concept), Zurich, Landesmuseum, from September 13, 2024 to January 19, 2025; *Mémoires. Genève dans le monde colonial*, Floriane Morin (exhibition curator), Geneva Ethnography Museum (MEG), from May 3, 2024 to January 5, 2025.

35 Sara Petrella, and Mylène Steity eds., *ABC arts & musées. Histoire coloniale et voix autochtones* (Zurich: Seismo), accessed August 11, 2025, https://www.seismoverlag.ch/fr/daten/abc-arts-musees/

aims to capture a plurality of voices and positions, weaving together diverse experiences and approaches. Its format allows for overlaps, tensions, and resonances across disciplines and geographies, forming a collective fabric of thought in motion.

This book is the result of a two study days we organized at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland in September 2022. While many contributions emerged from Swiss-based research and events, they engage with themes and case studies that extend across multiple continents and cultural contexts. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview, this *Abécédaire* (or ABC) aims to capture a plurality of voices and positions, weaving together diverse experiences and approaches. Its format allows for overlaps, tensions, and resonances across disciplines and geographies, forming a collective fabric of thought in motion.

This project emerged at a time when controversies surrounding the monument dedicated to David de Pury in Neuchâtel had rekindled debates about the Swiss colonial memory and history. Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, demonstrations have been held worldwide, and initiatives have been launched to "topple" statues of historical figures linked to the slave trade. In Neuchâtel, the authorities responded by launching a public art contest aimed at reconsidering this controversial figure in the city's history, a figure who had profited from the slave trade.[36]

Designed as an interdisciplinary space, our study days aimed to create a playing field for, and dialogue between, researchers from various backgrounds, curators, representatives of source communities, as well as artists and elders. With the theme of art and decolonization as our starting point, we reflected together through visits, presentations, and a round table,[37] as well as a conference and short film evening organized by Caroline Nepton-Hotte and the Ciné-Club d'Ethno

36 David de Pury, a merchant and international financier, was involved in the diamond and precious wood trade from Brazil, which was reliant on the forced labor of enslaved women, men, and children, and he also held shares in a company engaged in the slave trade. The statue of David de Pury, erected in 1855, has sparked numerous controversies. In 2023, the artwork *Great in the Concrete* by artist Mathias Pfund and an explanatory plaque were placed in front of the statue of David de Pury, accessed January 21, 2025, https://www.neuchatelville.ch/sortir-et-decouvrir/neuchatel-fait-la-lumiere-sur-son-passe.

37 Roundtable on Collaborative Provenance Research, University of Neuchâtel, September 16, 2022, with Placide Mumbembele Sanger (University of Kinshasa, Institute of National Museums of Congo), Noémie Étienne (University of Vienna), Damiana Otoiu (University of Bucharest), and Valérie Kobi (University of Neuchâtel), followed by a lecture by Bruno Brulon Soares (UNIRIO), "Décoloniser le décolonial: défis et paradoxe de la muséologie partagée" in discussion with Régine Bonnefoit (University of Neuchâtel).

of the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (MEN),[38] on the issues of participatory approaches, provenance research, and Indigenous struggle and resistance.

The purpose of this publication being to expand on the discussions and reflections we had, we contacted the wide-ranging and varied group of individuals who had participated, without issuing any public call for contributions.

Reflecting on Gilles Deleuze's *Abécédaire*, the opportunity to rethink knowledge by changing our attitude emerged, creating breathing space for something unpredictable, something we ultimately had no desire to control.

The "ABC of" is, admittedly, a Western concept rooted in our worldview and education. In the ancient myth of Cadmus on the invention of the alphabet, Herodotus (the Greek historian of the 5th century BCE) recounts how the Greeks inherited it from the Phoenicians. However, the Greek myth allows us to highlight the underlying idea of nomadism in the alphabet, the nomadism of words and ideas, images and concepts, beyond borders, in a global space – just as we are, two nomadic researchers within the university and museum worlds, navigating precarious academic positions: since we began organizing the study days, we have worked at three different universities, as doctoral assistants, postdoctoral fellows, contract researchers, and project managers; we have taken on a variety of mandates with museums, documentation centers, NGOs, and associations, and we have little idea of where we will be when this book is published.

This *Abécédaire*, in some way, reflects our situation, at a crossroads where various institutions and disciplines intersect, but above all there is communion, the intertwining of multiple voices. Instead of presenting art in the singular, the cases highlighted in this book transcend boundaries, thus removing any opposition between craft, primitive art, or fine art, the written word and the oral, science and fiction. The contributions in this volume fall into two categories. Some articles delve into the history of disciplines and institutions: the formation of ethnographic collections, the issue of archives and heritages, and old museum practices (see "Fragments", "Bias", "Questioning") as well as colonial stereotypes and imaginaries (see "Captations", "Phantom", "Xenophobia", "Zoo"). Other texts address the materiality of objects (see "Alterlife") and the multiple perspectives through which they can be understood (see "Naming", "Knowledge"). Finally,

38 Caroline Nepton-Hotte (University of Quebec in Montreal), "Décolonisation numérique de femmes autochtones au Québec. La réalité augmentée comme stratégie d'affirmation dans l'œuvre de Sophie Kurtness", followed by a screening of short films "Territoire et résistances – courts métrages autochtones – Québec", organized by the Ciné-Club d'Ethno MEN (Gaëtan Weislo and Alexandre Da Costa).

some contributions are conceived as spaces of experimentation: they either present exhibition projects both in Switzerland and around the world (see “Industry”, “Territory”, “Words”, “Vende”), or they themselves explore new forms of language through the arts (see “Yoruba”, “Xenophobia”).

The spoken word, represented in this publication in a transcription of dialogue (see “Justice”) is a reminder of the strength of orality as a form of expression, even when transcribed, which has never been extinguished. To the contrary, it is alive and in full solidarity with antiracist and feminist struggles, and intersectional movements in general. Moreover, the term “voice” encompasses both the spoken word and the right to express one’s opinion in political action.

This publication remains a laboratory which is accessible online and open access, and we hope that it will continue to evolve. More than a definitive result, this *Abécédaire* was conceived as a web, a fabric of networks, of interwoven past relationships and future encounters.

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Lotte Arndt

A *Alterlife*

On the Toxicity of Colonial Collections

> How to give words that might refuse the hegemonic sense of what chemicals and life are, that might be adequate to confronting the ubiquitous condition of chemically altered living-being, a condition that is shared, but unevenly so, and which divides us as much as binds us, a condition that enacts and extends colonialism and racism into the intergenerational future?
> (Michelle Murphy)[1]

In their groundbreaking research on decolonial chemical relations Michelle Murphy proposed the concept of *Alterlife* as a refusal of a damaged-based approach to environmental destructions in capitalist modernity, and as opposed to a fragmented understanding of life and non-life. Murphy stresses that "Alterlife acknowledges that one cannot simply get out, that this hurtful and deadly entanglement forms part of contemporary existence in this moment, in the ongoing aftermath." They highlight that in spite of the profound ruptures caused by industrial chemicals and colonial divisions, "the openness to alteration may also describe the potential to become something else, to defend and persist, to recompose relations to water and land, to become alter-wise in the aftermath."[2]

By toxic collections, I refer first to the harmful effects on humans and nonhumans from the residues of chemical treatments applied to collections of artifacts, taxidermized animals, and plants in those institutions known as ethnology and natural history museums.

What's more, the ~~object's~~[3] exhibition and conservation in Western museums has lasting consequences: removing from their original context, their institutional recontextualization, and the conservation practices that accompany them cause durable alterations, both material and cultural.

Toxic in a chemical sense first. So-called ethnological and natural history collections were treated with a variety of toxic substances, including arsenic, mercury,

1 Michelle Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, 4 (2017): 494–503. Accessed August 26, 2025: https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02

2 Lotte Arndt, ed., "The Toxic Afterlifes of Colonial Collections," *Troubles dans les collections* 2 (2021). Accessed August 26, 2025: https://troublesdanslescollections.fr/numeros/les-survivances-toxiques-des-collections-coloniales/?lang=en.

3 I use the word "object" with a strikethrough to indicate its problematic and insufficient nature in a museum context, referring to artifacts that, for some, may hold the status of a subject or require perception and treatment within a specific relational context.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-003

lead, and fumigated or sprinkled with lindane, DDT, camphor, and other chemicals in liquid, gaseous, or powder form, applied directly or indirectly on ~~objects~~ or within display cases, cabinets, or even entire floors, depending on the period, materials, and trajectories.[4] These treatments are often poorly documented and difficult to trace. To determine an ~~object's~~ precise toxic status, costly testing is often required. Collections with colonial origins, in particular, have been exposed to chemical treatments due to their material characteristics: ~~objects~~, often made from organic materials, accumulate in storage areas where they are exposed to insects, rodents, and mold.[5]

Modern Western museums have long considered the practice of conservation to be a scientific endeavor serving to preserve universal heritage.[6] The methods employed to prolong the material lifespan of museum ~~objects~~ were thus viewed as approaches, based on their scientific efficacy.

Toxic conservation is situated within the broader context of a modern promise of progress based on science and effective technical solutions to existential issues such as hunger, disease, or the finitude of life.[7] Western museum conservation emerged as a science and discipline at the end of the 19th century, precisely when colonial collections reached their peak: "It was, perhaps, only in 1888 that conservation as a professional discipline can truly be seen to have started".[8] The major ethnology museums in Europe established laboratories, the first being the Chemical Laboratory of the Royal Museums in Berlin in 1888, under the direction of chemist Friedrich Rathgen. At the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro (Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro) in Paris, technical assistant Adrien Fédorovsky, later to join the resistance cell at the Musée de l'Homme, worked between 1928 and 1933, setting up a laboratory to introduce what he called "the scientific method" of conservation.[9]

4 Lotte Arndt, "Poisonous Heritage: Chemical Conservation, Monitored Collections, and the Threshold of Ethnological Museums," *Museums & Society* 20, 2 (2022), accessed March 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v20i2.4031.

5 Nancy Odegaard and Alice Sadongei, eds., *Old Poisons, New Problems. A Museum Resource for Managing Contaminated Materials* (Walnut Creek, 2005); Tello Helene, *The Toxic Museum*. Berlin and Beyond (London: Routledge, 2023).

6 Noémie Étienne, "Who Cares? Museum Conservation Between Colonial Violence and Symbolic Repair," *Museums & Social Issues* 15, 1–2 (2021): 61–71, accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15596893.2022.2057413.

7 David Kinkela, *DDT & the American Century. Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide That Changed the World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

8 Chris Caple, *Conservation Skills. Judgement, Method and Decision Making* (London: Routledge, 2000), 53.

9 Lotte Arndt and Ariane Théveniaud, "Spreading the 'Scientific Approach': the Chemical Turn in Conservation from the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro to Colonial Museums in the French Empire," *Museums & Social Issues* (2023), accessed March 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2024.2397345.

He installed a toxic chamber where collections were treated at a rate of two to three loads per week, according to a systematic schedule, using equipment that allowed "the execution of various disinfection and pest-control operations (by spraying, vaporizing, soaking, etc.), depending on the nature of the objects and the insects to be eliminated" (this and the following translations are carried out by the author).[10]

Colonial collections were considered a particular threat, as they were said to come from societies "often living in deplorable hygienic conditions".[11] For this reason, they were thought to pose "a potential danger to personnel responsible for studying and handling these collections" and "were therefore subjected to disinfection" (see Fig. 1).[12]

Toxic conservation does not stop at European borders: the expansion of the Western museum model into colonies not only introduced the practice of creating collections separate from their users, but the same modes of classification and conservation were also implemented. Chemical treatments were thus established in numerous museums worldwide but, unlike most European museums where new legislation and a growing awareness of the dangers posed by chemical residues have led to protective measures,[13] employees in many African museums are barely or not at all protected. This could be described as asymmetric exposure and has a more lasting impact on the societies these ~~objects~~ originate from, through the prolonged use of treatments, accompanied by the erasure of indigenous conservation knowledge being replaced by the promises of modern chemical processes; through the enduring dispossession of a dynamic and changing relationship with a society's cultural ~~objects~~; and finally, through the risks posed by the potential restitution of toxic ~~objects~~. The harmful effects of chemical modernity, therefore, extend beyond their implementation in Western metropolises.[14]

The use of the term "toxicity" surged during the second half of the 20th century, reaching a peak in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion in Ukraine. It thus came to designate a striking, catastrophic moment with lasting consequences. In contrast to this idea of a dramatic event, Rob Nixon proposes we describe environmental destruction as "slow violence", violence which un-

10 Adrien Fédorovsky, *La conservation et la restauration des objets ethnographiques: le laboratoire du Musée d'ethnographie* (Paris: Verniere, 1933), 42.

11 Fédorovsky, *La conservation et la restauration des objets ethnographiques*, 42.

12 Fédorovsky, *La conservation et la restauration des objets ethnographiques*, 42.

13 *Deutsches Historisches Museum. Biozide. Segen und Fluch: Verwendung, Analytik, Bewertung* (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2015).

14 Maya Pontone, "Harmful Pesticides in Museum Collections Complicate Repatriation Efforts," *Hyperallergic* (2023), accessed March 27, 2025, https://hyperallergic.com/803145/harmful-pesticides-in-museum-collections-complicate-repatriation-efforts/.

Fig. 1: Manipulating instruments with protective gloves in the museum storage. Cité de la musique, Paris, 2022.

folds over a long period, gradually restructuring relationships, often almost imperceptibly.[15]

It is particularly difficult to hold synthetic chemicals and their manufacturers accountable due to the complexity of multiple chemical interactions, long latency periods between exposure and disease onset, and the limited understanding of the toxic substances themselves.

Besides the chemical sense of "toxic collection", I also intend the cultural dimension of the term: toxicity does not describe a material property but rather "form of affective relationality between people and other subjects, material, immaterial and animate, inanimate."[16] This relationship involves the radical disruption of time and the order of things through the advent of patrimonialization. Closely tied to the nation-state, which itself relies on retroactively projecting its existence into the past and aiming for an indefinite duration, heritage culture thus becomes the material guarantee of an ideally eternal temporal projection. Preserved in museums, it becomes a bulwark against death and finitude, a pretended escape from the limited cycles of life. From this perspective, toxic collections are not an accident of conservation but an integral part of the fundamental reorganization of social relations imposed by colonial powers on the world at large. As Melina Packer points out, "Contemporary disparities in toxic exposure emerge from imperialist legacies, both in terms of who becomes more poisoned and how science claims to 'know' poisons."[17]

Today, museum conservation is being questioned, particularly by audiences whose interest lies in practices and uses that go beyond visual contemplation.[18] The strengthening of protective measures in most so-called ethnographic museums in Europe reflects a growing awareness of the toxic legacy of the biocide treatments to which many collections have been exposed over the past century and a half. Initially, this awareness focuses on protecting the health of employees who work regularly with the collections, but it also extends to the visitors, who spend shorter periods near them: concerned individuals, researchers, or artists may find themselves forced to limit their time and contact with the ~~objects~~.

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15 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

16 Neil Nunn, "Toxic Encounters, Settler Logics of Elimination, and the Future of a Continent," *Antipode* 50, 5 (2018), 1333

17 Melina Packer, "Chemical Agents. The Biopolitical Science of Toxicity," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 12, 27 (2011), accessed March 27, 2025, doi:10.3167/ares.2021.120103.

18 Miriam Clavir and John Moses, *Le soin des objets sacrés ou culturellement sensibles* (Ottawa, Canada: Institut canadien de conservation, Ministère du Patrimoine canadien, 2018), accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.canada.ca/fr/institut-conservation/services/conservation-preventive/lignes-directrices-collections/soin-objets-sacres-culturellement-sensibles.html.

The discussion around restitution since the publication of the *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain* (*Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage*) by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, in 2018, adds another dimension: while restitution promises to create a more equitable cultural relationship, toxicity serves as a reminder of the indelible changes that the frequently enforced stay of ~~objects~~ in Western museum collections has caused. Just as museums are being urged to open up not only to restitution requests, but also to cultural, religious, or artistic practices that require access for people other than museum professionals, when handling, ritual offerings, dances, or fumigations may be involved,[19] toxicity imposes restrictions.

Following events occurring during the early years of repatriation in the United States, a paragraph was added to the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1996, stipulating that cultural institutions have a responsibility to inform communities about the treatments applied to ~~objects~~.[20] In a growing number of museums and archives, health risks related to potential collection toxicity have become a reason for restricted access, keeping concerned users at a distance.

Even beyond the restitution of artifacts, toxicity may alter uses, particularly by preventing touch. Although the potential toxic status currently plays an insignificant role in restitution discussions, toxicity may become an argument for keeping ~~objects~~ in display cases and building museums worldwide, in line with the Western model, thereby promoting its normative generalization.

As Michelle Murphy allows to understand, toxic collections compel us to consider a world that has been permanently altered by chemical treatments, the result of a chemical modernity with vast consequences, so it is now a question of living with the residues of chemicals in many areas of life. Conversely, the idea of a pure, pollution-free world is itself a modern fantasy.

Beyond the current pursuit of mechanical or chemical decontamination and its limitations, residual toxicity must be contextualized within a broader framework of unevenly distributed, gendered, and racialized environmental destruction. “Exposures [to toxicity] may be differential, uneven, or incommensurate; yet to practice exposure entails the intuitive sense or the philosophical conviction that the impermeable Western human subject is no longer tenable”.[21] From this starting point,

19 Dean Sully, *Decolonizing Conservation. Caring for Maori Meeting Houses outside New Zealand* (London: Routledge, 2007).

20 Jimmy Arterberry, “Les dégâts sont irréversibles. Et maintenant qu’allons-nous faire?,” *Troubles dans les collections* 2 (2021), accessed March 27, 2025, https://troublesdanslescollections.fr/2021/07/19/article-3-vf/.

21 Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5.

demands for environmental justice, and reparative processes led by communities become conceivable.[22] While such an approach does not promise to erase the toxic residues of more than a century of modern museum conservation, it opens the way to rethinking colonial collections from a broader perspective, beyond the closed entities that colonial collecting practices themselves created. They could, instead, serve as conduits towards understanding "alterlife",[23] affected by the global chemical industry and highlighting continued imperial survivals, in particular through their promise of a "better life" via modern technology.

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23 Michelle Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, 4 (2017): 494–50.

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Diletta Guidi

B
Bias

Institutional Bias: The Case of Islam at the Louvre Museum

An Institutionalizing Institution: The Louvre

In recent years, several studies have placed the museum as the institution responsible for providing a "face" to the nation,[1] while also endowing it with the power to represent society.[2] This includes highlighting its systems of domination[3] and even making accusations of perpetuating or creating new forms of discrimination.[4] To illustrate the phenomenon of the museum as a *mirror* institution of the nation and a *reflection* of society and its excesses, this entry in the *Abécédaire* focuses on the case of Islamic art exhibitions at the Louvre. More specifically, it shows how certain Islamic artworks are institutionalized (i.e., transformed into institutions themselves)[5] by the museum institution.

Once a royal palace subsequently seized by revolutionaries to be gifted to the French people at the end of the 18th century, the Louvre Museum, situated in the heart of Paris, symbolizes the end of the monarchy and the rise of the Republic. In France and internationally, it represents fine arts. Besides being a museum institution, it is itself an "institution", a cultural reference point.[6] This status ex-

1 Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'État en France. De 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 109.

2 Peggy Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

3 Leïla Cukierman, Gerty Dambury and Françoise Vergès, eds, *Décolonisons les arts!* (Paris: L'Arche, 2018);

Françoise Vergès, *Programme de désordre absolu. Décoloniser le musée* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2023).

4 Diletta Guidi, *L'islam des musées. La mise en scène de l'islam dans les politiques culturelles françaises* (Genève: Seismo, 2022). See studies on the ethics of public services and their mythical image by Françoise Lorcerie, see Françoise Lorcerie, "Services publics et discrimination ethnique: la question de l'éthique," *Migrations Société* 131, 5 (2010): 231–250. On the symbolic power of art, see Bourdieu, Pierre Bourdieu. "Sur le pouvoir symbolique," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 32, 3 (1977): 405–411, where the sociologist explains that the symbolic power of culture influences individuals' representations.

5 For more on the process of institutionalization, see Julien Fretel. "Institutionnalisation," *Encyclopœdia Universalis* (2014), accessed September 9, 2023, https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/institutionnalisation/.

6 Marie-Alix Molinie-Andlauer, "Musée et pouvoir symbolique. Regard géographique sur le Louvre," *Culture & Musées* 37 (2021), 210–213.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-004

plains why, in the neoliberal era, it has become a kind of brand, a label exported to the Persian Gulf, no less, where a museum branch recently opened in Abu Dhabi.[7] This museum might even be described as an "*institutionalizing* institution", for not only does it stand as an icon, but it also iconifies the objects it contains within its setting.[8] Take the Mona Lisa, for example. Her true biography is rendered almost irrelevant[9] in the face of what we already know about her: that she is displayed in the Louvre. Her "residence" alone suffices for her to be automatically included in the universal artistic heritage that this museum claims to represent. This problematic, universalizing process also affects Islamic artworks, as we will see.[10]

Is This Universally Recognized Institution Truly Universal?

The art history presented at the Louvre is situated history. It opens with the productions of ancient Greece and concludes with European works of the 19th century. Apart from a few attempts at inclusion[11] and certain exceptions, objects from South America, Africa, and everything related to the Eastern world in general, are excluded. This so-called universal heritage is therefore essentially a Western, even Eurocentric heritage. Over time, certain non-Western creations have been incorporated into the Louvre's collection, but often at the expense of part of their "identity". Anthropologist Benoît de L'Estoile uses the term "assimilationist universalism"[12] to describe the dual museum process that transforms the artisanal productions of the "Other" (for example non-Western peoples) into works of art, thereby slotting them into a supposedly "universal" art history. This

7 Alexandre Kazerouni, "Le Louvre Abu Dhabi et la particularisation de l'universalisme français," in *Le Louvre Abu Dhabi. Nouveau musée universel?*, ed. Charlotte Chastel-Rousseau (Paris: PUF, 2016), 121–145.

8 Joseph Moukarzel, "Du musée-écrin au musée-objet: Les musées, outils de communication et gages de contemporanéité," *Hermès, La Revue* 61 (2011), 90–95.

9 It is, after all, characteristic of an icon (in the religious sense of the term) to exist so that worship may be devoted to it, without other elements (including its biography) truly mattering. On iconization, see Jacques Rhéaume, *Iconisation. Les objets nous parlent* (Paris: Edilivre, 2012).

10 Dominique Poulot, *Une histoire des musées de France* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

11 See, for example, the story of Jacques Kerkache and his determination to bring what were then called "primitive" arts into the Louvre.

12 Benoît de L'Estoile, *Le goût des autres: de l'Exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 35.

aesthetic assimilationism emerged between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when colonized populations were first integrated into the occupying nations to facilitate their inclusion. Previously kept at a distance, the "Other" gradually loses its distinctiveness and is ultimately incorporated,[13] neutralized, within this supposedly universal Western category: "art" now serves as the term for alterity. De L'Estoile focuses particularly on the treatment of so-called "arts premiers" in France, but his analysis also extends to embrace the unique case of Islamic art, especially given the recentness of its inclusion at the Louvre.[14]

Islamic Art at the Louvre: The Museum's and France's Goodwill

Shortly after the Islamist attacks of September 11, 2001, French President Jacques Chirac reportedly called the Louvre to request that a wing of the museum be dedicated to Islam.[15] Chirac's idea was not only to "reinforce the universal mission of this prestigious institution", echoing the ideas expressed above, but, more importantly, to remind the French people of the contributions of Islamic civilizations to French culture.[16] As an art connoisseur, he knew that the Louvre held a large collection of objects that, until then, had been confined to hallways or in storage.[17] In a climate of social anxiety and violence (e.g., rising Islamophobia, terrorism, etc.), the government aimed to offer an alternative image of Islam to contrast the distressing portrayal spread by the media.[18] To oppose the image of religious, vio-

13 Despite the use of inclusive language, it is important to recognize that while marginalized, men in minority positions were nonetheless less marginalized than women and other gender and sexual minorities.

14 Guidi, *L'islam des musées.*

15 Guidi, *L'islam des musées.*

16 Speech by Jacques Chirac at the Ninth Conference of Heads of State and Government of Countries with French as a Common Language, in Beirut, October 18–20, 2002, accessed September 22, 2023, https://www.francophonie.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/actes_som_ix_2002.pdf.

17 Marthe Bernus-Taylor, *Les Arts de l'Islam. Guide aux visiteurs* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993); Marthe Bernus-Taylor, *Le guide du visiteur. Les arts de l'Islam* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001).

18 Thomas Deltombe, *L'islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France 1975–2005* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

lent, and dangerous Islam, it proposed a cultural, cultivated, peaceful Islam.[19] The new position accorded to Islam at the Louvre, through "its" art,[20] represents a "bringing together" of French people – both Muslims and non-Muslims – in the words of Hollande, who inaugurated the Department of Islamic Art (DAI) a few years after Chirac's initiative.[21] It is also a way to renew bonds between France and Arab-Muslim countries, which have made significant contributions to the funding for this new part of the Louvre.

Thus, the creation of the DAI, which opened in the Louvre's Visconti Courtyard in September 2012, arises from clearly political intent. Institutions are using the museum and a specific artistic category – Islamic art – to influence society. This is not new; museums have long been tools of the state.[22] What is noteworthy, however, is that this is not a uniquely French phenomenon. Since 2001, it has been shown[23] that an international "museum *Islamania*" has surfaced, with various museums dedicated to Islam opening or undergoing renovation worldwide, all with a cultural diplomatic goal: presenting an "alternative" Islam through art.

Admittedly, the process of using art as evidence of a group's *bona fides* is not new, dating back to the 18th century at least.[24] At the Louvre, however, this process takes on a singular form. Islamic art in France is embedded within a broader Western art history, more specifically within a Franco-French narrative, dare I say within a distinctly museum-based history; yet it is described as universal – a paradox that remains quite exceptional in the global museum landscape. This article will examine this process through three case studies of key objects in the DAI collection, which might aptly be termed "institutional objects" – objects that, to borrow from the etymology of "institution" (*in statuo*),[25] establish Islam within the *untouchable* sphere of art.

19 Here, I follow the academic distinction (commonly found in French museums) between "islam" with a lowercase, which refers to the Muslim religion, and "Islam" with a capital "I", which denotes Islamic culture and civilization.

20 For discussions on the ownership of Islamic art, see Diletta Guidi, *L'islam des musées. La mise en scène de l'islam dans les politiques culturelles françaises* (Genève: Seismo, 2022).

21 Speech by François Hollande at the Opening of the New Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre Museum, Paris, September 18, 2012, accessed September 22, 2023, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/185836-francois-hollande-18092012-nouveau-departement-arts-de-lislam-louvre.

22 Benedict Anderson, *L'imaginaire national: réflexions sur l'origine et l'essor du nationalisme* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996).

23 Guidi, *L'islam des musées.*

24 Guidi, *L'islam des musées.*

25 The word institution comes from the Latin verb *instituo*, *instituere*, which refers to the contraction of *in statuo*, meaning "to place into", "to install", "to establish", Virginie Tournay, *Sociologie des institutions* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 3–8.

The Institutional Objects of the Department of Islamic Art

There is geographical proximity between Western masterpieces at the Louvre, such as the Mona Lisa mentioned earlier, and the Department of Islamic Art. Indeed, the 2.800 square meters of the Islamic Art Department are centrally positioned within the museum, in a highly visible location.

The proximity among institutionalized works is also reflected on an onomastic level. Take, for example, the *Pyxis of Al-Mughira* (see Fig. 2), an ivory box created in 968 for the last son of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III of Cordoba (891–961).

Carved from a single block of ivory from an elephant tusk, this work features scenes of war and hunting all over its surface, revealing that, contrary to popular belief, Islamic art is not entirely aniconic.[26] For these reasons, the pyxis has a title – a rarity for Islamic art of this period. This name, however, is often set aside in favor of its nickname, "the Mona Lisa of Islam", a term frequently used by museum experts. Sophie Makariou and Yannick Lintz, former directors of the Department of Islamic Art, for instance, use this term to present it to the public,[27] most probably to make it relatable to viewers, but at the cost of erasing its Islamic specificity and authenticity.

A similar "erasure" of distinctive characteristics is seen with the *Lion of Monzón* (see Fig. 3).

This piece, which was chosen as the visual for the Department of Islamic Art launch, is described on the museum's website[28] as "one of the rarest preserved metal works from the entire Islamic Occident". Specialists use the term "Islamic Occident" to denote periods of significant Muslim presence in the West. In this case, it refers to the Muslim occupation of medieval Spain, as the lion dates from the 12th–13th centuries and was discovered in Palencia, a region once occupied by the Umayyad dynasty. It most likely served as a fountain spout in a Muslim palace before being repurposed in a Christian monastery in the region, exemplifying the peaceful "*convivencia*" between Islam and the West in Al-Andalus, or at least that is the narrative promoted by the museum's curators as regards the *Lion of Mon-*

26 Silvia Naef, *Y a-t-il une question de l'image en islam?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015).

27 Guidi, *L'islam des musées.*

28 The label and the caption of an artwork are synonymous. They both provide information on the 'biography' of the object (origin, creation, materials, style, etc.). The description of the *Lion of Monzón* is available on the Louvre's website, accessed September 22, 2023, https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010330266.

Fig. 2: The Pyxis of Al-Mughira, 968, Madinat al-Zahra, Ivory, Louvre Museum, Inventory number OA 4068.

zón.[29] Researcher Elena Arigita, who has studied this period, warns, however, that the harmonious image of Al-Andalus, with its ideals of tolerance and interfaith dialogue, should be approached with caution, as these ideals were often enforced. Arigita's call for prudence regarding the use of what she terms the

29 See: "visite virtuelle: les arts de l'Islam au Louvre en cinq chefs-d'œuvre. Interview à Sophie Makariou", *France Inter*, 21 septembre 2012, accessed September 22, 2023, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xtriiu_visite-virtuelle-les-arts-de-l-islam-au-louvre-en-cinq-chefs-d-oeuvre_creation; Interview between Yannick Lintz and Ghaleb Bencheikh, *France Culture*, "Cultures d'islam", May 29 2016, accessed September 22, 2023, http://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/cultures-d-islam/les-arts-de-l-islam.

Fig. 3: The Lion of Monzón, circa 975–1100, Monzón de Palencia,
Cast Bronze with Engraved Decoration, Louvre Museum, Inventory number OA 7883.

"*paradigme de Cordoue*", or Cordoba paradigm in English,[30] concerns, in particular, the pitfalls it may entail. Indeed, because it draws on a past reference, the well-meaning intentions behind its use may become "counterproductive", as political scientist Christopher Flood notes.[31] This so-called precedent from the Middle Ages represents a bygone "golden age", an idealized memory that generates nostalgia. By cherry-picking the biographical elements of the *Lion of Monzón*, the Department of Islamic Art contributes to constructing this idealized Islam – refined and tolerant – that visitors may take at face value and, in comparing it to contemporary Islam, create a dangerous anachronism. Today's Islam would then be forced to conform to a past, the reality of which, however, is distorted.

The third and final institutional object this article will examine is a Syrian brass basin dating from 1320–1340 with engraved decorations, inlaid with silver, gold, and black paste. It bears the artist's signature six times, making it unique and extensively studied within the Islamic art corpus.[32] Its original owner remains unknown, but what is known is that starting in the 17th century, it was used for baptizing the children of the French royal family, including the infant who was to become Louis XIII, which explains the name it was given: the Baptistery of Saint Louis (see Fig. 4).

30 Elena Arigita, "The 'Cordoba Paradigm': Memory and Silence around Europe's Islamic Past," in *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe: Memory, Aesthetics, Art*, ed. Frank Peter, Sarah Dornhof and Elena Arigita (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 21–40.

31 Christopher Flood, *Political and Cultural Representations of Muslims: Islam in the Plural* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 44.

32 Sophie Makariou, *La pyxide d'al-Mughira* (Paris: Musée du Louvre éditions, 2012).

Fig. 4: The Baptistère de Saint Louis, Muhammad ibn al-Zayn, circa 1325–1340, Syria (?); Egypt (?), Hammered Metal (Brass), Engraved Decoration, Inlaid with Silver and Gold, Louvre Museum, Inventory number LP 16.

The inner emblem also reads "France, 1821". This "French identity" is emphasized by the museum, which has omitted to insert the words "known as" between "Baptistery" and "of Saint Louis" to temper its historical association. Conversely, the name underscores the Department of Islamic Art's decision not to highlight its Mamluk origins but rather, its use by French Christian royalty. Its Islamic origin is obscured in favor of its later redefinition. Like the pyxis, this work is thus "*Frenchified*", illustrating the dominance of one civilization over another. François Hollande made notable reference to this piece in his inauguration speech for the Department of Islamic Art. "A revelation", he said of the baptistery, "that monarchs of divine right had been baptized in Islamic works. We did not know this. It reminds us of our *sometimes*-shared origins" (our translation).[33] The work thus takes

33 Excerpt from the previously mentioned inauguration speech of the Department of Islamic Art by François Hollande, with emphasis added in the text.

on diplomatic significance, symbolizing the potential (the term "sometimes" is significant in "shared origins") for dialogue between two civilizations.

What the Institution Can Do to the "*Other*"

As anthropologist Jessica Winegar explains in an article on the contemporary use of Islamic art, an artistic selection is "never neutral"; rather, it is "eminently political".[34] This is even more true, I would add, when carried out in an institutional context, as we have seen here.

In 2012, Islamic art was brought out of the Louvre's storage rooms – made visible – and became, consequently, an integral part of its art history. However, as this history remains exclusively Western, its integration, or more precisely its institutionalization, has also resulted in the erasure, at least partially, of its specificities. Through three emblematic objects, termed here "institutional objects", we have observed how museographic and discursive practices can alter the nature of an object and shape the visitor's perception (see "Life"). These three pieces, along with the entire collection of Islamic art housed at the Louvre, gain iconic status; they certainly acquire a new stature, but they also lose complexity and even uniqueness. In attempting to neutralize contemporary debates, the assimilationist processes staged by the museum institution also, whether intentionally or not, neutralize the particularities of Islamic art and, by extension, of Islam and the Muslims associated with it. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu showed, institutions hold significant power over the Other, particularly over their place and legitimacy in society.[35] Cultural institutions, and museums in particular, possess this power to the same, if not even greater degree, because they provide the Other with an image, a form of cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's terminology,[36] that can be socially invested. However, as in the case of Islamic art, the image created by the institution may be incomplete or distorted. To remedy this, one possible initiative would be for institutions to (further) involve relevant actors in this creative process (which, as we have seen, is as political as it is artistic),[37] so

34 Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror," *Anthropological Quarterly* 813 (2008), 652.

35 Pierre Bourdieu, "Le mort saisit le vif," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 32/33 (1980), 3–14.

36 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970).

37 See the proposals listed in the chapter "le musée imaginaire de l'islam" in Guidi, *L'islam des musées*.

that in future this institutionalized image, in all its complexity, may be as close to reality as possible.

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Monica Heintz

C
Captations

Captations in Colonial Contexts

Moving images are among the most challenging material objects to extract from the colonial context of their production for subsequent, peaceful reuse. Academics, artists, and curators from Europe and Africa are thus jointly establishing research and artistic frameworks with a view towards the "restitution" of these images to the communities "captured" within them, at the same time carefully balancing this with respect for the cinematic work itself. The (still) image selected for this glossary, a photograph taken on the set of *La Croisière Noire* (1926) by Léon Poirier, clearly reflects the ambiguity of the cameraman's act, shown at the center of the photo within the colonial context itself (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Photograph from the set of *La Croisière Noire* (1926), directed by Léon Poirier during one of the Citroën expeditions.

Analyzing and deconstructing this image whilst engaging with the dialogic work we undertake with colonial still and moving images allows us to symbolize the complex ambiguity of revisiting the filmmaker's gestures, which are both artistic yet predatory, during the colonial era.

How can we engage in dialogue around controversial films or, rather, animated images on film that have become the subjects of controversy over time – sometimes images which seemed relatively neutral at the time, but which were

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-005

captured in a historically sensitive context or one that has since become so? These distinctions are anything but trivial. The question of time's passing in relation to animated images, and time's effect on the interpretations (by viewers, scientists, or artists), lies at the heart of ethical debates around moving images. Ethics itself is fluid, processual, and the product of dialogue and debate, not a predefined framework to which images are subjected for judgment and possible condemnation.[1] On the one hand, the passage of time – comprising historical distance as well as the emotional distance brought on by forgetting – and on the other, historical change both strongly shape the ethical framework within which animated images are perceived and interpreted at any point in history. And yet, this topic remains far less debated ethically than the "restitution" of objects.[2]

The image "View of the Yalinga Region", captured on the film set *La Croisière Noire*, reflects the filmmaker's gesture during the colonial era while following the tracked expedition[3] led by André Citroën from North Africa to Madagascar in 1925–1926. The controversy surrounding the rights to this cinematographic work (and the accompanying photographs) between Citroën and the descendants of Léon Poirier serves as a reminder of the work's original promotional purpose, only partially overshadowed by the film's later fame. We do not know if the photographer was director of photography Georges Specht, film director Léon Poirier, or another member of the film crew. This shoot was, in fact, a collective venture since the film, commissioned by automobile manufacturer Citroën, was specifically intended to showcase the prowess of Citroën's factories. Behind both the photographer and the cameraman being filmed lies an entire world encompassing a vision of progress and of France which is all but casual. Written as the caption of the photograph, the word "capture" resonates here in an unusual way – "capture" as in the end goal of hunting. And it's clear to see: camera out front, the image hunters, with determined warlike looks, set out to battle the environmental challenges, proud of this new technological achievement – the stationary 1920s camera, mobilized through tracked vehicles that carry both cameraman and camera, with the goal of testing these new technologies under extreme conditions. The development of Citroën ve-

1 Monica Heintz, *The Anthropology of Morality: A Dynamic and Interactionist Approach* (London & NY: Routledge, 2021).

2 Trinh Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcolonialism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Paul Henley, "Avant Jean Rouch: le cinéma 'ethnographique' français tourné en Afrique subsaharienne," *Journal des africanistes* 87, 1–2 (2017), 34–63; Katherin Groo, *Bad Film Histories. Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

3 The half-track is a land vehicle equipped with front wheels and a track propulsion system.

hicles and cameras attests to the interest in pursuing this initial goal. It was also about self-testing, endurance, courage, and skill. The personal stories of the directors and cameramen, which we know little about, might also testify to this drive but we do know, however, that these images deeply influenced the popular culture of the time, indirectly transforming them into heroes.[4] In addition, there was also the daring challenge of capturing "reality" and bringing it home as a trophy, as proof of a unique experience. Today, only this final goal – capturing reality – can be debated, for it reaches us directly through the image on film.

Indeed, the "reality" captured by the camera has been the subject of numerous debates in visual anthropology. Reality, or staged scene designed to increase exoticism for and thereby interest of contemporary viewers? Full reality or truncated in order to suit the interests of the filmmakers or their potential audience (what lies beyond the frame)? Reality or artistic imagination? To explore these issues, which continue to raise their heads when we watch colonial-era films and attempt to reuse these moving images, let us first focus on the term "capturing reality", a concept rarely used in film studies. "Capturing" refers specifically to the recording of live performance on film. Here, constructed reality is performed by actors, at the director's behest, in front of one or more usually stationary cameras. The editing is minimal and intended only to render the performance as it occurred. It is the camera that "captures", the cameraman's role being merely technical, one of service; the editing is not intended to be recognized as a form of creation, and there is no recognizable auteur. In short, effective technology seems to erase the artistic dimension of capturing, allowing the live performance presented in front of the camera to draw all the attention. This performance is unique, as in any live show, and the goal is to capture this uniqueness in order to transmit it to those unable to witness it live (which remains the ideal setup). But ask performing artists and they will tell you that capturing is a makeshift solution or working tool for the director (actors often even refuse to watch themselves), and filmed theater is a non-starter which doesn't even "cross the footlights". The captured performance might only secondarily be considered a memory of the event. This preservation inscribes the performance in time, leaving a trace beyond the co-present audience's memory, at times, to the detriment of the artist. When I say "to the detriment of the artist", it's because many complain about the fixed nature of moving images permanently archiving a performance that has since evolved, or that misrepresents them. The act may seem absurd without the energy of the live show, or it might enter into competition with the artist's future performances. Thus, even in situations where cap-

4 Thomas Martin and Amanda Harris, eds., *Expeditionary Anthropology. Teamwork, Travel and the Science of Man* (Oxford and NY: Berghahn, 2018).

turing reality is done in a way that minimizes the role of those behind the camera, those in front of the camera often have much to say, with much of the discontent relating to the "unfavorable" passage of time on these images, the inability of images to reflect reality as it was, the lack of control over their distribution and viewer perceptions. All of this resonates with the familiar criticisms in anthropology regarding cultural representation,[5] particularly those representations in colonial contexts where fascination with documented populations[6] manifests itself as "orientalization"[7] in Said's sense.

What happens, then, when the person behind the camera takes control of the image from start to finish, from production through editing and to the choice of distribution, in the making of an auteur documentary film? When they assume it to be a personal creation in which reality serves merely as a base for inspiration and legitimacy? This is where the pact between those behind and those in front of the camera lens becomes crucial, and where the context in which the film was shot weighs heavily on the outcome: how much freedom was the director granted, did the subjects consent to serving as film material, and how far and how long was distribution and reinterpretation of these images of reality permitted? Initially, colonial or totalitarian historical contexts did not, however, establish such a pact or did so only within a framework of social inequality which has since been challenged. Thus, renegotiation of this pact for each time the film is re-broadcast is required. But who might be entitled to grant "permission"? The descendants of the subjects, or experts on the communities "captured" in the film? Should these experts be local or foreign? Is this feasible in practice? Must this pact be reconsidered with every new showing of the film, or would referencing the context of the image's production (historical, technological context) suffice in order to bypass the need for agreement and enable these unique moments to circulate, be received, and reused freely?[8]

Finally, do we ever truly escape the consent of the creator/director, whose copyright lasts 50 years but whose moral rights persist far beyond, limiting the

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Vumbi Yoka Mudimbé, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

6 Joshua Bell, Alison Brown and Richard Gordon, *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology, and Popular Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013).

7 Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

8 Hannah Turner, "Decolonizing Ethnographic Documentation: A Critical History of the Early," *Museum Catalogs at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History*, *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 53, 5–6 (2015), 658–676, accessed March 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1010112.

potential for reinterpretation, even if it involves a "recontextualization" of their vision – a vision they might accept or reject were they still alive? For the viewing public, tolerating even a masterfully executed perspective embedded in a period of history that has since been disavowed can prove difficult, whether it be a triumphantly civilizing view or one that is shamefully essentialist. This view could certainly be repurposed, reused, or reinterpreted to allow for new dissemination, and this is possibly the price we must pay to allow this vision to endure rather than be consigned to oblivion.

Aside from the actual or imagined rights of those behind and in front of the camera lens, moving images derive considerable legitimacy from their unique testimony to a period of history which is little-known or known from a single viewpoint alone, from that of those who were able to access these accounts. Providing greater access, despite the challenges and questions mentioned above, allows for multiple perspectives and diverse testimonies (textual, visual, auditory) in the documentation of the era. Secondly, reintegrating these moving images into the documentary body available within certain communities will facilitate and enrich the study of the era, while also serving as a starting point for further research that draws on history as a foundation (the origin of a social activity, a person, a relationship) thus developing a scientific or artistic approach to an entirely different social phenomenon. Thirdly, these images enable the type of dialogue this book is encouraging: one that spans multiple disciplines between colleagues of diverse scientific traditions and historical experiences. It is from these dialogues that new agreements on distribution and collaborative ethics emerge, since film – ultimately – merely serves as a catalyst and means of transitioning from one reality to another.

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Paola von Wyss-Giacosa

D
Diaspora

900 Hazara Prayer-Cloths in a Swiss Museum

Based on his own experience in doing research in ethnographic collections, the anthropologist Paul Basu has suggested applying the term "diaspora" to objects or groups of objects in museums. This concept is highly charged and may also function as an analytical metaphor, but before anything else it is useful in the etymological sense of the word. Diasporic objects are quite literarily "scattered" from their place of origin. Though physically located in one place, their identity is linked to and grounded in another. Basu asks whether exile and diasporic existence are synonymous or what distinguishes them, furthermore, whether objects in exile invariably want to "go home" or may have settled into their new diasporic environment, whereby it plays an important role what caused their dispersion from their place of origin.[1]

My focus here is on a particular collection of diasporic objects, a group of over 900 Shi'ite prayer cloths in the holdings of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zürich. These embroidered artefacts from Central Afghanistan were first exhibited at the museum in the year 2000 and subsequently donated to the institution in 2012.[2] They were neither purchased nor proactively selected by the donator. Rather, the museum was called on to give this textile ensemble institutional public space and visibility, and, beyond this, to offer them indefinite shelter. The background and history of this "collection" is indeed remarkable, and though it has been told and written about on several occasions,[3] the obligation to keep alive the consciousness of the Hazara's political situation remains. No less

1 Paul Basu, "Object Diasporas, Resourcing Communities: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape," *Museum Anthropology* 34, 1 (2011), 28–42. See also Paul Basu, "From Object Diaspora to Museum Affordances," in *Diasporic objects*, Symposium at the Research Center for Material Culture, Leiden, March 1, 2018, accessed May, 15, 2023, https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/diasporic-objects.

2 A publication accompanied the exhibition, Paul Bucherer and Cornelia Vogelsanger, *Gestickte Gebete. Gebetstüchlein – dastmal-e-mohr der afghanischen Hazara und ihr kultureller Kontext* (Liestal: Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanica, 2000). The donation agreement of December 2012 as well as additional documents on this object group are in the museum archive.

3 See most recently Andreas Isler, "Objekte in der Diaspora. Die Sammlung von Gebetstüchern der Hazara, Afghanistan, von Verena Frauenfelder (1927–2018)," *Feierabend? (Rück-)Blicke auf "Wissen", Nach Feierabend. Zürcher Jahrbuch für Wissensgeschichte* 15 (2020): 231–233.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-006

important is the need to highlight the crucial importance attributed by Hazara women to these artefacts as repositories of their threatened culture and identity.

The local name of the prayer cloths is *dastmal-e-mohr*. They are – or rather were – typically made by Hazara women in the Jaghori district, in the Ghazni province in southeastern Afghanistan. *Dastmal* is a handkerchief, and *mohr*, also a Persian word, means seal. *Dastmal-e-mohr* is the name used for prayer "stones", sacred objects of Shi'ite devotion formed and baked in different shapes from the earth of Karbala.[4] This city in modern Irak is a holy place of pilgrimage for Shi'ite Muslims; in the battle of Karbala, in 680 AD, Husayn, son of Ali and Fatima, was killed, becoming a symbol of sacrifice and justice and a martyr hallowing the ground with his blood. The *mohr* is used in prayer. The prostrate worshipper touches the earth of Karbala with the forehead. A particularity of Hazara devotion is the use of an embroidered cotton or synthetic fibre fabric, in which the prayer stone is enveloped for protection and storage and on which the *mohr* is placed, thereby drawing boundaries and creating a sacred space for the daily prayers.[5] Their softness and flexibility make woven things particularly suitable for covering or enveloping sacred bodies and thus absorbing blessing: An embroidered handkerchief begins its "sacred career" when it first comes into contact with the *mohr*. It is by fulfilling its multiple functions that an ordinary albeit artfully decorated cloth becomes a *dastmal-e-mohr*. Through the gradual loading with the *barakat*, the blessings, of the prayer stone, it itself becomes a holy object.

The large group of textile objects in Zürich's Ethnographic Museum is valuable for several reasons. These are elaborate artefacts made beautiful and precious by many women's skill in manual embroidery. Each prayer cloth is unique. Together, the over 900 pieces feature a broad range of patterns, stitches, and colours, varying and combining the textile vocabulary, creating a many-layered visual expression, all speaking a powerful symbolic language.[6]

Two prayer cloths serve here as examples, from the two main aesthetic categories, namely the geometric-ornamental embroideries, which likely are the elder type, and the figurative pieces. Some *dastmal-e-mohr* in the holdings show evident traces of their use and the continuous contact with the prayer stone. The

4 Helga Venzlaff, "Das schiitische Gebetssiegel," *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series 2, 35 (1995), 250–275.

5 Alfred Janata and Nassim Jawad, "Ya Ali! Ya Husayn! Ein Aspekt religiöser Volkskunst der Hazara," in *Textilhandwerk in Afghanistan*, ed. Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff and Paul Bucherer-Dietschi (Liestal: Bibliotheca Afghanica, 1983), 161–175.

6 During the preparation for the exhibition in 2000, and with the assistance of Sima Samar, questionaries were sent to the district with many questions for the women about their embroideries, the names of the stitches, the meaning of certain pattern and motifs.

cloths with a purely geometrical pattern of radiating ornamental rows and symmetries in multicoloured art silk and cotton emphasize the centre. It is on this manifest inner middle that the *mohr* was positioned for prayer, as the threads worn out by friction in this beautiful piece, executed mainly in the commonly used satin stitch, demonstrate (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Undocumented author, Hazara prayer cloth, Jaghori district, Ghazni province (Afghanistan), art silk/cotton embroidery on white cotton, 32.5 x 32 cm, Ethnographic museum, University of Zurich, Inventory number 28367.

The figurative *dastmal-e-mohr* usually show a mosque, dome, minaret, or tomb – also sometimes hands – and thus have a different compositional orientation. The shapes of these architectural motifs are left entirely to the imagination of the embroiderer and are quite diverse. What the highly stylized buildings have in common is that they represent the *quibla*, the direction of prayer. The embroidery shown here, executed in cross stitch and back stitch is one of a group in the collection featuring a particular element: the representation of a prayer stone. In this case the *mohr* has a rectangular shape. It is positioned above the building with its floral elements and pennons and below the prayer beads. We see here a remarkably explicit pictorial expression of the Hazara's Shi'ite identity and of the will to document one's own threatened culture as a religious minority. The writ-

Fig. 7: Undocumented author, Hazara prayer cloth, Jaghori district, Ghazni province (Afghanistan), cotton/synthetic fibre embroidery on white synthetic fibre, 37.5 x 38.5 cm, Ethnographic Museum, University of Zürich, Inventory number 28472.

ing in the lower right corner of the cloth, "Feyziyeh School", is a reference to the famous school in Qom, Iran, and might be read in the same context (see Fig. 7).

These objects appear to us today carefully stored in a Swiss museum as a "community" of similar artefacts, all created for the same purpose and with the same technique, all originating from the same region, all marked with an inventory number. The history of their displacement opens possibilities for a differentiated engagement with their diasporic condition.

The *dastmal-e-mohr* were individually conceived by their creators, their age differs significantly, some being old heirlooms while others are more recent or were even never used. And as already mentioned, they were neither purchased nor in any way selected proactively by a collector. They were, on the contrary, given by their owners and makers to a Swiss pharmacy assistant, Verena Frauenfelder (1927–2018), who since the late 1970s had been traveling the region. She founded the *Verein Afghanistanhilfe* in 1988 and initiated various aid projects, among them to educate girls and women in the Hazarajat.[7] After the Taliban take-

7 See: accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.afghanistanhilfe.org/en/home.html.

over of power, the Hazara people, encouraged by Sima Samar, a doctor, human rights advocate and activist cooperating with Frauenfelder on various projects, started sending Frauenfelder parcels containing, among other things, many prayer cloths, all gathered in villages in the Jaghori district; ultimately more than 900 pieces came together. Clearly, the Hazara wanted to express their gratitude for her constant support. And they wanted to do so by giving something that was durable and representative of their culture. Made by women, these valuable embroideries were given to a woman who with her projects endeavoured to help everybody but whose major concern was women empowerment. Was a collective intention and organized action behind this sending of the prayer cloths? Or was it one person, for instance Dr. Samar, herself a Hazara, who thinking ahead sought to create a body of – quite literarily – moving testimonies of a threatened culture abroad, both to save the objects from destruction and to preserve, in and through them, vestiges of the Hazara culture?

Rather than selling the prayer cloths and using the money for her projects in the Hazarajat, as she normally did with other embroidered objects sent to her, Frauenfelder, in dialogue with various experts and Sima Samar, decided instead to pass this unique ensemble on to the museum as a place of study and safekeeping, specifically intending to see them preserved and, whenever and wherever the opportunity should arise, displayed as cultural heritage, as testimonies of the identity of a persecuted community. When I last spoke to her, a year or so before her death in 2018, she told me that such *dastmal-e-mohr* were no longer produced according to her local informants. On that occasion she gave me three recent pieces, very simple ones, with scarcely any embroidery and only white on white.

In preparation of this article, I have spoken to Hazara families who arrived in Switzerland in 2015. Though they know prayer cloths were used in past times, they themselves no longer do so.

The diasporic objects preserved in the Ethnographic Museum have by now spent more than twenty years as refugees in Switzerland. Everyday objects as many or most of them used to be, anchored to a particular time, space and experience, they changed their status and identity, both individually and collectively, when they were sent abroad and subsequently entrusted to a museum. Becoming part of an academic institution had an influence on the perception of the cloths in Switzerland, where the interest and research by scholars and the public also shaped the objects' history. So did the efforts of Verena Frauenfelder, with whom these objects, at least as long as they remain in their Swiss museal diaspora, are intimately linked. It was her continuous presence and actions over decades in the Hazarajat that created relationships and mutual obligations. It was the initiative of her friend and collaborator of many projects, Sima Samar, that brought together, and to Switzerland, so many prayer cloths. Based

on the donor's intention and according to the contract, they should be kept together, to continue their work as testimonies of the women who created them and of Hazara culture and identity. At present and for a long time now they have not been publicly accessible.[8] If the situation allows it – this, too, is part of Verena Frauenfelder's will – they should one day be returned to their homeland. Where to, exactly, will certainly require careful consideration. Some of the Hazara I spoke to here in Switzerland think that these objects may in time develop new functions for the Hazara diasporic community, no longer as religious paraphernalia, but as a material part of their history. As repositories of memory and cultural heritage, in a relationship between people and objects, they may hopefully continue being, as the British anthropologist Alfred Gell would have it, "sources of, and targets for, social agency".[9]

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Venzlaff, Helga. "Das schiitische Gebetssiegel." *Die Welt des Islams, New Series* 2, 35 (1995): 250–275.

8 Some cloths were exhibited in Marburg in 2013, see Katja Triplett, "Gebetstücher der afghanischen Hazara", in *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola. Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis*, ed. Edith Franke and Konstanze Runge, Veröffentlichungen der Religionskundlichen Sammlung, 6 (Marburg: Diagonal, 2013), 133–139.

9 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 96.

Seloua Luste Boulbina

E
Everyday Life

Everyday Life Arts Objects: Yam Knife

Here, I have chosen the document over the monument, the humble over the ostentatious. In Kanak culture, humility is indeed a paramount virtue, so I elected not to spotlight the emblematic ceremonial Kanak ax-ostensorium, but to focus, rather, on an object that intertwines plant life and humanity – elements that are deeply interwoven in this culture. This is my guiding thread. Working on a philosophy of plant life led me to consider an object to be as unassuming as it is profoundly meaningful within its place of origin, far from the display cases where it is sometimes exhibited. In doing so, I have sought to philosophically contextualize and situate this modest art: the use of the yam knife, which belongs both to the realm of everyday gestures and to a society whose culture has long been deemed worthless.

The everyday life, in fact, always contains both the extraordinary and the banal, the symbolic and the material. It is always, in a sense, ritualized. A rite – an enacted rule and a re-enactment of a myth – demands certain gestures and requires specific instruments. Such is the case with circumcision, in particular. In New Caledonia, "It has been discovered [. . .] that the circumcision ritual, marking the transition from youth to manhood, is still practiced in its purest tradition" (our translation), as Emmanuel Kasarhérou states.[1] This transition to adulthood takes place with a specific knife – the yam and circumcision knife. One might find the association between the yam and circumcision surprising, but only if unaware that Kanak culture has been defined as that of the yam.[2] There are different varieties of this tuber: some are more commonplace, others sacred, and known as chief yams.

Everyday life thus encompasses a plurality of practices and customs which, in Kanak society, inevitably refer to the cultivation, consumption, and reverence of the yam as a representation of the masculine; the feminine, meanwhile, is symbolized by the taro. Moreover, genealogy is inscribed in plant life, since the

1 Cited in "Les Kanaks courent contre le temps pour mettre à l'abri leur patrimoine", *Le Figaro*, June 27, 2006, accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2006/06/27/01003-20060627ARTWWW90322-les_kanaks_courent_contre_le_temps_pour_mettre_a_labri_leur_patrimoine.php.

2 André Haudricourt, "Nature et culture dans la civilisation de l'igname: l'origine des clones et des clans," *L'Homme, Revue française d'anthropologie* 4, 1 (1964), 93–104.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-007

uniqueness of the yam lies in its replanting through cloning, so that today's vegetable is, in effect, the same as the yam cultivated and consumed eight generations ago. The integration of genealogy and gender into everyday life on the one hand, and into plant life on the other, forms a symbolic structure that spotlights the tool created for offerings and the sacrifices intended to foster group cohesion.

Separating a man from his mother and inducting him into the world of men while simultaneously rooting individuals in their ancestry requires a specific tool, a tool that is distinct from the ordinary kitchen knife. In Kanak society, what was once called "habits and customs" or "mores" – now considered by certain anthropologists as more "culture" than custom, sensitive not only to the vocabulary's polyphony but also to conceptual precision – is now known as "customary ceremonies". The "customary ceremony" is a public act, a moment of both material and discursive exchange, where the yam is always present amongst the offerings. To bind and unite, to elevate and celebrate constitutes the very essence of these intense social manifestations.[3]

One might say, as the poet puts it, that the cut imparts a new (or purer) meaning to the words of the tribe. It acts as an operator of metamorphosis. During the cooking of the yam, steam rises upward, moving toward the ancestral, binding absence and presence, past and present. In this universe, the aura, as Walter Benjamin defined it, has not disappeared.

> What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye-while resting on a summer afternoon-a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.[4]

Thus, the aura defines a unique mode of existence for the work of art and is inseparable from its ritual function.

This is precisely the case for the knife in question. It is, indeed, a ceremonial instrument, not for everyday use or just anything. It is dedicated to the dual ritual function from which it derives its value. It is not intended for display. And yet, today, it can be seen in auction catalogs or in museum display cases, purchased and/or admired. Through its movement and transfer into spaces and locations detached from its place of creation, exhibition value has overtaken ritual value. It has been defunctionalized, its displayability now determining its price. Further-

3 Julia Ogier-Guindo, "Le pays invisible, Représentations de la mort dans les discours cérémoniels kanak (Nouvelle-Calédonie)," *Cahiers de littérature orale "Paroles de jeu, paroles de crise"* 69 (2011), 79–106.

4 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2008), 24.

more, no transitional zone exists between its place of origin and its current geographical location.

Yet, symbolic geography contributes to giving the object its full significance. The instrument that isolates newly circumcised youths from their peers for several months, just as it singles out certain yams from others, might come from the sea. In our lands, one might note that before becoming a technical object, it may have been a "natural" object. The shell of the pearl oyster, for instance, can serve as a yam knife (see Fig. 8). Sotheby's has an example on offer on its sales website.[5]

Fig. 8: Judith Lorne, Scientific Illustration, *Yam Knife*, Kanak, New Caledonia, Melanesia.

Currently, on Etsy, a "ritual knife for cutting yams made from marine bone" is listed for sale. It is described as "flat with dotted incisions and sculpted cutouts to stylize the object. Featuring a blade with a rounded tip, a finer rounded handle, and a pommel with opposing triangles [. . .] Originating from New Caledonia, of the Kanak people, this particularly stylized type of instrument, generally made of wood, was used to slice yams during important ceremonies, such as the '*prémices des ignames*' (new yam season or *saison de l'igname nouvelle* in French) or the '*prise d'habit*', a ritual during which knives served both to cut yams and to circumcise young men. This latter ceremony highlights the Kanak belief that an essential unity links men and yams" (see Fig. 9).[6]

Could this object be a fake?

Wooden models are also found, sculpted and engraved with varying degrees of detail, and whose geometry sometimes includes characteristic "wings", the

5 Accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/extra-objets-rares-et-singuliers-extra-europeens/couteau-a-igname-kanak-nouvelle-caledonie.

6 Accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.etsy.com/fr/listing/1218578734/couteau-a-ignames-en-os-marin-ethnie.

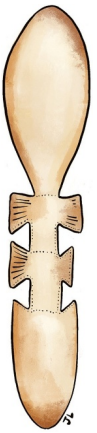

Fig. 9: Judith Lorne, Scientific Illustration, *Ritual Knife for Cutting Yams*.

quantity varying from piece to piece. In a sense, the Kanak knife is not a knife, just as Kanak currency is not mere conventional currency. It is imbued with meaning beyond that of a mere kitchen utensil. It is part of the arts of the everyday, whose functionality is neither alpha nor omega. In other words, it belongs to what we now call design, which in the past might have come under the "folk" arts heading or, in other instances, "primitive" and latterly, "first" arts. These categories reveal more about those who create them than about the objects or practices they attempt to define.

In the mid-19th century, as France took possession of New Caledonia, metal began to replace stone or wood, yet the symbolic value of knives, axes, or 'war clubs' did not vanish during this profound transformation. The apparently innocuous nature of certain pieces conceals from outsiders their decisive role within systems the Kanak, like many others, employ in social relations, in reinforcing certain bonds, or during mourning ceremonies. Thus, the two major symbolic distinctions – between men and women, the living and the dead – permeate both artifacts and actions. Abroad, these artifacts became objects of curiosity linked to exhibitions, "'human zoos" (see "Zoo")' that showcased "savages" or "Kanak" in an attempt to illustrate the colonial image.

Thus emerges the "Occidental" paradox of displaying: today, the symbols of former "savagery" as representations of the cultural history of populations we now call Indigenous. These people were dispossessed of their land, their history, and their culture under a regime of racial inferiority, humiliation, and relegation. We must remember that many Kanak objects were created by people who had been confined to reserves. The context of creation reflects, in the Kanak yam knife as in other works – the currency skirts, rooftop arrows, carvings decorating the great hut's entrance, mourner masks, etc. – a cultural resilience that enabled

survival in the face of imported diseases, and enduring strength under widespread oppression. In New Caledonia, these traces, these remnants, these works stand as testimonies of a fractured history, where "history" itself was largely reserved for Europeans as if it were a white privilege.

A systematic inventory of dispersed Kanak heritage was initiated in 1979 by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and initially entrusted to Roger Boulay, a mission officer in the French museum directorate and a specialist in Kanak collections.[7] The exhibition "De jade et de nacre" ("Of Jade and Mother-of-Pearl" in English), first shown in 1990 in New Caledonia and then in France, was the inaugural step. Emmanuel Kasarhérou, then curator of the Museum of New Caledonia, contributed to this initial inventory. In 2011, he was then tasked with conducting a revised inventory, focusing on the most significant pieces – some items existed in large quantities within collections or were damaged, for example. Opening in 2013, the exhibition "Kanak. L'art est une parole" ("Kanak: Art is a Voice" in English) brought together 350 objects and documents from a wide range of museums and was the first public outcome of this effort.

Roger Boulay observed how neglected this heritage had been:

> I noticed at the time that the forgetfulness in which these collections were held was such that the scant information I had been able to gather, perhaps clumsily certainly, suggested that Boulogne held only about twenty pieces . . . during the inventory 370 were revealed, piled up in makeshift crates deposited in a store open to all the winds of Boulonnais! Research on the history of the collection was also very rich.[8]

This demonstrates that interest in Kanak artifacts constitutes interest in the Kanak people themselves through their artistic productions. This signals a shift, allowing art history to expand its scope and include the various art histories from beyond the Western world within a disciplinary canon that had previously excluded them.

Sally Price was one of the first to develop the "*artworld* concept", along with Arthur Danto, who actually coined it. Deconstructing what Price calls the "mystique of the connoisseur", critiquing the profound asymmetry concealed by the principle of universality, and revealing the fascination with the darker side of humanity in its magical-religious aspects, she notes how anonymity and timelessness mark "primitive" artists.[9] Indeed, like everyone else, I do not know who

7 Roger Boulay, "L'inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé," *La lettre de l'OCIM* 196 (2021), 50–55.

8 Roger Boulay, *Inventory*, text featured on the French Ministry of Culture website, in the section Directory of French Public Collections of Oceanian Objects, 2007, accessed January, 16, 2025, https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematic/Museums/Les-musees-en-France/Collections-of-museums-in-France/Discover-the-collections/directory-of-french-public-collections-of-oceanian-objects.

9 Sally Price, *Arts primitifs, regards civilisés* (Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris, 2012).

crafted the yam knives discussed in this article. Nor do I know the date of their creation. The fetishization of the proper name and the obsession with dating are specific anthropological data that are not universal. Thus, art became a label that the Western world applied to certain objects only after their artistic value had been denied. This is but one of the paradoxes that yam knives invite us to contemplate.

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Chonja Lee

F
Fragments

Printed Cotton Fabrics, Their Images and (Dis)connected Fragments

Objects arriving from abroad are, at times, cut up to facilitate their transport and integration into collections. Sampling emerges as one of the tools for producing and disseminating naturalist knowledge, enabling the circulation of specimens within an international network and, for example, the creation of herbariums. This fragmentation contributes to the partial destruction of objects and specimens, which begins the moment they are removed from their original context.[1] Fabrics collected in the 18th century during the so-called exploration voyages, such as many Oceanic tapas made from beaten plant fibers, were also coveted and cut into pieces for exchange and wider dissemination.

Beyond this practice, rooted in scientific and colonial networks and methods, the word sample or swatch also refers to a small piece of fabric, canvas, or other item utilized to represent the entire piece or merchandise. Numerous books of designs and samples of printed cotton textiles, known as *indiennes*, circulated in the 18th and 19th centuries for communication between manufacturers and merchants. The *indiennes* or chintzes, how they were called in English originating from a technique developed in India, were also produced in Europe, among other places, for the West African market (see "Industry"). In the 18th century, textiles were the main commodity in exchange for enslaved individuals, with cotton accounting for 40 to 50% of all goods exchanged towards Africa.[2]

Although Switzerland did not have national colonies, Swiss individuals were involved in colonial projects and participated in human trade, either through loans or direct trade.[3] Swiss manufacturers themselves became exporters of

1 Noémie Étienne, Claire Brizon, Chonja Lee and Étienne Wismer, eds., *Exotic Switzerland? Looking Outward in the Age of Enlightenment* (Berlin/Zürich: Diaphanes, 2020).

2 Colette Establet, *Répertoire des tissus indiens importés en France entre 1687 et 1769* (Aix-en-Provence: IREMAM, 2017), 33 and Prasannan Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello, "From India to the World. Cotton and Fashionability," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

3 Béatrice Veyrassat, *Histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses dans la marche du monde, XVII^e siècle – Première Guerre mondiale. Espace – Circulations – Échanges* (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2018), 129–158, 187–208; Thomas David, Bouda Etemad and Janick Marina Schaufelbühl, *Schwarze Geschäfte. Die Beteiligung von Schweizern an Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Zürich:

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-008

printed textiles, which had been produced either within the Confederation or in subsidiaries located in other European territories, particularly France, to West Africa. By the mid-18th century, as trade with Africa intensified to resupply Central and South America with enslaved people, the European material culture grew in Africa, especially in the palaces of the ruling elite and amongst the wealthier segments of society.[4] Samples were frequently attached to documents written by Europeans regarding the ongoing negotiation process between European producers and merchants and African brokers, as buyers of European fabrics in West Africa. By examining the material and textile culture associated with slavery, we shed light on both Indian and European producers, as well as African consumers.[5] In the travel account of a trader of enslaved people from Saint-Malo, published in 1801, an engraving shows one of these trading partners, Tati, rushing in a carried hammock toward the ships arriving in Malembe Bay at the mouth of the Congo River, his porters dressed in chintzes of probably European origin.

Communication Through and With Textiles

Fabric samples and pattern swatches attached to letters and model books facilitated communication between manufacturers, merchants, and intermediaries, playing a central role in assessing market preferences and controlling supply within the global chintz trade.[6] Communication thus occurred indirectly, with the actors involved being (dis)connected, as interactions among consumers, buyers,

Limmat Verlag, 2005); Niklaus Stettler, Peter Haenger and Robert Labhardt, *Baumwolle, Sklaven und Kredite. Die Basler Welthandelsfirma Christoph Burckhardt & Cie. in revolutionärer Zeit (1789–1815)* (Basel: Merian, 2004).

4 Roberto Zaugg, "Le crachoir chinois du roi. Marchandises globales, culture de cour et vodun dans les royaumes de Hueda et Dahomey (XVIIe–XIXe siècle)," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73, ed. Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, Microhistoire et histoire globale (2018), 125.

5 Pedro Machado, *Ocean of Trade. South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 120–167; Kazuo Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa. African Agency, Consumer Demand and the Making of the Global Economy, 1750–1850* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2019), 10; Pedro Machado, "Cloths of a New Fashion. Networks of Exchange, African Consumerism and Cloth Zones of Contact in India and the Indian Ocean in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *How India Clothed the World. The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500–1850*, ed. Tirthankar Roy, and Giorgio Riello (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 53–84; Carolyn Keyes, "West African Textiles. 1500–1800," in *Textiles. Production, Trade and Demand*, ed. Maureen Fennel Mazzaoui (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 251–61.

6 Gabi Schopf, "Selling through Samples? The Role of Objects in Merchant Communication," in *Cotton in Context. Manufacturing, Marketing, and Consuming Textiles in the German-speaking*

sellers, and manufacturers took place within a vast contact and conflict zone. The intertwined objects and their histories also reflect processes of globalization, such as in the trade of chintzes, signaling both a lack of connection yet interdependence. From this perspective, objects can also become symbolic of ruptures, absences, and detours. Rather than a dichotomy, the connection and disconnection mutually form a relationship of (dis)connectivity.[7]

A swatch book containing fabric samples, designs, and printed *indiennes* patterns traveled aboard the slave ship *La Seine* to the trading ports of present-day Angola in 1788, thus documenting the Swiss and Dutch textiles that were exchanged for 400 enslaved individuals.[8] An accompanying letter explains that the textile samples contained were suitable for the trade with enslaved people and lists the price and quantities of these same textiles (see Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Undocumented author, Sample book from the slave ship *La Seine*, 1788, Provenance: Armement Lacoudrais père et fils aîné, Musées du Vieux Honfleur, Inventory Number VH 39.2091.

World (1500–1900), ed. Kim Siebenhüner, John Jordan and Gabi Schopf (Wien/Köln/Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), 245–366.

7 Burcu Dogramaci, Hanni Geiger and Änne Söll, "Dis:connected Objects," *Static. Thoughts and Research from Global Dis:connect* 2, 1 (2023), 5–6.

8 David, Etemad and Schaufelbühl, *Schwarze Geschäfte*, 22; Jonas Lenzburg und Luanda Bürgi, "Aargauer Geschichte als Globalgeschichte lesen," *Argovia. Jahresschrift der Historischen Gesellschaft des Kantons Aargau* 133 (2021), 69–72. Exploitation register of the ship "La Seine [. . .] allant à Angole faire la traite des Noirs pour les porter à Saint-Domingue," Les Archives du Calvados, Caen, F/5851.

The textiles traded most frequently with West Africa were plaid or striped; in 18th-century France, striped fabrics were associated with foreign taste and exoticism, symbolizing in a fluid way Chinese, Turkish, or African styles.[9] Beyond the fabric samples, there are 131 printed patterns, mostly consisting of geometric and floral ornaments, sometimes accompanied by European figures. One pattern, likely to have made a detour through West Africa, depicts a Bernese bear, the heraldic animal of the Swiss capital, which was 'exoticized' by the addition of a monkey; it appears to have been repurposed from production intended for the Swiss market.

Swiss indienne manufacturers' advertisements and letters lead us to the conclusion that textiles intended for the West African market were sometimes specifically produced to "satisfy Black tastes",[10] as described in an 1803 circular from the Favre-Petitpierre factory. African buyers' preferences regarding fabric quality, color schemes, and images varied locally, and European manufacturers endeavored to meet fashion demands to enhance commercial success. For this reason, they occasionally developed patterns specially for the African market. The creations preserved in the surviving fabrics, sample books, and design books offer insights into image manufacture not only "of the Other" but also "for the Other" – where these superficially decorative patterns often conceal stereotypes.

Communication is not limited to samples; the designs of fabrics intended for trade in exchange for enslaved people can themselves be conceived of as communicative entities, with abstract ornaments and colors carrying specific meanings.[11] In various West African cultures, abstract geometric motifs were woven into or printed onto indigenous textiles, playing a prominent role in religious and political order. These abstract motifs, composed of stripes, diamonds, crosses, interwoven bands, concentric circles, spirals, triangles, crescents, and dots, were imbued

9 Coleen E. Krieger, "Guinea Cloth. Production and Consumption of Cotton Textiles in West Africa before and during the Atlantic Slave Trade," in *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*, ed. Giorgio Riello (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 120; Colette Establet, *Répertoire des tissus indiens importés en France entre 1687 et 1769* (Aix-en-Provence: IREMAM, 2017). I thank Mei Mei Rado for bringing to my attention this perception of striped patterns in fashion as an exotic and sometimes explicitly African motif.

10 Niklaus Stettler, Peter Haenger and Robert Labhardt, *Baumwolle, Sklaven und Kredite. Die Basler Welthandelsfirma Christoph Burckhardt & Cie. in revolutionärer Zeit (1789–1815)* (Basel: Merian, 2004), 138.

11 Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion. A Study of Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: Epworth Press, 1969 [1949]), 11, 50–59, 172–75; Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa. The Majesty of Form* (London: Calmann & King, 1998), 58–59, 74; Céline Cousquer, *Nantes. Une capitale française des indiennes au XVIII^e siècle* (Nantes: Coiffard Librairie, 2002), 114.

with specific symbolism.[12] Their function extended beyond simple decoration; they formed a language of ornamentation in that they could be read as a map, as a record of their creators, as specific symbols, or as reflections of political events, and they often constituted a form of currency. Beyond figurative or ornamental iconography, 18th-century travel literature notes specific preferences for red and black in the markets, a color palette consistent with the prints in the *La Seine* sample book.[13] Adaptation to the market can be seen throughout *indiennerie* history. In the 16th century, for instance, Indian artisans produced specific designs for consumers in Sulawesi, Japan, Armenia, and Europe.

However, the ornamental semantics of textiles as a means of social communication is dubious: European manufacturers were likely unaware of the actual meaning behind what they were designing, and West African consumers probably did not share the same image connotations as the creators of the designs.

(Dis)connected Samples

The concept of (dis)connectivity is also relevant at a meta-discursive level: very few European textiles destined for the 18th century West African market have been preserved. Research on this topic requires methodological detours due to the scarcity of material and its (dis)connectivity – a common issue when studying the history of subaltern subjects, particularly those who were enslaved, and the material culture associated with them.[14] The fact that most of the sources regarding the transatlantic trade were produced and accumulated by Europeans renders them highly biased. Almost no large fabric pieces or garments from 18th- and early 19th-century *indiennes* used for trade with enslaved humans have been preserved. The primary sources are exceedingly rare fragments of textiles, fabric samples attached to merchants' letters, pattern books with designs for chintzes intended for slave trade, and depictions of African consumers in travel literature. However, fabric did play – and continues to play – a fundamental role in religious imagery and temples in

12 Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa*, 58–59, 74, 155, 193–96, 216, 231–33, 242–46; Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion. Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 153; Cousquer, *Nantes. Une capitale française des indiennes au XVIII^e siècle*, 153–55.

13 Mr. C*** [i.e., CHÂTELAIN Henri Abraham?], *Atlas historique ou nouvelle introduction à l'histoire, à la chronologie & à la géographie ancienne et moderne*, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: Frères Châtelain, 1719), 66–67.

14 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, 26 (2008), 1–14.

West Africa.[15] The surviving chintzes intended for trade with enslaved humans can, therefore, be contextualized by examining West African sculptures and art objects from the period, sometimes adorned with fabric remnants, which may represent imported chintzes. This may well be the case, for instance, with the *Nkisi* power figure acquired during a German expedition to the Loango coast in 1875 (see Fig. 11).

Fig. 11: Undocumented Bakongo author, *Nkisi* (power figure), mid–19th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, wood, textile, glass, 25 × 15.5 × 12.5 cm, Provenance: acquired by Fritz Klingelhöfer in the Cabinda province in 1875 during the German expedition to the Loango coast (1873–1875), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Inventory Number III C 330.

When textiles were traded for human beings in West African "cloth currency" zones,[16] both were treated as equivalent commodities, with the market price of an enslaved person being denoted in printed cotton textiles.[17] Textiles and enslaved individuals thus became closely connected, even synonymous, as in the port city of Nantes, for example, where enslaved people were referred to as "*indiennes*".[18] Igor Kopytoff described the equivalency of value within commodity

15 Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion. A Study of Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: Epworth Press, 1969 [1949]), 63–67.

16 Richard Roberts, "Guinée Cloth. Linked Transformations in Production within France's Empire in the Nineteenth Century," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 128, 32 (1992), 598.

17 Henry-René D'Allemagne, *La Toile imprimée et les indiennes de traite*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gründ, 1942), 160.

18 I thank Krystel Gualde for this information.

spheres and how individuals are stripped of their identity in the social process of enslavement and transformed into merchandise.[19] We can imagine the immense, dehumanizing depreciation the commodification and valuation of an enslaved person in terms of pieces of fabric would cause. Did this process also change what the fabric itself represents? Bits of fabric and prints often constitute the only material evidence of the chintzes used in this trade and are among the few material sources regarding slavery. Sadiya Hartman has addressed the problematic nature of archives on enslaved individuals, their anonymity, and how they were erased from history. Scraps and samples of fabric do not overcome this anonymity; as monstrous equivalents of enslaved people, they leave but a trace of the erased bodies within material history – the fabrics for which they were traded clothed the local African population, while their bodies were sent to America, stripped of their clothing.

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19 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things. Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65, 71.

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Francisco Xavier Valenzuela Kat

G
Gold

Longing for Radiance: Ana Hernandez's Artwork As Reflection and Continuation of Communitarian Practices

Ana Hernandez is an artist from the Tehuantepec isthmus region, located in the state of Oaxaca, México. She was born and raised in Tehuantepec and currently she works between Oaxaca city and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where her artistic practice revolves around memory, migration and the value of communal knowledge production through artistic craft and practice, working with traditional embroidery and filigree goldsmith (see Fig. 12).

Fig. 12: Ana Hernández, Jicapextle covered with gold leaves. Part of *Doo Yachi* Exhibition.

For the artist, is of vital importance the relation of her work and creative processes with her own identity as a zapotec woman from the Tehuantepec isthmus, where she does not make a division between herself as artist and woman, as wife and the roles she performs for being part of her community and as a form of responsibility that continues communal life.

The belonging to the Zapotec group has caused Hernandez's artwork to be catalogued as Indigenous art. This category, she says, became a boom and is used as a token for inclusivity in museums and other *apparatuses* that name and categorized what art is, as Agamben describes it:

> What I'm trying to single out with this term is, first and foremost, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions-in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these ele-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-009

> ments [. . .] by the term "apparatus" I mean a kind of a formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency. The apparatus therefore has a dominant strategic function [. . .] I said that the nature of an apparatus is essentially strategic, which means that we are speaking about a certain manipulation of relations of forces, of a rational and concrete intervention in the relations of forces, either so as to develop them in a particular direction, or to block them, to stabilize them, and to utilize them. The apparatus is thus always inscribed into a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain limits of knowledge that arise from it and, to an equal degree, condition it. The apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge.[1]

"I didn't know I was an indigenous artist until I was named like that, my art is as universal as any other art, not because of my clothing I am Indigenous" Hernandez explains. "For contemporary art right now, there is a need to have everything handmade and that it has connection to some root. This is appropriation." To this distinction we can add the one between artist and artisan, the individual genius versus the collective production.

Hernandez explains she experienced the migration of her mother to United States of America in search of better opportunities for her family when she was very young, she sees migration as a form of social bleeding that drains the community from it's many cultural forms, practices and knowledges, as the people who perform the actions and hold the know-hows and know-whens of ritual life and crafts, are forced to leave the community.

In this context there are different forms in which community has persistence through time. For the women in the isthmus of Tehuantepec, the clothing has a memorial function, as the *huipiles*, an embroidered blouse with flower motifs, and the *enaguas*, an embroidered ruffled skirt, become symbols of the family members, a collection growing as they are being transmitted from generation to generation. Traditionally, in the Zapotec families of the isthmus, when a woman gets engaged, she receives an inheritance, this inheritance is comprised by a trunk of dresses that could have belonged to older relatives as well as a portion of the golden jewellery that has belonged to the family for generations. The newly wed receives a necklace, or a ring or a bracelet that was passed from the grandmother to the mother and to the daughter, and so on. The intention of the transmission of the jewellery were two: the first is that it has the function of an investment, in case the new family is going through an economic hardship the woman could sell part of the inheritance to regain financial stability; the second intention was that the jewellery she received were to be made bigger by adding chain sections of gold or coins, this addition of value was made through hard work and would reflect on the wealth acquisition of the new family.

1 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

The importance of the golden jewellery and gold itself in the isthmus is that it is a vital part of the religious festivities, which are a syncretism between Catholic and Indigenous practices, usually celebrated the day of the saint patron from each neighbourhood or town. For Hernandez, "Gold is important in the isthmus not because it's a thing of economic value but because it has a meaning of purity" It's common for some women to embroider a new *huipil* every year, that they will use in the main festivity. The *huipiles* are highly ornamented with flowers or different pattern styles, the *enaguas* are prepared and to finish the adorn, the *resplandor* is ironed and starched and a rich variety of gold jewellery is displayed; earrings, bracelets, necklaces, chains, among other kinds.

What Hernandez is interested in emphasizing is the network of relations that these practices generate; the festivity congregates the community in different acts of communion to celebrate the saint patron; food is cooked and served, music is played and mostly the women are the ones that dance, their colourful presence is bright with the gold they carry. Not only is the festivity productive, but during the year it fuels the work, organization, and preparation for the celebration. The aim is not the celebration per se, but the whole process of preparation, a radiance that takes its time to bloom, sustained by the rituality of its practice and time and the specificity of its locality. It makes work a relational creative practice that not only recognizes humans but also non-human entities that dwell in this territory, their influence, and a form of calling for aid or intervention on the community life and needs.

The celebration then it's a splendorous expression that unfolds in a specific time and location, in a cyclical pattern the festivity used to organize life. Nowadays the practice has changed. Hernandez recalls how people lost their gold, the jewellery whose value resided in the density of its historicity carried on by the women of the families, by the work of the goldsmiths, of the weavers, of the man that fishes, and the *muxhes* that decorate. The radiance of the festivity does not only emerge from the gold carried, but from the communion, the interaction and organization to celebrate, what Mauss (1950) would call the "voluntary-obligatory exchange"[2] that the figures of the *xhuanas* represent by taking the responsibility of the festivity's organization.

Because of the marginalization of the region and the attack to Indigenous identity made by the Mexican state during the 19th century, especially against Indigenous languages and autonomy, many people were forced to pawn their gold

2 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies,* trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen and West, 1954).

and slowly the community was dispossessed from their history. For Ana this was an invasion,

> How do you arrive in a town without jobs, where people had no knowledge of pawn tickets and, they (the pawnshops) would give you the minimum for the value (of the jewellery), they only paid the carat value. It didn't matter the quality of the goldsmith's work, the only thing that mattered was the gold's value. And thus, people lost almost everything, it was when they stole our gold, they also stole our history, our culture.[3]

The process of dispossession repeats, the artist mentions that now the traditional dresses are being stolen and they are being categorized as fashion. "Many designers came, people went to the isthmus, they would announce in the speakers searching for antique dresses, and they bought them for nothing . . . it's worrying because the pattern of the gold is being repeated". The importance of the clothes for Hernandez is made explicit when she says that "when I wear my clothes it's not only about me or a political position but is something I search that it replicates because our clothes are our identity".

In the state of Oaxaca the gold pattern is being repeated at a much larger scale and with unforeseen ecological impacts. Just 250 km from Tehuantepec Isthmus we can find the mining project "San José" in the municipality of San José del Progreso, Oaxaca. In 2020 it produced 1,0718 tons of gold.[4] The owner of the venture is a Canadian company, Fortuna Silver Mines, whom from 2016 to 2019 sold its concentrate production to different companies most of them based in Switzerland such as "Trafigura (2016) a worldwide giant of the raw materials and food commerce, the company Glencore-Xstrata (2016) and Clivenden Trading AG among other Swiss owned corporations."[5] The differences between the extractive practices and the relations to population, territory, land, and gold are immense.

The mining companies take the gold and its surplus without giving back to the communities that are being dispossessed from water, air, land, and health. Hernandez recalls how her mother had to leave because she lost her gold to the pawn shop. But she also remembers her mother prior to the festivities opening a hole in the earth where she would hide her jewellery in a clay pot, it was the cus-

3 Castillo Mariana Hernández, *El oro de Ana Hernández: Doo Yachi y el arte en istmeño*, August 28, 2021, accessed March, 27, 2025, https://marviajaycome.com/cultura/el-oro-de-ana-hernandez-doo-yachi/.

4 Servicios para una Educación Alternativa [EDUCA]. *Proyecto minero San José. Informe sobre violación de derechos humanos en comunidades de Ocotlán, Ejutla y Tlacolula*, 2022, accessed March, 27, 2025, https://www.educaoaxaca.org/proyecto-minero-san-jose-informe-sobre-violacion-de-derechos-humanos-en-comunidades-de-ocotlan-ejutla-y-tlacolula-oaxaca/. 53.

5 EDUCA (2022), 55.

tom to bring back the gold to the ground, as a form of safety but also as a metaphor of the respect to the gold and to the earth.

The gradual loss of cultural elements, practices, jobs and knowledge is the guiding thread in Ana Hernandez's work with gold and people who hold the knowledge of traditional creative practices. Her work with the traditional technique of *estarcido* plaques, is a search to turn on the images again with the light boxes, just as the gold irradiates light, this connection with the process of bringing memory to the present as a way to say "what I do is to take the image out and bring it back to life, turning the light on, the memory that the light rises and the sun rises again . . . to turn it on again, just like the embers turn off but they can be turned on again" As Hernandez says "I like to work with people . . . at some point I knew my root was like that thread that is worn, in that moment I knew I had to rivet it, take care of it, to mend it. I think art to me, and to the people we have been in contact with, art does not change you, what art does is value your work. It gives strength. It's a medium of strength".

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Marie-Charlotte Franco

H
Hybridity

The Porosity of Indigenous Artistic Practices

According to the dictionary of the *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*, the term "hybridity" refers to the concept of mixing, of borrowing from various origins.[1] The term "porosity" might be considered synonymous, though a subtle difference remains between the two. In the definition given by the same dictionary, drawn from the field of physics, it is described as "the property of a body that exhibits interstices between its molecules" (our translation).[2] The idea of tiny, empty spaces to be filled is particularly fruitful when considering the decolonization of the arts through Indigenous cultural productions. In this entry, I propose to return to the hybridity of practices in Indigenous arts, which disrupts the artistic and historical categories established by Western canons that are promoted by the fine arts and art history. I will also discuss the temporal blurring that occurs when Western and Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies intersect. Linear and circular temporalities intertwine, creating a unique, hybrid relationship with time within relational spaces.

Museums are heirs to the Enlightenment and the development of scientific disciplines, including anthropology and the natural sciences. From the first cabinets of curiosities, Western collectors demonstrated a need to classify natural specimens, artifacts, and artworks into distinct categories based on epistemologies grounded in specific times.[3] Since the 15th century, Indigenous cultural productions have been extensively documented and interpreted through these museum nomenclatures. These categories evolved with the development of anthropology in the 19th century and the refinement of Western aesthetic canons, which are still largely influenced by Kantian and Hegelian ideas regarding artistic genius, the purpose of the work, and the aesthetics of art.[4] In other words, Western scholars, collectors, and researchers have long categorized Indigenous objects according to their own

1 Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales, "hybridité", accessed April 24, 2023, https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/hybride.

2 CNRTL, "porosity".

3 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); Eilian Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992).

4 Ruth B. Phillips, "L'Ancien et le Nouveau Monde: aboriginalité et historicité de l'art au Canada," *Perspective* 3 (2008), 535–550; Jean-Philippe Uzel, "Faire, défaire, refaire: la décolonisation chez Nadia Myre," *Spirale* 260 (2017), 15–26.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-010

worldviews and disciplinary, scientific, and museological needs. These artifacts thus oscillated – and sometimes still oscillate – between categories like fine art/anthropology and art/craft, depending on who created them, who collected them, and the discourse derived from research and institutional custodianship. This perception of art and culture, modeled by James Clifford in 1988, helps us better understand how these categories permitted museums, collectors, and even creators to judge the authenticity of objects, even when the authenticity itself was the product of a system where categories are porous, and objects can shift from one pole to another, depending on the characteristics emphasized or sought-after. A diversified semantic framework exists, enabling the same cultural productions to be designated according to a specific spatiotemporal context. Thus, the same object may be considered to be a work of art or an artifact depending on the creator, place of production, host institution, and other potential intermediaries. Indigenous cultural productions drew the attention of anthropologists well before that of art historians. Constrained by their materiality and utilitarian function, acknowledgment of the techniques, formal aspects, and plasticity required for these productions had long been denied, as was their creators' status as professional artists.[5] However, they contribute to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and the deconstruction of Western canons through the use of alternative aesthetic codes.

Since the advent of the New Art History in the late 1980s, perspectives falling outside Western canons have become possible. These include intellectual hybridities and liminal practices that transcend previously established boundaries. Microhistories, personal narratives, and open perspectives offer a way out of the art-culture system theorized by Clifford. In particular, New Art History advocates for the concept of visual culture, a much more inclusive term that can encompass both sculptures, paintings, as well as covers and carved boxes. The definition of visual arts thus makes it possible to incorporate Indigenous artistic expressions which were previously excluded by the Western art world or sporadically included, depending on context. Sociologist Guy Bellavance interprets it thus:

> Currently, the concept of the visual arts serves on the one hand as an umbrella term for those "longstanding" art forms that formerly made up the world of the fine arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and engraving, as well as a significant proportion of fine craft and architecture. On the other hand, the new concept henceforth includes a set of emerging practices that cannot be adequately circumscribed, either by the old concept of the fine arts or by the more recent notion of the plastic arts: photography, video, computer and digital media, and

5 France Trépanier and Mylène Guay, "N'tagam8bna maalhakws – Nous (exclusif) frappons le frêne noir. Enjeux dans les milieux culturels autochtones francophones au Québec," in *D'horizons et d'estuaires. Entre mémoires et créations autochtones*, ed. Camille Larivée and Léuli Eshrāghi (Montréal: Éditions Somme toute, 2020), 63.

> other, new art forms such as installation, performance and various forms public or community art.[6]

From an Indigenous perspective, the Western dichotomy is not an effective means of understanding cultural production, from ideation to creation, including symbolism and the vital relational networks necessary for its creation. Hybrid practices, conceptions, and formal aspects are therefore highly valued by Indigenous artists, who see within them the active grounding of community histories and memories, both in contemporary art and museum contexts. Based on a circular conception of time, these practices involve the continuity and evolution of motifs, materials, and stories in artistic and cultural productions, engaging creations in a profoundly intimate and intellectual way that museums would struggle to convey. As noted by France Trépanier, artist, curator, and researcher of Kanien'kehá[7] and French descent, and Mylène Guay, cultural worker, curator, and author of W8banaki and Acadian descent:[8]

> [s]ometimes we hear that there are no words for art in Indigenous languages. In fact, there are many words for art in different ancestral languages. These words do not easily translate the concept of art as it is understood from a European perspective. Rather, Indigenous words reflect process, movement, and experience. Consequently, Indigenous arts occupy the full spectrum of practices – sacred and ritual, customary and contemporary.[9] (our translation)

Through the wholeness and the intertwining of interstices that are sometimes Western and sometimes Indigenous, Indigenous productions, lying at the boundary between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary art theory, support a decolonial vision of the arts and their interpretation.

In 2016, Anishinaabeg artist Nadia Myre, from the Kitigan Zibi community in Quebec, presented the results of a residency within the collections of the McCord-

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6 Guy Bellavance, *The Visual Arts in Canada: A Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Recent Research* (Québec: Institut national de la recherche scientifique, 2012), 3.

7 The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, also known as the Mohawk, is an Indigenous nation from eastern North America. Their territories are located in what is now Canada, in Ontario and Quebec, as well as in the United States.

8 The W8banaki Nation, or Abenaki, is an Indigenous nation whose territory is located in present-day Quebec, near the city of Trois-Rivières. Several other Abenaki communities live in the northeastern United States. The Acadians, on the other hand, form a distinct cultural group. They are the descendants of the first settlers who established themselves in Acadia during the time of New France and are characterized by their use of French, both as a language and as a heritage. They currently live in Canada's Atlantic provinces, in Quebec, as well as in the state of Maine in the United States.

9 Trépanier and Guay, "N'tagam8bna maalhakws – Nous (exclusif) frappons le frêne noir."

Stewart Museum (Tiohtiá:ke/Mooniyang/Montreal). Entitled *Decolonial Gesture Refaire le chemin or Doing it Wrong?*, the exhibition displayed various Indigenous artifacts from the museum's collection, along with photographs and paintings depicting Indigenous peoples creating or selling objects, 19th-century women's magazines, and photographs of Victorian bourgeois interiors decorated with Indigenous-made or inspired objects. Added to this was a long video projected on the floor, where viewers could watch Myre's hands creating objects[10] that were also displayed in the exhibition next to those from the McCord-Stewart collection (see Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: View of the exhibition *Decolonial Gesture Refaire le chemin or Doing it Wrong?*, Marilyn Aitken, McCord Stewart Museum, 2016.

Through an audio setup, visitors could listen to several curators reading aloud the pattern instructions for Indigenous-inspired objects that Myre was creating, without knowing the final result, size, or shape. The rupture in the transmission of traditional skills and the cultural disconnection experienced by communities was rendered visible – and audible – by this research and creation residency. By recreating various Indigenous-style objects based on Victorian patterns, Myre reclaimed ancestral knowledge and critiqued the Canadian assimilationist and genocidal policies which coincided with a time when Indigenous aesthetics were fashionable in 19th-century women's circles.

10 The projected images showed her hands beading, sewing, etc.

The *Decolonial Gesture Refaire le chemin or Doing it Wrong?* exhibition embodies both the process and the outcome of juxtaposing multiple hybridities. First, various epistemologies and temporalities confront each other within the same museum space. Victorian values, represented by bourgeois interiors richly decorated with objects that looked like Indigenous artifacts, can be juxtaposed with the Indigenous objects in the collection, both created at the same time, but under vastly different social and cultural conditions. The porosity of worlds and temporalities is also expressed in the continuity of forms, patterns, and the formal resemblance of objects, such as Myre's interpretation of a Victorian reinterpretation of Indigenous cultures. The works created for this exhibition oscillate between craft and contemporary art, and the very hybridity of the objects' and artist's status, somewhere between fine arts and anthropology, ultimately and inevitably blurs these categories to allow for new meanings to emerge, meanings closer to intimacy, memory, and transmission. The voices of the curators (non-Indigenous) intermingle with the artist's hands (Indigenous) producing an unexpected visual result that somehow seems to stem from a layering of intermediaries and potential interpretations.

Ultimately, through Myre's residency, porosity and hybridity both converge. Through needlework and craft practices traditionally reserved for women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous techniques and motifs delicately brush against each other. Nadia Myre's creations reveal the hybrid nature of the crafted objects, resulting from multiple interpretations, intentions, and historical and cultural contexts. The artist's gestures, guided solely by hearing, engage her in a decolonization of technical know-how and a renewed appreciation for the preciousness of materials where colonial history, through Victorian patterns, serves as both a powerful vehicle of artistic coercion, confined by externally imposed categories, to become an opportunity for the material rewriting of silenced artistic cultures.

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Helen Bieri Thomson

I
Industry

A Swiss Industry With Global Implications: Cotton

This article discusses the textile industry,[1] a term that encompasses all operations involved in transforming fibers into fabric. Production includes four major stages: preparation of the raw material (washing, combing), yarn production (spinning, twisting), creation of raw fabric (weaving, knitting), and finally, finishing processes, which cover various treatments (bleaching, dyeing, printing chintz, embroidery, for example).

In Switzerland, as in the rest of Europe, textile production was the first to be industrialized. This article focuses on Switzerland's cotton industry in the 18th century, one of the country's major *success stories*. What does this success consist of? Who benefits from it? And what is the flip side of this "medal"? These were some of the questions raised when planning an exhibition on the history of chintzes, presented at the Château de Prangins – Swiss National Museum, whereof I am the chief curator.[2] Chintzes are cotton fabrics that were painted, dyed, or printed and enjoyed phenomenal popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries. The exhibition aims to reveal a chapter of Swiss history, mostly unknown to the general public, while incorporating decolonized principles into the museum context.[3]

Cotton: A Local and Global Industry

After a few sporadic appearances in the 16th and 17th centuries, cotton took root in Switzerland, quickly becoming the "king of Swiss textiles".[4] This "cotton fever"[5]

1 Anne-Marie Dubler, "Industrie textile," *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS)*, 2014, accessed April 19, 2023, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/013957/2014-10-07/.

2 With the invaluable co-curating of Barbara Bühlmann and Matthieu Péry, scientific collaborators at Château de Prangins – Swiss National Museum.

3 See, for example, the guide provided by the British Museum Association, accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/#.

4 Jean-François Bergier, *Histoire économique de la Suisse* (Lausanne: Payot, 1984), 156.

5 Béatrice Veyrassat, *Négociants et fabricants dans l'industrie cotonnière suisse 1760–1840. Aux origines financières de l'industrialisation* (Lausanne: Payot, 1982), 17.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-011

swept through the country as the new fiber created numerous jobs, especially in rural areas, thus helping to combat poverty. Cotton was primarily introduced by Geneva merchants, who imported it from the Levant (Egypt, Syria). After passing through Genoa, Livorno, or Marseille, the bales reached the Rhône, from where they were sent to fairs in Zurzach, or directly delivered to entrepreneurs, especially in Zurich. Cotton spinning and weaving quickly established themselves in the Zurich area, then in Aargau, before spreading to the rest of eastern Switzerland.

Meanwhile, Geneva merchants were also importing brightly colored, exotic-patterned cotton fabrics: chintzes (see "Fragments"). As the French name "indienne" suggests, these cottons originated from India. A true fashion phenomenon, chintz offered undeniable advantages over the fabrics previously available in Europe: cotton was lightweight, comfortable to wear, and easy to care for. In fact, by the late 17th century, demand was so high that imports could no longer keep up. This led to the idea of importing white cotton cloths from India to Europe, to Geneva in particular, where they would be printed with woodblocks. The printing of chintzes began modestly in the 1670s, expanding over the following decade. Having become illegal in France, chintz production grew in the border regions, often driven by the Huguenots. In Switzerland, it spread throughout the Jura region and, by 1700, factories had opened in many cities, including Zurich, Bern, Basel, Aargau, St. Gallen, and Glarus.

In the 18th century, the cotton industry became one of the country's main economic drivers. Cotton printing, as the most dynamic and innovative sector, sustained entire regions. Production methods changed drastically: the *Verlagssystem*, a decentralized production system based on home industry, gave way to factories that concentrated large numbers of workers under one roof, allowing their work to be rationalized and controlled. The Fazy chintz factory in Geneva, for instance, had up to 600 workers by the end of the century.

Moreover, through the cotton industry, Switzerland became further integrated into the European and global economy. The raw materials used – cotton and dyeing and printing products such as indigo, madder, and gum arabic – came from Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia, generating millions of pounds in annual expenditure.[6] The markets were also largely international, with the bulk of production intended for export. Furthermore, many of the players in this industry operated within vast, complex networks that extended well beyond the Swiss and European borders. Most were capitalists aiming to "control the import circuits of colonial goods and textile raw materials (especially cotton in the 18th century), to then manage the global sales of the goods manufactured in Swiss rural

6 Pierre Caspard, "Indiennes". *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS)*, 2020, accessed April 19, 2023, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/013962/2020-04-01/.

areas, speculate on various trades, their end objective being to gain a monopoly on the market [. . .]"[7] (our translation). Most importantly, cotton goods were integral to triangular trade. Made and/or sold in Europe, they were sent to the West African coast, where they were exchanged for enslaved people. Packed into ship holds, captives endured the horrific Atlantic crossing before being sold in America or the Caribbean, where they were exploited on cotton, cocoa, tobacco, and coffee plantations. Finally, these colonial goods ended up on European markets.

The Museum as Site for Decolonial Practice

Museal institutions are increasingly confronted with sensitive issues such as globalization, colonization, and slavery. Public demand for spaces to learn, understand, and form opinions is strong. The new definition of museums, adopted in August 2022 in Prague during the General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), incorporates terms such as "diversity" and "inclusion".[8] This not only pertains to the audiences which museums are expected to target and welcome, but also to the choice of topics they address and how they present them. Museums are now tasked with diversifying perspectives, prioritizing plurality, giving voice to those historically excluded from museums and society, and bringing previously overlooked phenomena to light.

Although Switzerland's colonial past has been well-studied by historians over the past twenty years,[9] it is one example of a subject that has long been taboo. While it is acknowledged that certain Swiss individuals amongst which a large majority of men – traders, scientists, missionaries, mercenaries – played an active role in trade with the colonies, the public has long been reluctant to accept this, frequently citing the fact that Switzerland did not, strictly speaking, own colonies. Recently, with movements such as Black Lives Matter, Switzerland has seen robust debate on racism, monuments honoring controversial figures, and Switzerland's complicity in exploiting colonized territories. In this context, museums, and particularly the Swiss National Museum, have a role to play by tackling these "awkward subjects".

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7 François Walter, *Une histoire de la Suisse* (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2016), 155.

8 See: accessed April 19, 2025, https://icom.museum/fr/ressources/normes-et-lignes-directrices/definition-du-musee/.

9 Thomas David, Bouda Etemad and Janick Schaufelbuehl, *La Suisse et l'esclavage des Noirs* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2005); Hans Fässler, *Une Suisse esclavagiste: voyage dans un pays au-dessus de tout soupçon* (Paris: Duboiris, 2007); Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds., *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism From the Margins* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

How Can We Decolonize the Narrative Surrounding the Cotton and Chintz Industries Within the Museum Setting?

In 2021, the Château de Prangins – Swiss National Museum decided to dedicate a permanent exhibition to chintzes, merging local and global history. This instantly raised many questions. How could we tell this story without falling into a Eurocentric narrative? What perspective should we take on these fabrics? How could we revisit the collections in light of new societal demands?

From the outset, we dismissed the idea of a traditional "art history" exhibition that would focus solely on patterns, manufacturing processes, or style, as had often been done in the past. We then established the main themes we wanted to explore. First, we aimed to contextualize the history of chintz within the broader context of colonial empires and the transatlantic slave trade. We then sought to dismantle the notion that Switzerland has no colonial past by showing how some Swiss nationals benefited from colonialism or participated in the triangular trade. To achieve this, we decided to spotlight Swiss individuals who had, directly or indirectly, participated in the global history of chintz and the cotton industry: textile printers whose products had been shipped to African coasts, traders who had settled in Nantes to better equip ships and gather cargo for the trade, or plantation owners and administrators who had used enslaved labor.

Once the framework for our narrative had been defined, we sought credible partners to develop certain exhibition contents. To avoid a unilateral and Eurocentric perspective, we invited narrators from various parts of the world – Switzerland, France, Senegal, the United States, and Brazil – and from diverse backgrounds, not only academia but also independent researchers, museum colleagues, and descendants of chintz producers.

Finally, we spent considerable time pondering on which of the objects to display. Material culture presents one of the main challenges when addressing the cotton industry and chintzes. The fabrics preserved in museums or private collections offer only a partial and somewhat distorted view of the history of chintz, erasing entire aspects of production (see Fig. 14).

This is particularly true for textiles destined for the triangular trade, frequently listed in slave ship cargoes, but of which very few authenticated pieces have survived. So how could we, in the exhibition, discuss the thousands of meters of fabric that had been sent to Africa? And through which artifacts could we guide our audience to an understanding of the link between Swiss cotton fabrics and slavery? By re-examining our collections from a colonial past perspective and juxtaposing them with non-European sources, we found some solutions.

Fig. 14: Nantes, Petitpierre & Co. factory, *Paul et Virginie*, example of a fabric made by Swiss manufacturers established in Nantes to be close to their markets, circa 1795, copperplate printing, Swiss National Museum, LM 171599, former collection Xavier Petitcol.

By examining numerous visual sources, including a series of hundreds of watercolors by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret, we were able to better convey the reality of those who were deported and enslaved. Active in Brazil in the early 19th century, Debret depicted everyday life in Rio de Janeiro, at a time when half of the inhabitants were enslaved. Among his works, we found a depiction of a sugar mill showing men pressing sugarcane (see Fig. 15).

A detail caught our eye: the fabric used to produce the pants of the worker on the right. This type of brightly colored and striped or checked textile was highly sought after in Africa and in the Americas, where they were used to clothe enslaved people. Demand was so high that they were not only produced in India, the original source of this fabric, but were also imitated in European countries, including Switzerland. In our collection, we discovered a letter from 1785 written by a Geneva textile trader to a colleague in Bordeaux, a major port for colonial trade and the slave trade. The letter included two samples of Indian woven cotton fabric. One is almost identical to that worn by the enslaved man in Rio. This archival document allowed us to connect Asia, the origin of the fabrics; Geneva, a center of textile trade; Bordeaux as a slave port; and Africa or the Americas as final destinations. Although these elements alone do not prove a direct connec-

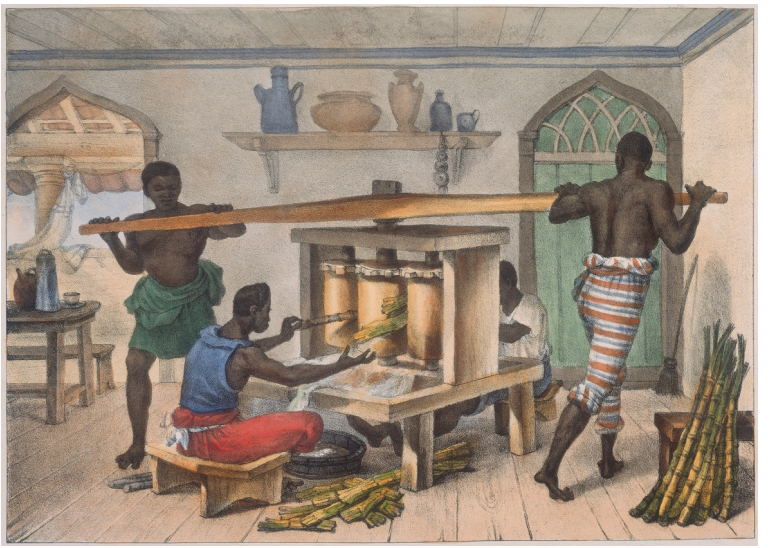

Fig. 15: Jean-Baptiste Debret (after), *Petit moulin à sucre portatif*, plate No. 27 from *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, Paris, Firmin Didot Frères, 1834–1839, hand-colored lithograph.

tion between these samples and slavery, they allow us to hypothesize. This example helps give the public a tangible illustration of the role played by cotton fabrics traded or made in Switzerland and worn by enslaved people working in sugar production thousands of miles away. Consequentially it renovates the image of Switzerland's supposedly non-colonial past.[10]

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10 I thank my colleague Matthieu Péry for his careful review and insightful comments.

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La bûche

Industry II

Voices of Women

The Château de Prangins gave *carte blanche* to twelve comics artists from the Swiss French-speaking collective *La bûche* to create a temporary exhibition (see Figs. 16 and 17).

Fig. 16: View of the temporary exhibition *BD ! Voix de femmes*, La bûche, from March 11 to June 4, 2023, at the Château de Prangins – Swiss National Museum.

Between 2022 and 2023, these artists undertook creative residencies at the Château, drawing inspiration from the voices and lives of women from different social backgrounds who had lived there from the 18th to the 20th century. The exhibition *BD! Voix de femmes* showcases the fruits of their labor. At the heart of the exhibit, a ten-meter-long watercolor paper roll serves as a shared canvas and collective artwork for the twelve artists. This roll was kept on-site as the illustrators took turns staying at the Château for their creative residencies. Each duo added motifs inspired by their experience, painting freely over the entire surface, while leaving a pattern to continue or develop for the next group, in the spirit of exquisite corpse. The permanent exhibition *Chintz. How a Fabric Conquered the World* (*Indiennes. Un tissu à la conquête du monde*) served as the main inspiration for

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-012

Fig. 17: View of the temporary exhibition *BD ! Voix de femmes*, La bûche, from March 11 to June 4, 2023, at the Château de Prangins – Swiss National Museum.

this extensive roll, with its motifs and narrative quality, such as the way patterns unfold across fabric, and its indigo blue and madder red colors resonating directly within the artwork. Moreover, just as the red was derived from the madder plant, so too the artists connected their creations to the Château's natural surroundings, including its extensive historic vegetable garden where there is a section dedicated to dye plants.

Pierrette Birraux, Kenneth Deer, Sara Petrella, and Aurore Schwab

J
Justice

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: More Than 25 Years of Struggle at the United Nations

As affirmed in the United Nations Charter of 1945, the concept of justice is primarily based on the "principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" (Article 1, paragraph 1). For various reasons, international recognition of this principle has been challenging for colonized peoples and for Indigenous Peoples in particular. On September 13, 2007, after 25 years of institutional struggle, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. This document seeks to protect the Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination (Article 3) and all associated rights, particularly their rights to lands and waters, including resources, history, language, culture, and spiritual connections.

Kenneth Deer and Pierrette Birraux closely followed the entire process of the drafting of the Declaration, with Kenneth Deer as an Indigenous delegate and Pierrette Birraux as a coordinator of services provided to Indigenous delegations. Initiated by these delegations, Docip (Indigenous Peoples' Center for Documentation, Research, and Information) preserves unique records of Indigenous struggles and the drafting of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These documents are part of UNESCO's "Memory of the World" program. Multilingual, Docip also provides technical support to Indigenous Peoples at international forums in Geneva and New York.

The interview below outlines the lengthy process of drafting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which constitutes a fundamental document in international Indigenous rights.[1]

Sara Petrella (SP): The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the result of a long battle.

Kenneth Deer (KD): It was a tremendous battle to get the Declaration. It was the longest-negotiated Declaration in UN history. When the UN Working Group on Indigenous Population was created in 1982, people told them, "What we need is a Declaration of what the rights of Indigenous Peoples are because the UN and the States are saying we do not have any rights, particularly for Indigenous Peoples". It took 25 years, from 1982 to 2007, to obtain the Declaration.

1 The interview took place on October 6, 2023, at the Docip Documentation Center in Geneva.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-013

As I understand the story, during the Wounded Knee crisis in the United States in 1973, there was a confrontation between Indigenous Peoples and the US government, and people were killed. They evaluated what happened and concluded that you cannot get justice in the domestic situation. So we had to take our issues internationally. We said let's go to the UN. People were assigned to start working on the UN to try to get us through the UN's front door. It was very difficult because Indigenous Peoples were not allowed in, and we were demonstrating on sidewalks in front of the UN in New York.

In 1977, there was a conference called the "International NGO Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations of the Americas". People back home began to organize to come here and there were peoples from North America, Central America, and South America. I've heard different numbers, 150 to 200 people – also some Sami and other peoples who came when they heard about it.[2]

There was some concern that they [the UN] would stop the Indigenous Peoples if we started to enter in twos and threes. So, they gathered in a large group outside the front gate, and they came in as a big group. They marched in like that and those are the famous pictures we see of people walking in through the arch of the UN (see Fig. 18).

It was to prevent security or anybody from stopping them from coming in. It worked. They walked in and they came into the UN to attend the Conference.

Pierrette Birraux (PB): I wasn't there in 1977; I started at Docip (Indigenous Peoples' Center for Documentation, Research and Information) in 1980. However, I'm proud to say that Augusto Willemsen-Diaz, then a Guatemalan lawyer at the Center for Human Rights (the predecessor of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) and author of the famous Martinez Cobo report, as well as Edith Ballantyne, a Canadian and president of NGOs working with the former Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, were among the founding members of Docip, along with Bill Means, a Lakota Oglala delegate. The Martinez Cobo report (not named after its author), entitled "Study of the problem of discrimination against indigenous populations",[3] is the foundation document of Indigenous Peoples' struggle at the United Nations. Created participatively at a time when reports were typically drafted behind closed doors and Indigenous Peoples' existence was volontarily ignored, it became, and still is, the reference document in this area.

2 In the list of participants in the official IITC report, there are approximately 90 Indigenous delegates, while the report itself mentions 600 participants (governments, NGOs, Indigenous Peoples, etc.)

3 E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7/Add.4

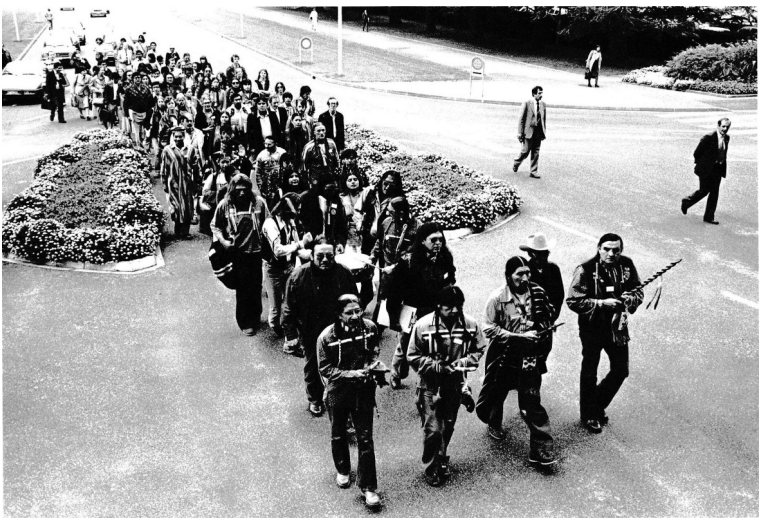

Fig. 18: Jean-François Graugnard, *The Indigenous Peoples' march during the 1977 Conference*, photo, Geneva, Docip Documentation Center, UNO1, September 1, 1977.

As a result of the 1977 Conference, Docip was created in response to Indigenous Peoples saying, "We need a documentation center to preserve all the documents we bring to the UN, a secretariat, a workspace, and people who can assist us in French, English, and Spanish" (later, we added Portuguese and Russian). We were truly behind-the-scenes people, providing simple, practical support, and were criticized for not taking a stance. Yet, this apolitical stance is profoundly political! It is up to Indigenous Peoples themselves to express and explain their understanding of their rights. It is their issue, their self-determination; it is up to them to defend it. For me, Docip has always played – and continues to play – a balancing role: on one side, there were the states and UN officials with all the logistical support they needed, and on the other, Indigenous Peoples who had none of this. So, the goal was simply to reduce, even marginally, the enormous gap in resources between the stakeholders. Today, Docip preserves thousands of documents, including those from the negotiation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

KD: What [Indigenous Peoples] learned in 1977 was incredible. What they were told is that Indigenous Peoples are not subjects of international law and that Indigenous Peoples are not Peoples. You are populations, you are tribes, you are groups. Under international law, a People has the right to self-determination, whereas populations have no rights, you know, like groups and communities, so that was why the States did not want to recognize Indigenous Peoples as Peoples.

That started a very long struggle, from 1970 to 2007 when the Declaration was passed.

Since 1960, in the Declaration on the Rights of Minorities, minorities have had a right to their language, culture, religion, and they have their right to be free from discrimination. Indigenous Peoples say: "we have the same rights". But the difference is that Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination. We have our right to land and territory, and we exercise our rights collectively. So, we, Mohawk, can only have one place where we can exercise self-determination and that is in North America. That is the difference between a minority in North America and Indigenous Peoples in North America. We may be a numeric minority, but our rights are different. We had to explain that to the United Nations and to States.

Aurore Schwab (AS): So, the major specificity of Indigenous Peoples' rights, compared to minorities, is self-determination and, therefore, the idea of being a subject of international law?

KD: In the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 1 [recognizing the right to the full enjoyment of all human rights] and Article 2 [recognizing the equality of Indigenous Peoples to all other peoples] are more important than Article 3 [recognizing the right to self-determination]. We cannot have Article 3 without 1 and 2 because of the attitude of racial superiority of the rest of the world towards Indigenous Peoples. When some people say that we only aspire to be recognized as Peoples, meaning subjects of international law, they suggest that we are not. This is discriminatory and racist. We had to fight for these articles, and self-determination was the last one to be agreed to.

AS: Under what conditions was the Declaration developed?

PB: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the most democratically crafted international instrument. Men, women, elders, and youth from all the affected countries participated: leaders who came directly from their communities in the Americas and Caribbean, the Arctic, Central and North Africa, Asia, Russia, Eastern Europe and Transcaucasia, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, and everywhere else. Generally, international instruments are negotiated by diplomats representing governments, not by the Peoples directly concerned. The Declaration highlighted a form of universality among peoples who share values of respect for Mother Earth and reciprocity. It was genuinely written with them, from all over the world, despite all the obstacles they had to overcome.

The second important aspect is the caucus. The weekend before the conferences, Indigenous delegations would meet in preparatory sessions that were almost always chaired by Kenneth [Deer], to strategize among themselves. There were practically no non-Indigenous participants. We [Docip] were there because we

helped with the organization and provided interpretation. Kenneth worked tirelessly for years to bring everyone together to adopt a unified stance despite the differing local situations. Delegations spoke one after the other, stating who they represented and the position of their community or organization. They often also met in regional caucuses – South American, North American, Arctic, etc. – to try to establish a regional consensus and, ultimately, a global position. It was a profoundly democratic and participatory process.

AS: During the 1980s, thanks to your organization in the caucus, you produced a draft Declaration within the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. What about the higher UN bodies, I mean the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and, subsequently, the Commission on Human Rights?

KD: When [the draft] went from the Working Group on Indigenous Populations to the Sub-Commission in 1994, the were 28 human rights experts, and some of those with very big egos were against our right to self-determination. Five of them were from the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, including Erica-Irene Daes and Miguel Alfonso Martinez. They had to make sure that other 23 members did not touch the Declaration. They said: "Look, you told us to draft a Declaration, this is the Declaration. The rights of self-determination are in there." They managed to prevent any changes to the Declaration.

In 1995, when the Declaration went to the Commission on Human Rights, which is run by the States, the States hated the Declaration. So, the States created their own Working Group to elaborate the Declaration. They did not even mention the Declaration drafted by the Working Group [on Indigenous Populations]. That was the type of resistance we had. At the beginning of the first meeting of the new Working Group, Ambassador José Urrutia Ceruti from Peru said that the basis of the discussion would be the draft Declaration of the Sub-Commission; a positive decision for Indigenous Peoples. [With this support], we thought it would take maybe five years to make the Declaration. That is not what happened. The Commission on Human Rights is a States' meeting, like the Human Rights Council. The States were at the front, and we were at the back. It is up to the Chair to let us speak, and when we would raise our hands, sometimes he would acknowledge us and sometimes not. That angered us because we could see the danger that our whole draft would be gutted.

In 1996, when the Chairman [of the Commission on Human Rights] would not acknowledge our raised hands, at the caucus, we decided "We are going to walk out." Because the resolution says that they would elaborate a Declaration "with the participation of Indigenous Peoples". That move is what saved us. If you pull out of the room, we are not there, so they cannot fulfill the resolution. About 90% of Indigenous negotiators walked out. That was a significant number. The Chair-

man and the UN had to find a way to get us back in. We had to find a way to get back in, too. We said: "OK, how about an Indigenous co-chair?". They said: "No, that is against the rules." "How about an Indigenous Rapporteur?", "No, that is against the rules". Talks went on between the UN in Geneva and the Legal Office in New York. We were out for three days. The Chairman came back with the proposal: all negotiations on any Declaration are informal; when they agree on an article, then they move into a formal session, and they all vote on the article. So, 99% of working groups are informal. He said that Indigenous Peoples will be part of the consensus in the informal session. We said: "OK, we will accept that." So we went back into the room, and our strategy was that we were not going to agree to any changes. We started discussing the articles. We defended every paragraph, sentence, word in the draft Declaration, and we refused to accept any changes. It worked for 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003. For nine years, we stopped the States from making any changes. That was unprecedented in the UN. The secret of our success was that we would meet separately in the caucus, we would decide our strategy, and we walked in there together, united, and strong.

In 1997, we marched from the park in front of the main gate [on the Place des Nations in Geneva]; the gate was open in those days. We met with security beforehand, and I explained everything, and they told us that we couldn't do this because demonstrations are not allowed in the UN. This really was an exception. We were not calling it a demonstration, because you have to be careful with that word. It was a march to replicate what had happened 20 years before. We wanted to reenact the March of the Peoples, so we marched from the front gate with all the people who were there in 1977, with all our friends, everyone carrying flags and banners, marching and singing.

The States had been dealing with a solid wall of Indigenous Peoples, and they hadn't been able to break us for all those years. We also had the support of Denmark and Guatemala because they said they could accept the draft Declaration as written. That made the States divided. But as the years went on, they gradually got worn down. One of the most important things about those years [is the fact that] we were educating the States about all those rights. Indigenous Peoples and our supporters convinced the States of how important those rights are.

In 2004, 2005, 2006, we went through all those articles which were open to changes on both sides – Indigenous Peoples and governments. What made it difficult for us is the fact that, because there are a lot of articles and paragraphs, they split it into two Working Groups at the same time. Norway was heading one. I think Luis-Enrique Chávez from Peru was in the other one. To be represented in both working groups, we had to split our delegation in two, but this was not always possible. All the articles were open, and we defended the rights the best we

could, and we did very well. By 2006, we had 90% of the Declaration agreed to, but self-determination, the articles on land, and a few others were not.

2006 was an important year because there was a movement to abolish the Commission on Human Rights, where their mandate was from. In 2006, the Human Rights Council was going to be created, and this began in June. The first Chairman of the Council was Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba, from Mexico. He told Luis Chávez, the Chair of the Working Group: "Get me the Declaration on the first day of the Human Rights Council and that is our best chance of getting it passed because the States have to prove that they can do something". At the end of the Working Group's last meeting in January 2006, Luis Chávez says: "OK, look, we've had enough of this. We have had all these 12 years of discussion. Now, we are going to end this Working Group. I alone will decide the outcome of all the articles on which there is no general agreement. I will decide what the final words and the final articles will be." So, the draft Declaration became the Chairman's text. It was no longer a consensus. We lost a couple of articles – one on identity, I think. He kept Article 3 on self-determination and the articles on land, territories, and other resources. Even though there were States against them. It was courageous of him to do that. He sent it to the Human Rights Council in the morning [of the first day of the first session] in June. They were hoping that the Declaration would be passed by consensus, but it was not. Canada called for a vote. If Canada hadn't called for a vote, it would have been passed by consensus.

What was funny is that, when they vote, they push a button: green is yes; red is no; yellow is abstain. The buttons did not work. They had to get a bag with all the countries' names in it, and the Chairman pulled out the name of the first country and then it went around alphabetically. They pulled out Cuba. Cuba voted first, and Cuba said "Sí". And then they went all the way around. Then it got to Russia, and Russia voted "No". Argentina, I think, abstained. Then it came to Canada. The Chairman said: "Canada". There was no answer. He said it again, as if he had not heard it, said: "Canada", and the guy at the desk was sitting there. He slowly got up to the microphone and said: "No". He did not want to say: "No", but those were his orders. There was an audible groan in the room. But it was passed and there was a standing ovation afterwards.

AS: Now, all that is left is the United Nations General Assembly.

KD: After the Declaration was passed to the Human Rights Council in June of 2006, it went to New York to be voted on by the General Assembly. Canada was very much against the Declaration, so they started to scare the African States, telling them that it might break up their countries. When it was in the Third Committee in New York – the Third Committee is where resolutions are vetted, where all the fights take place –, the African States said the Declaration required more study, which means that the African States wanted changes to the Declaration.

So then another series of negotiations started in New York with the African States. They wanted 43 changes. There were 46 articles, so there were multiple changes in some articles. We were not in the room this time. It was only between States. We were on the outside. The friendly States would come and consult with the Indigenous Peoples. This was when the African States insisted that Article 46.1, on the territorial integrity of States, must be added to the Declaration. We had to incorporate this request. If the African States had let it be known that they were against the Declaration, other States would have voted against the Declaration in support of Africa, and we could have lost the Declaration, and even if we had won the Declaration by 51% to 49% let's say, it would have been a very, very weak Declaration. So, with the amendment to this article, the Declaration was finally submitted to vote at the General Assembly.

On September 13, 2007, the General Assembly voted. The Declaration passed with 143 countries voting in favor, including the African States, and four countries voting against it: Canada, United States, Australia, and New Zealand – all the children of Great Britain. The other countries were either absent or abstained. The four countries who voted against the Declaration changed their position in 2010 and endorsed the Declaration.

That is how the Declaration was built.

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Carole Delamour

K
Knowledge

Reconstitution of Knowledge

Information is knowledge and knowledge is power
(Eeva-Kristiina Harlin)[1]

The reconstitution of the knowledge associated with museum collections contributes to Indigenous nations reclaiming control over their heritage, due to multiple factors. Firstly, knowing the location and information relating to objects forms the foundation of repatriation claims for the objects themselves. The success of these efforts depends on the recognition granted on the part of the legal or political structure involved in the repatriation process and, therefore, to the knowledge they present to legitimize their claims. Furthermore, besides the return or non-return of an object, reconstructing the knowledge produced about the object in the context of a repatriation effort becomes central to local movements of cultural reclamation and revitalization.

To illustrate these points, I will discuss the cultural and scientific activities conducted as part of the Nika-Nishk project. Led by Élise Dubuc, professor at the University of Montreal, running from 2011 to 2017, this project was a collaboration between the Ilnu community of Mashteuiatsh (Lac-Saint-Jean region, Quebec) and the Anishinabeg community of Kitigan Zibi (Outaouais region, Quebec), as well as museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and the Field Museum in Chicago. With the goal of reclaiming Indigenous heritage, the project included several research components, including general documentation of repatriation processes, the study of Ilnu and Anishinabeg objects held in museums, and actions promoting community access to museum collections.[2] The focus of the Indigenous co-researchers quickly

1 Eeva-Kristiina Harlin, "Repatriation as Knowledge Sharing," in *UTIMUT: Past Heritage – Future Partnerships: Discussions on Repatriation in the 21st Century)*, ed. Gabriel Mille and Jens Dahl (Copenhague: IWGIA, 2008), 198. Comments on the Repatriation of a *Sámi* Object.

2 Carole Delamour, Marie Roué, Élise Dubuc and Louise Siméon, "*Tshiheu*. Le battement d'ailes d'un passeur culturel et écologique chez les Pekuakamiulnuatsh," *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* 2–3, 46 (2017): 161–172; Carole Delamour, "Les processus de rapatriement en Amérique du Nord: nouveaux régimes de propriété des collections autochtones," in *Les minorités au musée, réflexions franco-américaines*, ed. Olivier Maheo (Paris: La Documentation française, 2024).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-014

shifted toward studying collections that had been gathered between 1910 and 1930 by American anthropologist Frank G. Speck (1881–1950) at Mashteuiatsh and Kitigan Zibi. Following preliminary research, the project's focus turned to examining collections held at the NMAI in Washington in particular. The Mashteuiatsh collection includes over 500 objects, and the Kitigan Zibi collection nearly 350.

I undertook numerous activities with members of the two communities and from 2012 to 2017 worked closely with the Pekuakamiulnuatsh of Mashteuiatsh as a research assistant master's student and, later, doctoral student. Drawing on archives but especially on the elders' stories and research conducted by high school students, we collectively reconstituted a significant amount of information about the biographies, knowledge, skills, and practices associated with the Ilnu objects preserved at the NMAI.[3] Through a collaborative approach, I directed the research toward responding to the Pekuakamiulnuatsh's request: to trace the life histories of the objects at the NMAI and produce research that could support a potential repatriation request.

In order to trace the life histories of the objects (see "Life"), I started by consulting publications and the archives of anthropologist Frank G. Speck, whose original materials are held at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. I then refined this information through ethnographic work with the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, conducting over a hundred interviews and workshops with high school students, artisans, and community elders, both at Mashteuiatsh and at the NMAI.

Intergenerational exchanges shaped the study of the objects and the repatriation process of the Mashteuiatsh community.[4] The objects selected by the community's youth, which became focal points of interest and discussion for several years, influenced the community's choice in their repatriation request. Some objects became emblematic of the community's repatriation efforts through these exchanges and through being highlighted by community members, and thus ended up being the most thoroughly documented.

Through collective activities and collaboration with the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, I documented the life trajectory of three types of objects preserved at the NMAI: two *nimapan* (portage straps), a *mushianiakup* (moose-skin coat), and two *teuehikan* (drums). I drew on biographical and agentive approaches to objects to explore the objects' trajectories, and reconstructed parts of the objects' histories, in-

3 Carole Delamour, Gabrielle Paul and Julian Whittam, "Rapatrier les moyens de transmettre sa culture. L'implication des jeunes des communautés de Mashteuiatsh et de Kitigan Zibi dans les processus de rapatriement et de transmission culturelle," *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* 1, 51 (2022): 85–98.

4 Carole Delamour, Marie Roué, Élise Dubuc and Louise Siméon, eds., *Tshiheu. Le battement d'ailes d'un passeur culturel et écologique chez les Pekuakamiulnuatsh.*

cluding those of both their original owners and those who are revitalizing their use today. The Ilnu knowledge gathered also highlighted the ethnoecological knowledge associated with the objects, their past and current uses, and their roles in the web of human and non-human social relations.

Drums (*teuehikan*) are entities imbued with a unique force that enables communication with non-human beings. Despite their status as sacred objects, knowledge about these drums is being lost, and it quickly became clear that documenting the associated practices and local knowledge was essential. While *teuehikan* once served as intermediaries in communication with non-humans, research shows that nowadays they act as mediums for healing cultural dispossession, through their ability to transmit Ilnu knowledge across generations, and as vehicles for identity affirmation.

Nimapan are special portage straps used to thank the spirit of a slain animal. The ceremonial use of these objects was what caught the attention of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, ceremonies which no longer seemed to be practiced in Mashteuiatsh. Studying them deepened the understanding of the Ilnu principles relating to non-human beings, such as divinatory sign interpretation, respectful attentiveness, and the enriching notion of "luck".

The moose-skin coat (*mushianiakup*) holds personal significance for the family, as it was worn by one of the main collaborators'' ancestors, Thomas Siméon. It features the dragonfly larva motif, through which the study of Ilnu designs, often based on floral patterns of European influence, was renewed. By restoring some of the meanings and cultural knowledge associated with this motif, the study revitalizes a certain ethno-entomological knowledge and contributes to reattributing to the Pekuakamiulnuatsh the uniqueness of their decorative heritage.[5]

I then analyzed how the knowledge produced on the NMAI objects can serve as justification for repatriation requests. I used updated Ilnu conceptual categories from object studies to assess the applicability of the categories defined by the NMAI's repatriation policy. This first demonstrated that the obligation to prove "cultural affiliation" relies on a genealogical and linear conception, which tends to essentialize identities and obscure cultural and human exchanges. This cultural affiliation seeks to establish the links between objects and their "legitimate" owners in order to avoid competing claims from other Indigenous communities. However, the need to prove cultural affiliation creates challenges when claiming objects situated at the intersection of multiple communities or Nations, as is the

5 Delamour, Roué, Dubuc and Siméon, eds., *Tshiheu. Le battement d'ailes d'un passeur culturel et écologique chez les Pekuakamiulnuatsh.*

case with Mashteuiatsh, which had historically been a crossroads of human and material exchanges between several Nations such as the Innuatsh, Attikamekw, or Eeyou, even prior to the reserve's institutionalization in 1856.[6]

I also examined the notion of ownership as defined in the NMAI's repatriation policy: communities must demonstrate that they once held a right of ownership or collective control over the objects. Yet, the notions of "collectivity" and "community" are problematic in proving ownership of objects that are used within a semi-nomadic, family-based lifestyle. Research with the Pekuakamiulnuatsh shows that there are certain familial and territorial dimensions which regulate ownership regimes over Ilnu heritage. One key aspect is that these regimes are based on relationships with non-human beings, such as ancestors or animals of the territory, a fact that should be given greater consideration in the preservation, transmission, and restitution of Indigenous heritage.[7]

Finally, we worked together with the Pekuakamiulnuatsh to revisit the category of "sacred objects". According to the NMAI, an object is only recognized as sacred if it is used by a "religious leader". For the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, a sacred object corresponds to a conceptual category, *ishpitelitamun* (something I feel that is higher than me). *Ishpitelitamun* translates as both "sacred" and "respect" in English. To clarify this association, we demonstrated that any object that helps maintain respectful relations with non-human beings, particularly animal spirits, is regarded sacred. The Ilnu approach to the sacred is relational: it is not the object itself that is sacred, but the respectful relationships it helps foster, particularly with animals, non-human beings, the land, and the associated knowledge and skills. Thus, the Ilnu category of "sacred object" conflicts with that used by the NMAI. For the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, sacred objects are associated with everyday principles like respect and may be used by anyone, not solely by a "religious leader".

This contribution of co-produced knowledge on the NMAI objects is essential to highlight. Indeed, repatriation is sometimes presented as endangering the museum project by causing irreplaceable material and immaterial losses for museums. However, the process of preparing repatriation requests involves preliminary research that enriches the knowledge produced about collections. The testimonies and Ilnu expertise that formalized our study of the objects add real depth to the knowledge, skills, and ways of being that would have been impossi-

6 Carole Delamour and Thomas Siméon, "Le don du caribou et l'appel du *teuehikan*. Repenser des patrimoines autochtones à la lumière des dimensions familiales et relationnelles établies avec les non-humains," *Revue d'études autochtones* 3, 52 (2023), 85–96.

7 Carole Delamour and Thomas Siméon, "Le don du caribou et l'appel du *teuehikan*."

ble to develop from Frank G. Speck's writings alone. Far from being a loss, the repatriation process can thus prove to be, in itself, a gain in knowledge for communities but also for museums. In the case of the NMAI objects, the knowledge produced aligns with the museum's research mission, as these collections had never been studied or even exhibited since their acquisition by Speck. In this sense, the inclusion of local expertise in object studies is not only an ethical approach to questioning ethnographic and museographic authority but also a genuine scientific endeavor in the co-production of knowledge.

These projects renew repatriation approaches by demonstrating the significant potential of museum collections when a link is reestablished with the memory and knowledge of their originating communities. Indigenous control over heritage can be enhanced through the reconstitution and revitalization of certain knowledge or cultural practices via institutional channels of transmission, such as museums or schools. Indeed, the documentary, photo, and video projects created by young people, as well as the NMAI collections, continue to serve as local educational resources years after the initial activities, highlighting the long-term potential of access to museum-held heritage. Beyond repatriation itself, access to ancestral knowledge and objects strengthens communities' reclaiming of their heritage, which is partly fundamental to their self-determination process. What is valued in these efforts is not only the return of collections but also the return of means to perpetuate the associated cultural knowledge. This perspective allows us to view repatriation procedures more through the lens of reconstitution than that of dispossession – whether from museums or communities. Ultimately, it is about pursuing what can be achieved by regaining control over one's cultural heritage.

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Debasish Borah

L
Life

Objects and Their Social and Political Lives

> [. . .] a room filled with white people, talking about non-white people.
> (Maximilian C. Forte on anthropology 2012, Zero Anthropology)

The contemporary museum is a politically contested space. This crisis of museum institutions, especially with collections related to colonialism, is rooted in their origin as institutions of the empire. The museum is the site in which the human worlds of the colony are turned into "still lives" for the public in the metropolis.[1] Museums tend to associate culture with civilisation; in his interview with Clementine Deliss, Issa Samb, a Senegalese philosopher, says, "Ethnographic museums confuse culture with civilisation, human beings with objects. Every person has a culture; civilisation is a fabrication. We need a critique of classification because classification contains the germ of racism".[2]

In this essay, I will attempt to provincialise museum objects from their privileged position of originality and centre the life or "journeys" of objects. I am concerned with two kinds of journeys: the physical journey (how objects travel to museums in European metropolises thousands of miles away from their social lives) and the journey of objects as they change from one condition to another (for example, a commodity[3] changing to a museum object).

Looking Through a Kaleidoscope

Critically engaging with charted and uncharted journeys in the social and political life of objects can offer a contemporary re-configuration of museum institutions. The museum's focus on originality refuses the trans-local migrations, travels, and exchanges of culture and fixes cultures to a particular historical time and space. In-

1 Arjun Appadurai, "The Museum, the Colony, and the Planet: Territories of the Imperial Imagination," *Public Culture* 33, 1 (2021), 115–128.

2 Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hathe Cantz, 2020).

3 Commodity in a Marxist sense of something that is bought and sold or exchanged in a relationship of trade.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-015

stead of relating museum objects to specific nation-states, I propose to engage with transformation in the social life of objects and associate them with cultural landscapes. I suggest we understand value, origin, and restitution discourses through corresponding journeys instead of provenance. I think this shift is more than necessary in post-colonial countries like India, where I come from, the Hindu right wing has become a major political force. Indian right-wing politics is searching for an imagined pre-colonial original "Indian"' culture, and museums provide the fodder for this originality through definitions of "original" museum objects. The museum's provenance helps the right wing to produce an image of Hindus as the "original" inhabitants of the Indian nation-state and associate this political "originality" with contemporary citizenship. The Indian right wing repeatedly employs this argument to claim ownership of land and resources for the dominant group (upper caste Hindu in the case of India) while denying the ownership to all of its citizens, especially minorities, Muslims, *Adivasis*, tribal states of North-east India, and low castes.

Prominent museums like Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Rietberg Museum in Zurich or Musée de l'Homme in Paris insist that not everything from their collection was looted; even during the colonial period, the researchers bought many of these objects. Discussing the colonial culture's political economy is outside this text's scope; however, I am interested in understanding such trade relationships through "reverse-anthropology".[4] Wagner argued that ethnography is a two-way street; as ethnographers study the people, the people also study the ethnographer and most often than not, the research subjects influence ethnographic research results. In other words, in the ethnographic contact zone,[5] both the researcher and the researched subjects are influencing each other, which is mostly neglected by the supposedly objective researcher. In this shared ethnographic culture, the research subject knows what the researcher seeks. Hence, the research subjects would expose their cultural-self and related objects insofar it satisfies the researcher and their ethnographic enquiries. Did the research subject manipulate the museum research and ethnographer to buy objects due to reverse ethnography? I wonder if the objects in the museum can tell us anything about the cultural contexts they were brought from; such objects might tell us more about the European notions of modernity, gender, sexuality and society.

I will discuss two museum objects as examples to illustrate journeys and attempt to shift the focus from originality towards a trans-local and transformation-based understanding of objects.

4 Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

5 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992).

The first object is the "*Vrindavan Vastra*". *Vrindavan Vastra* (Named by Rosemary Crill, Victoria & Albert Museum, London) is a 17th-century nine-meter-long textile. This textile was woven in Kamarupa (part of medieval Assam, currently northeast India) and made of 12 decorated strips of cloth. Richard Blurton, a former curator of the South Asia section of the British Museum, curated an exhibition titled "Krishna in the Garden of Assam Cultural Context of an Indian Textile".[6] The textile and Blurton's book about the textile and the cultural context of its production were displayed. While the book engages with the historiography of the textile in detail, it does not critically examine the travel of the textile from Assam to the British Museum. Blurton writes that the 12 strips of woven cloth called "*Vrindavan Vastra*" were woven in Kamrup, Assam, and the pieces of fabric were taken from Assam to Tibet unstitched, where they were assembled to form one piece.[7] In 1904, Perceval Landon, the Times newspaper correspondent, travelled with Francis Younghusband's colonial expedition to Tibet from India. Amidst the chaos of loot and plunder,[8] Landon "acquired" this cloth from the monastery of Gosbi in Tibet. Eventually, Landon donated it to the British Museum in 1905. It is unclear how the 12 pieces of cloth reached the monastery of Gosbi in Tibet. However, it was not uncommon for the borderlands of Assam to trade with Tibet in the 17th century.

The exhibition's title, "Krishna in the Garden of Assam", makes it abundantly clear that the textile is exclusively associated with Assam and thus nationalises a cloth not produced in our modern understanding of India. The exhibition ignores that although the 12 pieces of cloth were woven in modern-day Assam in contemporary India, the fabric in its current form was stitched in Tibet. I think Blurton looked at the textile as a museum object and did not approach it as a cultural object. The exhibition in search of provenance, nationalises the textile. Nationalising the textile and strongly connecting it to Assam also brings the whole debate of restitution. However, new questions emerge: Restitute where? Modern-day Assam in India? Modern-day Tibet in China? Instead of fuelling cartographic anxieties in already tensed borders of the Indian subcontinent, I suggest that such exhibitions are curated as a trans-local dialogue between pre-colonial Assam and Tibet. Such an approach of curation with interconnected histories will emphasise the journey of the cloth. It will generate a transcultural dialogue between the neighbouring regions and offer a planetary understanding of objects and their association with memory.

6 Richard Blurton, *Krishna in the Garden of Assam* (The British Museum, London, 2016).

7 Blurton, *Krishna in the Garden of Assam*, 9.

8 Michael Carrington, "Officers, Gentlemen and Thieves: The Looting of Monasteries during the 1903/4 Younghusband Mission to Tibet," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, 1 (2003), 81–109.

Moving the discussion towards another object, I will explain how objects travel and change their value not through journeys in space like the previous object but rather through transformations in their social life.

A mask of a demon snake called *Kaliya* was also exhibited in the same exhibition (see Fig. 19).

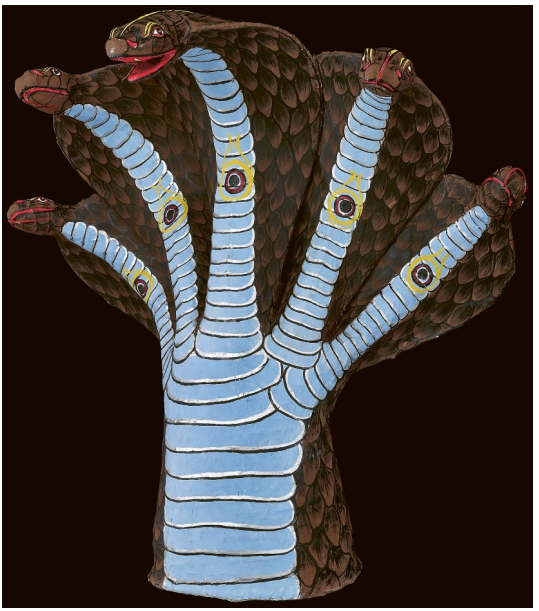

Fig. 19: Workshop of Hemchandra Goswami, Head and body mask of the multi-headed serpent demon Kaliya, 2015, Samaguri monastery, Majuli island, Assam (India). Funded by the Luigi and Laura Dallapiccola Foundation, The British Museum, Inventory number 2015,3041.1.

Samuguri Satra (*Samuguri* is the name of the village, and *Satra* is an Assamese monastery) is on Majuli Island of Assam in the middle of the mighty Brahmaputra, where such religious masks are produced historically. These masks are employed for performances of religious plays called *Bhaouna*. *Bhaouna*s re-enact the life of the Hindu god Krishna (see Fig. 20).

The monastery monks make these masks with bamboo and clay, a highly skilful craft practice. However, historically, the monks or mask-makers did not perceive mask-making as an art form. From my interviews and site visits in Majuli, I gather that the purpose of the mask-making practice lies in its need to tell a story. Performers wear these masks to become mythological characters, transcending the human body into something *beyond*. The mask makers tell me that the prac-

Fig. 20: A Bhowna performance in Majuli, Assam (India).

tice of mask-making is beyond the art form. It confers forms and meanings to meta-physical characters, and gods come down to the *namghors* (prayer-halls) of Majuli wearing these masks. The mask's purpose is more important than the mask itself. My field studies and interviews with mask-makers of Majuli, not only from *Samuguri Satra* but also with independent mask-makers, reveal that there is a certain pressure asserted by Indian and non-Indian researchers, museum institutions, and tourism to see mask-making as an art practice, elevated from other everyday practices of life. Indian right-wing government, in its misplaced understanding of decolonisation, is seeking to highlight and celebrate vernacular practices as pre-colonial "original" and "indigenous" art insofar as conveniently ignoring the caste-based hierarchy of artisans. The gaze of government agencies, tourism, and research defines the practice of mask-making as an art form. This separation of the mask as specialised "art" from the practice of *Bhaouna* interrupts the mask's journey. This celebration of the mask-maker as an artist elevates one part of his multi-dimensional body. Ananda Coomaraswamy, in his book "The Indian Craftsman" (1909), discusses that the body of a craftsman is not unidirectional; instead, the craftsperson is also a carpenter, a teacher, a farmer and so on. The social and political life of the mask-maker is inter-winded with the social and political life of the mask. It is an epistemological mistake to highlight mask-making as an art form; we must consider it one of the many practices of rural agrarian daily life. The elevated status of mask-makers of *Samuguri Satra,* who

are high-caste Assamese, is marginalising independent mask-makers from tribal communities who are peripheral in the caste-based social structure of India.

The masks are not usually produced for a specific client; they make numerous masks of gods and demons; some are sold, and some remain unsold. Selling the masks is not a driving force behind their production. Taking this rationale of production as a point of departure, I argue that masks are not made as commodities, but rather as objects. These masks are sold to performance groups, usually attached to a religious institution. After being sold, the mask becomes a commodity; however, the commodity phase is brief. These masks as commodities go through a religious ceremonial process that initiates their conversion to the next stage in their life, ritual objects. By ritual objects, I mean objects employed for religious and cultural rituals of a specific social group. The actors wear these masks to perform in religious plays.

Along with the religious music and recitation from Bhagwat Purana, the commodity is converted into a complete ritual object. This ritual object becomes holy and cannot be touched by feet. However, when it was an object being produced in the monastery of *Samuguri*, I saw the mask-makers hold these same masks in between their toes to paint them. The change in its social life triggers the change in the value of the same object. Hence, it is evident that without understanding the journey of such objects in social space, we cannot understand the value of objects.

Furthermore, after the performance, the performance group keeps the mask in storage, usually in the *Namghor* (prayer hall). At this point, the mask still holds the ritual-object phase of its life and will be re-used in the next performance, sometimes within weeks. After two or three usages, the bamboo and clay masks start to tear, and the need for a new mask arises. The mask is discarded, and the ritual-object phase of its life is over; it becomes trash or an object again. I can say that at this point, the social life and journey of the mask is finally over.

The mask's journey as a "museum object" is drastically different. I interviewed Richard Blurton in 2023, who told me he commissioned the *Samuguri Satra* mask-makers to make the *Kalia* mask displayed at the British Museum exhibition I previously discussed. The mask made in this context is already made as a museum object because the mask-makers are told that the British Museum will collect it. In this scenario, the political economy of the mask is decided by the museum and not by the artisan. The mask-makers are not crafting any "object", but rather a "museum object". However, the mask is not entirely a museum object yet. Its packaging, special care in handling, and physical journey and displacement, most probably in an aeroplane, are part of the mask becoming a museum object. In the exhibition, *Kalia's* mask was placed in a glass compartment for visitors to view. Here, I would argue that the viewer's gaze is the culmination of the

process of making a museum object. In other words, for being a museum object, the viewer's participation, in its knowledge and ignorance, is as meaningful as the object itself. An object cannot be a museum object without the gaze of the museum visitor. Collecting is not enough; objects must be transported, catalogued, exhibited, and gazed upon. The mask as a museum object is at its highest value during the exhibition. After the exhibition, room 91 of the British Museum was emptied, and the contents were put into deep storage. What happens to a museum object when it is not displayed? I have already established that exhibiting is crucial for the museum object to remain in that state of its life.

Once removed from view and no longer gazed upon and put inside storage, the museum object partly loses its value, meaning it is not entirely a museum object anymore. This contradicts Blurton's curatorial practice; he told me that whenever he commissions artisans in India to fabricate a museum object, he ensures that what he receives on behalf of the British museum is "original". He defines original objects as something that could be used for their actual purpose, for example, in a ritual. I have shown earlier that the object commissioned by Blurton achieves its highest status as a museum object when placed in exhibition view and not in its production phase in Majuli. However, according to Blurton, he already got a museum object in its original form, which is the highest state in the life of that object; meaning, the museum object's highest value is already achieved without bringing it inside the museum. This value should not change; paradoxically, it does change, as demonstrated. In such a scenario, I would call the museum object in storage an object in crisis. It is no longer a museum object, but not an object either. Its value is undefined, and so is its definition of originality. In his own words, Blurton said, "This is the first time the exhibition is shown in its entirety, and now is the moment in the first half of 2016 to come and see it because probably in my lifetime, it will not be seen again".[9] Hence, I can state that a museum object's social life depends on the viewer's gaze instead of its value. The mask or the object in crisis waits at the deep storage.

In 2022, walking near the riverbank and talking about the river and life in Majuli with Pulin, a local of Majuli, we stumbled across a mask of a *Kalia*, the demon serpent. This mask is very similar to the one in the British Museum exhibition. This mask was most likely used in one of the village's *Bhaouna* (religious musical plays). After the mask became unusable, someone might have put it close to the river. In most Hindu religious practices, ritual objects are placed upon riv-

9 The promotional short documentary called Curating Krishna in the garden of Assam is availabe to watch as an open-source video in the official Youtube Channel of the British Museum, accessed Paril 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BbO_qbVZPA (6.11 minutes).

ers or riverbanks after they run out of purpose. It reminds me of the Hindu practice of scattering the ashes of dead people in the river. I asked Pulin about the mask and what does he think of the mask lying near the river. Shouldn't it be taken care of, I asked. He was quite unmoved by it. He told me it was natural that someone might have left it here, and the Brahmaputra would take the mask with him (Brahmaputra in Assam is considered a male river- Brahmaputra means Son of Hindu god Brahma). His response surprised me; he has repeatedly shifted houses and lost objects from yearly floods. I found his stance on *giving away* objects to Brahmaputra noteworthy. It also tells us about the value attached to the said object. It is crucial to understand that for Pulin, the mask of Kalia lying on the riverbank is not an *object in crisis* which asks for a change in its social life; for him, it has completed its life, and the imminent destruction of it is the natural course.

In this text, I attempted to provincialise museum curation and classification and focus on local and vernacular histories of everyday life as the critical point of departure towards decolonising museums. Cultures are dynamic and diasporic and are not located in a historical time or faraway places; by thinking of journeys and diasporic cultures, museums can shape the global designs and understanding of memory in our shared postcolonial condition.

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Saskia Cousin Kouton, Sara Tassi, and Madina Yêhouétomè

M
Matrimoine

Our Mothers Heritage, Things of Us-Other

The etymology of matrimoine is simultaneously a story of disappearance and a story of a trace, allowing for reunions, reworkings, and reassignments.[1]
(Ellen Hertz, our translation)

Matrimonium, Matremuine, Matrimoine

Derived from the Latin *matrimonium* and later the Old French *matremuine*, "matrimoine" originally referred to "property that comes from the mother's side". Over time, this was gradually erased from French law and language, as the "matrimonial regime" in the West marked the transition of the mother into wife and the appropriation of her property. In 2002, anthropologist Ellen Hertz revived the term "matrimoine" to denote the alterity and intersectionality of certain "heritages", specifically the so-called "non-Western" collections of the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel). Viewed through the lens of research by Ifi Amadiume[2] and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí,[3] "matrimoine" here is defined as the "heritage of our mothers": biological, adoptive, symbolic, mythical, initiatory, or ritual mothers. Drawing on these studies and our research in Benin, we propose to repoliticize the term "matrimoine" by defining it as an intersectional relationship that adds generation to the class/race/gender nexus, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the wake of the reflections of numerous authors and activist collectives, including the Combahee River Collective. There is no question of "race" here, since, in our examples, the relationships of social domination are more a question of "class" or "caste".

1 Ellen Hertz, "Le matrimoine," in *Le musée cannibale*, ed. Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Jacques Hainard, and Roland Kaehr (Neuchâtel: MEN, 2002), 162.

2 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press Ltd, 1987); Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and culture* (London/New-York: Zed Books, 1997).

3 Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-016

Decolonizing Gender from the Categories of Mother and Wife

If we rely on the Western history of feminist struggles and a sociobiological representation of the category of "woman," social relations of sex and gender relations are commonly confused. However, as Joan Scott notes, the neat category of "gender" loses its effectiveness if reduced to binary opposition based on sexual difference.[4] This is precisely the critique Nigerian scholars Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí made in the late 1980s against the Western approach to the categories of "woman" and "gender." Through their study of relationships between age groups, rites, and transmission practices related to "mothers" in Nigeria, they show that in their respective Igbo and Yoruba societies, the category of "woman" itself, does not exist: gender relations, and thus domination, are not fixed. Rather, they are relational and evolving, depending on age group and social status. Thus, an older, more powerful person, one who, in the West, would be denominated "woman" can "possess" wives.

Similarly, in Benin, different terms translated as "wife", "mother", or "aunt" denote relational and contextual situations rather than a biological designation. In Abomey, the former capital of the *Danxomɛ* kingdom, *axɔsì* literally means "wife of the king", just as *vodúnsì* (follower of vodún) translates to wife of *vodún*, and *honmesì* (servant) to the palace wife. The *dadasì* is the ritual wife who embodies and represents an ancestral king. Regardless of their sex, many *bokɔnɔ* (diviners), *agoojiée* (amazons), *honmesì*, (priestesses, royal women, royal artisans), and even *kpanlingan* (genealogists) identify as *axɔsì* (royal wives) an affirmation of their closeness to power. This is the case, for example, for those who, generation after generation, identify as *axɔsì* of the figures who embody the female-king Hangbé, who reigned in the early 18th century in Abomey. *Axɔsì* thus pertains to gender and not to sex: the position of wife signifies a relationship of spatial proximity and devotion.

The maternal position, on the other hand, is one of power. In Benin and Nigeria, the terms *minɔ* and *iya* (literally "our mothers") denotes a specific ritual and spiritual power. At the top of the most secret and respected cults are often "mothers" whose power nothing would suggest. Similarly, the term *kpɔjitɔ* (literally "mother of the panther") denotes those who embody the symbolic mothers of ancestral kings. In this conception, being a mother and being a wife imply two ends of the spectrum of gendered dominance: matrimonial subjugation or mater-

4 Joan Scott, "Genre: Une catégorie utile d'analyse historique," *Les cahiers du GRIF* 1, 37 (1988), 125–153.

nal power. Yet, these roles may belong to the same individual: everything depends on relationship, situation, and perspective.

"Matrimoine" allows us to recover this situation by shedding light on the crucial question of generation, in terms of seniority and procreation. This raises the question of heritage.

The *Oríkì* of the Mother or "Matrimoine" as Heritage

While in many aspects of its political and economic life, postcolonial Beninese society might be considered patriarchal, a reinterpretation of social, spiritual, and genealogical relationships through the lens of "matrimoine" opens up new perspectives. For instance, in the Abomey tradition, it is common for a child to take the mother's name, rites, and language, and to distinguish her contribution from that of the father. The father's name appears on official colonial identification, but it does not reflect the close or supportive relationships maintained with maternal households. In both Nigeria and Benin, each child carries several names given by both the father and mother, in turn associated with their respective genealogies. Through daily sung litanies and panegyrics, the mother reminds her children of their maternal oríkì, or maternal genealogy.

In the capital of Benin, known as Porto-Novo (colonial name), *Xọgbonú* (Gun toponym), or *Ajasẹ* (Yoruba toponym), the wife (*yaó* in both Gungbe and Yoruba) is always considered a "foreigner" within the household, but this status of alterity grants her a particular power: the transmission of her in-laws' lineage stories. "Matrimoine" is not only about maternal or symbolic or ritual marital relations; it is also about the transmission of genealogical and ritual knowledge. Indeed, some wives and mothers, seen as outsiders by both prominent family members and scholarly literature, play a pivotal role in the (re)configuration of lineages. The figure of the *tánnyínọ* (aunt or customary mother) is exemplary in this regard. In most written sources examining the social and spatial organization of lineages, the *tánnyínọ* is described as one of the oldest *tánnyì* (paternal aunts) within the lineage. Nevertheless, according to our research in *Xọgbonú*, not all *tánnyì* in the household can assume this role. Thus, the *tánnyínọ* should not step outside the "historical courtyards" founded by the direct descendants of the founding ancestor. In other words, the lineage's founding ancestor is nurtured, maintained, and honored by a woman who is not his direct descendant. Just as the founding ancestor is essential to inscribing a lineage spatially, the *tánnyínọ* is equally vital

for maintaining the daily relationship with this same ancestor, his memory and his spatial influence.

A similar observation applies to the *yaó*, the wives of the home. Foreign by definition, they actively contribute to the (re)definition of the lineage. During family ceremonies, their role is fundamental: the *yaó* are the ones who sing and interpret the *oríkì*. In a sense, they are the custodians, but also the preservers and transmitters of the history of the founding ancestor, of which the *oríkì* is a translation. The *yaó* are outsiders and are often former captives. In 1904, in the protectorate of Porto-Novo, there were 48,000 "Nago" domestic captives, also known by the exonym "Yorùbá", out of a total population of 154,000, meaning one "Yorùbá" captive for every two free men.[5] These captives were predominantly female, making them three times more numerous than men in Porto-Novo society.[6] The memories of slavery also form part of "matrimoine".

"Matrimoine" in Museum Collections: Things of Us-Other

When seen as a situated and contextual approach – related to gender, intersectional, though not always "dominated" – "matrimoine" opens new perspectives towards understanding current debates on the restitution and return of the "other" collections, as they are called. As in other areas of social life, but even more so given its colonial history, the "gender" of restitution is a "primary field within which, or through which, power is articulated".[7] "Matrimoine" is relevant to the restitution debates in two ways: through the gendered division of pro or con positions in the West, and the gendered relationship to collections. Since 2020, we have been creating an inventory of public positions in Europe either "for" or "against" restitution. We found that in the museum and art market sectors, the defense of restitution is almost exclusively led by women, while its opponents – curators or collectors – are nearly all men. This division likely reveals gender polarization in the relationship to the collections and objects/artworks concerned: for some, these are collections of objects forming a "museum of

5 Michel Videgla, *Un État Ouest-Africain : le royaume Goun de Hogbonou (Porto-Novo) des origines à 1908* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2002), 377.

6 Michel Videgla, "Les éléments sombres de l'histoire de Porto-Novo: esclavage et colonisation," in *Porto-Novo: Patrimoine et développement*, ed. Christine Mengin and Alain Godonou (Paris/Porto-Novo: Publications de la Sorbonne/École du patrimoine africain, 2013), 81–99

7 Scott, "Genre," 143.

others," whereas, for others, they represent constitutive elements of a "museum of us-other", where sisterhood and "matrimoine" intersect. The logics of representation, identification, and/or othering, place the advocates of the circulation-conservation of the alterity-object against the advocates of the restitution-transmission of the subject-identity. In this sense, those advocating for the return are the *yaó* or *axɔsì* of dispersed "matrimoines". In the context of the recent access to positions of power in the museum or academic world by Western women, this hypothesis of gender polarization – between othering and identification – appears to be crucial to jointly understanding the century-old refusals of restitution, the recent developments in its implementation, and the challenges yet to be faced.

"Matrimoine" as a Trouble in Gender and Collections

Today, in French-speaking Europe, "matrimoine" is often used synonymously with works produced by women, as we see in events like "matrimoine" days. A perspective informed by gender and generational relations in Nigerian and Beninese contexts would help to move beyond this approach, which is rooted in biological differences. It restores the agency of "mothers" and "aunts" and supports the strong, situated objectivity of their perspectives.[8]

In 2022, the wives of the vodún (*vodúnsì*) Mami Wata (Mother of Waters) visited the "Treasures of Benin" exhibition at the Presidential Palace in Cotonou. After paying homage to the deities and thrones returned by France, they discovered the contemporary art exhibition, which included Gẹ̀lẹ̀dé crest masks by Beninese artist Kifouli Dossou (see Fig. 21).

The maternal power of the Mami Wata and Gẹ̀lẹ̀dé cults is reactivated through *vodúnsì* "femmage", a term intended as the feminine equivalent of homage, which refers, here to both creations that utilize conceptual and technical processes traditionally associated with women, as well as to experiences of recognition, sisterhood, sharing, and the transmission of the heritage of "mothers" and "aunts."

"Matrimoine" is also this: a space-time where generations intersect, knowledge is transmitted, and powers are reactivated. In this way, "matrimoine" intro-

8 Artemisa Flores-Espínola, "Subjectivité et connaissance: réflexions sur les épistémologies du 'point de vue'," *Cahiers du Genre* 2, 53 (2012), 99–120.

Fig. 21: The vodúnsì Mami Wata visit the *Treasures of Benin* exhibition in Cotonou. In the foreground, the Geledé mask by Beninese artist Kifouli Dossou.

duces a new form of intersectionality, intertwining questions of gender, class, and race, but also of age or, more accurately, generation. It enables us to view a sequence of narratives, patrimonies, and collections that are external, if not outright foreign. Those of enslaved, colonial, missionary, ethnological, and patriarchal origin, all of which are agnatic in their symbolic orientation: appropriating the living and the land, imposing narratives and imaginaries, capturing and displaying. Besides questions of intersectionality, coloniality, and appropriation, "matrimoine" also raises those of subjectification, transmission, and heritage. It offers a different perspective on colonial patrimony, ritual performances, the history of the slave trade, the role of captives who became wives, and colonial, missionary, or scientific collections. From this perspective, "matrimoine" might serve as a "useful category", in Scott's sense,[9] in contemplating systemic power relations, as well as relative and evolving relations.

9 Scott, "Genre."

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Claire Brizon, and Denis Pourawa

N
Naming

"Permanent Reformulation" as a Means of Constructing Kanak Identity in a Decolonial Act

The expression of "permanent reformulation" was proposed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936–1989), a Kanak political figure, poet, thinker, and philosopher inspired by his Melanesian land, New Caledonia, and its customs, and language.[1] His definition was expressed during an interview in 1985, when Tjibaou was serving as president of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), a party whose members had called for an electoral boycott a year earlier, on November 18, 1984, against the so-called Lemoine statute, named after the then French Overseas Territories Minister.

> Going back to tradition is a myth; I strive to say it and repeat it. It is a myth. No one as experienced it. The search for identity, the model, for me, is in front of me, never behind. It is a constant reformulation. And I shall say that our present struggle is to be able to put forward the best of our past, our culture, to build the model of man and society that we want for the edification of the citizenship. Some may have other perspectives, but that's my personal view. Our identity is in front of us. Finally, when we're dead, people will take our image, place it in shrines, and use it to construct their own identity. Otherwise you never manage to 'kill your father', you are doomed[2] (our translation).

This expression is a fundamental element of FLNKS political thought, in which its founders integrated both tangible and intangible heritage. Customary language, itself intangible heritage, serves as the primary matrix for the structural organization of Kanak society. Melanesian culture and tradition are the foundations underpinning Tjibaou's decolonial argument, of the Pacific-style social pact with "history's victims" – the colonial settlers' descendents – which he crafted, as well as of his deconstruction of colonial French discourse and reconstruction of a decolonial relationship with Europeans as a whole. The latter, to be considered in parallel with political and territorial decolonization processes, was conceptualized by scholars in the 1990s in South America through the interdisciplinary re-

1 Jean-Marie Tjibaou, *La Présence kanak*, ed. Alban Bensa and Éric Wittersheim (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996), 185.

2 Jean-Marie Tjibaou, "Entretien avec Jean-Marie Tjibaou," *Les Temps Modernes, Nouvelle-Calédonie: pour l'indépendance* 41, 464 (1985), 1587–1601.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-017

search group Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality.[3] The authors in this movement question Europe's central role in world history to date. One of the main concepts they define is coloniality: a multifaceted power regime that emerged in the modern era through colonization and the intensification of international trade, which, despite the decolonization processes initiated in the 1950s, still persists today, especially in the way social power relations are organized.[4] From a museological perspective, this awareness prompts the rethinking of professional and relational practices with stakeholders and affected communities as concerns relational ethics, as discussed in the recent symposium organized by the International Committee for Museology titled *Decolonising museology*.[5]

Today, using the expression "permanent reformulation" to rename the Kanak material heritage preserved in Western museums is not about rewriting a history that was once written in blood. In the fight for liberation and decolonization, the duty of the colonized is to restore the falsified memory of their people and ancestors, and to surpass themselves by creating collectively a worthy society within a renewed and remodeled humanity. Through the essence of the original Indigenous "voices", oral memory can regain its full vitality, which is now fading for many colonized peoples. Indigenous "voice" must reclaim its rightful place within the realm of science, knowledge, and understanding. In the Kanak world, "voice" is still today somehow the only way to measure community life within society; this is evident if we consider the number of believers in religious rites, who seem to be looking in the divine "voice" the representation of the legitimate power of a potent, invisible entity and which brings the breath of life from the First Ancestor to the clans, still alive for the average Pacific Island national. Today, the position of the "Kanak voice" is as prominent in New Caledonian society as the objects displayed behind glass cases in museums worldwide.[6] In a multipolarised world, this "Kanak voice", which is currently caught in an irreversible process of historical decolonization, this constitutionalized "voice", still under French colonial wardship, this "voice" which must continue to struggle to live and breathe, behind the grand showcase of the now digital and virtual modern society. With dif-

3 Aníbal Quijano, "Colonialidad y modernidad / racionalidad," *Revista del Instituto Indigenista. Peruano* 13, 29 (1992), 11–20.

4 Edgardo Lander, ed, *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, Sur-Sur), 2000.

5 Yves Bergeron and Michel Rivet, eds., *Décoloniser la muséologie: musées, métissages et mythes d'origine (Montréal, 15–18.03.2021)* (Paris: ICOFOM (Comité international pour la muséologie du Conseil international des musées), 2021), accessed January 26, 2022, https://icofom.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2022/03/2021_icofom_decoloniser_museologie.pdf.

6 Roger Boulay and Emmanuel Kasarhérou, eds., *Kanak, L'art est une parole* (Arles-Paris: Actes Sud, Musée du quai Branly, 2013).

ficulty, it endures, a living and rooted speech, bound to the customary values of oceanic community life. It is speech that resists and suffers the vicissitudes and changes of successive governments. From political speech to colonial literature, the only written source of cultural transmission has long been the Western perspective.

Where does speech come from? When asked this question by a journalist from the cultural magazine le Mwà Véé, Mr. Arthur Maramin, a customary elder from the Xârâcùù area in Canala, responded as follows:

> Speech came from where the ancestors are. The speech within me stops here today because tomorrow, we don't know. That's why I have already passed it on to my children. Speech is the breath of the earth. It's like a mirror; we are on one side, and the spirits are on the other. They watch us and listen to us. R culture, There is no boundary between life and death. Death is merely a passage from here to the other side of the mirror. Death is the continuity of life. That's why, before speaking, one must make a gesture for those on the other side, the spirits, with the elements, the rain, the wind [. . .]. For instance, to summon rain, there is a specific clan designated to carry the "rain stone". Not just anybody. It's the same for thunder, for fire. If this is not respected, the entire society falls apart. And if there's no order, there's no respect for speech, and thus, no respect for nature or the elements. Speech is always here, it is alive. The elders [the spirits of the elders] are here with us. That's why one must always bow when speaking. The elders [spirits] listen to us, the spring listens to us, the birds, the wind – they all listen. It's all one and the same speech[7] (our translation).

If this is all one and the same speech for the Kanak people, might we suggest that colonizing and decolonizing are one, single speech for the Western colonizer? The act of decolonization requires the act of distinguishing itself from colonization, in order to repair what was inaudible and make audible the speech that has finally been received.

To apply the concept of "permanent reformulation" as part of the decolonial act, a Kanak axe, referred in French to as "*hâche ostensoir*", which is conserved in Switzerland at the Cantonal Museum of Archaeology and History in Lausanne was chosen as a case study. This type of axe, which consists of a jade disk mounted on a handle set into half a coconut shell often covered with tapa and braided flying fox fur thread decorations, is commonly called in French "*ostensoir*" due to its formal resemblance to the Catholic monstrance used to display the consecrated host during the communion part of the mass.[8] Museologists Roger Boulay and Emmanuel Kasarhérou, who have researched the origins of this comparison, explain that the

7 Arthur Marmarin, "Arthur Marmarin, transmetteur coutumier, entretien retranscrit par Gérald del Rio et Ammanuel Tjibaou," *Mwa Vée, La parole kanak* 76, 6 (2012), 6.

8 CNRTL. *Ostensoir*. Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales (dictionnaire en ligne), accessed August 26, 2020, https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/ostensoir.

term originated during the period of collection.[9] Bruni d'Entrecasteaux seems to have been the first to describe its form and usage, noting: "We finally learned from several of them that this instrument was intended to disembowel the bodies of their victims and to strip the flesh from bones" (our translation).[10]

However, the physical composition of this object makes it incompatible with the warrior description it was given. It is evident that the blade, too heavy for the size of the handle, could not truly have served as a cutting tool capable of "stripping flesh from bones". Anthropologist Christiane Métais suggests that rather than a weapon, this object, reserved for a high-ranking figure, would have been a ceremonial object[11] a theory supported by the flying fox fur thread, which was a precious material traditionally used as currency, especially in marriage and alliance ceremonies.[12]

The assigning of a Christian term to designate an Indigenous object is not an isolated event. Tahitian barkcloth garments known as *tiputa*, for instance, have been labeled "*chasubles*". These new labels show that Western culture is considered the primary cultural reference as regards colonized cultures. These labels also highlight a globalized process of appropriation that extends beyond the material realm to the immaterial, as appropriation is carried out through language.[13]

In this context, it would seem relevant, through the concept of "permanent reformulation", to rename this Europeanized object in one of the 28 Kanak languages. The "voice" of the monstrance axe, renamed Nââkwéta in the Xârâcùù language, means "speaking the language of the Ocean or of peace", which was its original name in the Xârâcùù region in central New Caledonia.[14] Poetically, to reestablish "Kanak voice", renaming the object should restore its lost vision, fulfill its purpose, reestablish its original duty, and retrace its source formula. This new perspective aims to infuse it with meaning in a way that is acceptable to and for all. Although this is all one and the same speech, action must still be taken to lay

9 Boulay and Kasarhérou, *Kanak, L'art est une parole*, 40.

10 Joseph-Antoine (Bruni d') Entrecasteaux, *Voyage de D'Entrecasteaux à la recherche de La Perouse* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1808), 338.

11 Éliane Métais, "Hypothèse sur l'origine de la hache ostensoir néocalédonienne," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 8, 8 (1952), 137–148.

12 Marie-Solange Neaoutyine, *Arts de l'Echange en Océanie* (Nouméa: Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2006), 72.

13 Claire Brizon, *Collections coloniales. À l'origine des fonds anciens non européens dans les musées suisses* (Zurich and Genève: Seismo, 2023), 113–114.

14 Denis Pourawa, "Nââkwéta ou l'art de la relation," in *Une Suisse exotique? Regarder l'ailleurs en Suisse au siècle des Lumières*, ed. Noémie Étienne, Claire Brizon, Chonja Lee and Étienne Wismer (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2020), 224–225.

the foundations of this "sameness".[15] Through the name Nââkwéta, a poetic "permanent reformulation" emerges, transforming it into a "speaking object". To regain its aura and virtue and reorganize the conceptual space-time balance of human emotions and sentiments, Nââkwéta must find its place in the geographical space of the human heart. The ultimate purpose of speech is to be represented. Renaming it as Nââkwéta brings this type of object to life, connecting it to humanity, to natural elements, to the constellations, to people, to Ancestors, and finally to society. Reformulating our thoughts, our ideas, our dreams, and our hopes is the essence of "Permanent Reformulation". The spirit of Nââkwéta prompts each of us to question our relationship with ourselves, a pursuit that applies equally to the colonized and the colonizer. Renaming it Nââkwéta restores its light, its position as an exceptional work, and as a vessel of an age-old concept that remains relevant today: a message of peace and connection, a message of stability handed down to guide humanity's ultimate duty: Balance (see Fig. 22).

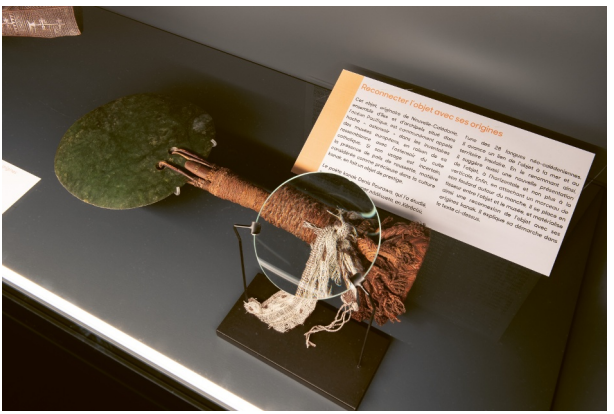

Fig. 22: View of the exhibition *Retracer la provenance. Collections invisibles*, Cantonal Museum of Archaeology and History in Lausanne (Switzerland), 2021. MCAH/04547, undocumented author, *Nââkwéta*, 18th century, jade, wood, tapa, coconut shell, flying fox fur, New Caledonia, likely collected between 1791 and 1794 during the expedition led by Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, Jules Paul Benjamin Delessert Collection, donated in 1824, Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire de Lausanne.

15 François-Marie Arouet (dit Voltaire), "Identité," in *Dictionnaire philosophique* édition Garnier, 1878, accessed May 2, 2023, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionnaire_philosophique/Garnier_(1878)/Identit%C3%A9#cite_note-1.

Thus, to use the term "permanent reformulation" to rename a Kanak object preserved today in Western museums is to make a decolonial act toward colonial imaginaries and mentalities. Between the reading of the account of a prominent Western navigator and listening to the words of a clan striving to reconstruct the narrative of its past, falsified and plundered by colonization, there remains a hyphen linking the wind clan, the rain clan, the thunder clan, the fire clan, the earth clan, the engravings on carved bamboo, the scant traces and memories that, until now, remained silent.

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Marion Bertin

O
Object

Objects as Ambassadors of Kanak Culture

The term "object" is part of the standard terminology used in the museum world to designate a tangible item preserved in a collection. The choice of this word reflects a deliberate distinction from the term "artwork," which is recognized as having artistic status. From a philosophical perspective, the term "object" also denotes a difference from "subject". Thus, an object exists only in and through the relationship created between a subject and itself,[1] and it is the human subject that gives meaning to an object. Some of the items preserved in museum collections, however, are not considered mere objects but are actually personified, recognized as ancestors or family members. Such personification is seen in certain Kanak heritage items preserved in museums outside New Caledonia, items which are described as "ambassador objects."

This idea arose within a historical and political context characterized by the cultural and identity affirmation of the Kanak peoples, Indigenous to the archipelago of New Caledonia, which was accompanied by a gradual transformation of the relationship between the French State, the New Caledonian authorities, and the Kanak peoples. The term "ambassador" first appeared in 1990 in the inaugural speech for the exhibition *De Jade et de nacre* at the Territorial Museum of New Caledonia (Musée territorial de Nouvelle-Calédonie),[2] delivered by Octave Togna, a Kanak politician and independence activist. In this speech, Togna stated: "Our ancestors let these things go, and some may have done so willingly. Let them be our ambassadors" (our translation).[3] However, it appears that this idea dates back even further, rooted in the thought of Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936–1989) and his interpretation of the Kanak heritage preserved in international museums. Starting in 1979, at the request of Jean-Marie Tjibaou – a cultural leader and prominent figure in the Kanak independence movement – an inventory was drawn up and efforts undertaken to locate Kanak cultural objects housed in museums outside New Caledonia to understand how they were displayed and the

1 Jean Bazin and Alban Bensa, "Les objets et les choses: Des objets à la 'chose'," *Genèses* 17 (1994): 4–7.

2 Today, this museum has become the Museum of New Caledonia.

3 Togna cited in Roger Boulay, "'De Jade et de nacre'. Responsabilités patrimoniales, inventaires et restitutions," *Les Nouvelles de l'ICOM* 46, 2 (1993), 17.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-018

narratives associated with them.[4] This inventory, called the "Inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé" (IPKD), is now accessible online.[5] The *De Jade et de nacre* exhibition marked the first temporary return of 120 Kanak items preserved in museums in mainland France and Europe, selected based on the IPKD. The establishment of the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture (Agence de développement de la culture kanak, ADCK) in 1989 and the creation of the Tjibaou Cultural Center (Centre Culturel Tjibaou) in Nouméa enabled the development of a larger-scale project for the temporary loan of items to the cultural center: the Kanak Ambassador Objects Program. The New Caledonian cultural initiative was also supported politically and financially by the government of New Caledonia and the French State. The Nouméa Accord, signed in 1998 between representatives of the French State and those of the New Caledonian political parties, both pro-independence and loyalist, dedicated a specific article to Kanak "cultural heritage" (Art. 1.3), including a paragraph specifically on "cultural objects" (Art. 1.3.2). Through this text, the French State committed to supporting the return of Kanak objects to the territory. Between 1998 and 2013, seventy-three objects were loaned and displayed at the Tjibaou Cultural Center over three successive rotations.[6] The exhibition *Kanak, l'art est une parole*, held at Quai Branly Museum-Jacques Chirac (Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac) and later at the Tjibaou Cultural Center in 2013–2014, concluded this program with the temporary return of 200 objects on loan from European museums. At the end of this exhibition, the program came to an end for both logistical and financial reasons.[7]

Today, projects related to dispersed Kanak heritage are being resumed in the event of renovation of the New Caledonian Museum (Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie), scheduled to reopen in 2026. In this context, ambassador objects are once again expected to travel from mainland France, Europe, and Australia and will be hosted in Nouméa for temporary stays lasting several years.

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4 Roger Boulay, ed, *Carnets kanak. Voyage en inventaire de Roger Boulay* (Paris: Édition du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2020).

5 Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé (Inventory of Dispersed Kanak Heritage) (IDKH), n.d., https://museenouvellecaledonie.gouv.nc/collections/linventaire-du-patrimoine-kanak-disperse-ipkd (accessed January 16, 2025).

6 Marion Bertin and Marianne Tissandier (pref.), "Archives délaissées, archives retrouvées, archives explorées: les fonds calédoniens pour l'étude du patrimoine kanak dispersé," *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre* 14 (2019), accessed June 8, 2023, https://journals.openedition.org/cel/5438; Marion Bertin, *Circulations et valeurs des objets océaniens dans les collections privées et publiques (1980–2020)*, Thèse de doctorat, Anthropologie et Muséologie, Université de La Rochelle et École du Louvre, 2021, 490–496.

7 Marion Bertin, "La statuette ambassadrice. Diplomatie kanak au musée du quai Branly," *Terrain* 73 (2020), 228–235.

Of the ambassador objects that have already returned to Nouméa, there are various types of Kanak objects representing a diversity of meanings and uses. Some of these objects fill in gaps in the collections of the New Caledonian Museum; an anthropomorphic female figurine, for example, collected during the expedition led by Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux between 1791 and 1794 (see Fig. 23).

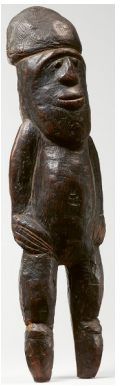

Fig. 23: Undocumented author, anthropomorphic figurine, Kanak population, New Caledonia, late 18th century, wood coating, likely collected during the expedition led by A. Bruni d'Entrecasteaux in search of La Pérouse (1791–1794), currently housed at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, inv. n° 72.56.125.

Following European contact and colonization, small statuary objects quickly disappeared from Kanak societies. This ambassador object made a strong impact when it was displayed in 1990 and has returned to Nouméa twice since, in 1998 and 2014.[8]

However, despite the term suggesting personification, ambassador objects are not exclusively anthropomorphic. Several Kanak currency items, for instance, have returned to Nouméa since 1990 (see Fig. 24).

Fig. 24: Undocumented author, currency head, Kanak population, New Caledonia, early 20th century, wickerwork: plant fibers, shell beads, mother-of-pearl, fish vertebrae, dolium shell, flying fox fur, currency head donated by Maurice Leenhardt to the Musée de l'Homme in 1934, now housed at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, inv. n° 72.56.125.

8 Bertin, "La statuette ambassadrice."

These currencies are composite objects, crafted from woven materials and an assemblage of various items, including shells, flying fox fur, and animal or human bones. Such currencies were used in exchanges between individuals or Kanak clans. They are keystone objects in the Kanak world, symbolizing established relationships and they remain significant today, when contemporary examples continue to be made. The ambassador objects selected aimed to represent the full variety of Kanak heritage and all the regions of New Caledonia. For instance, in 2001, the collection of objects exhibited in Nouméa on loan from the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (France) included a stone statue from Lifou, an island in the Loyalty Archipelago where few examples of material heritage have been preserved.

The term "ambassador object" is meaningful in several ways. First, this expression illustrates a juxtaposition between subject and object: while remaining a museum collection item, the "ambassador object" also becomes a subject. Through this, these objects regain agency and a capacity for action;[9] they are endowed with specific roles by the Kanak people. Furthermore, the diplomatic metaphor clearly conveys the role assigned to these objects, which become political and cultural representatives of the Kanak people in museums worldwide.[10] Ambassador objects are thus tasked with "making Kanak culture known worldwide and revealing who the men [and women] of this land [New Caledonia] are and to whom the foot that walks on this soil belongs" (our translation),[11] and "carrying with them [the Kanak voice] of yesterday and today" (our translation).[12] These objects are also duty-bound to return regularly to New Caledonia to renew their connection with their place of origin and the descendants of those who created them.[13] The political context needs reiterating: the concept and implementation of the "Kanak ambassadors objects" program took place while the Kanak people were actively fighting for the independence of New Caledonia, which they referred to as Kanaky. The archipelago has been on the United Nations (UN) list of non-self-governing territories since 1984. Diplomatic assertion is particularly meaningful in the case of Indigenous Peoples who do not yet enjoy full international sovereignty. On the global museum stage, the ADCK asserts itself and collaborates on an equal footing with other institutions, in particular, by providing the necessary funding for the transport and insurance of objects. In the end, the concept of object-subject highlights the limitations of the Euro-North American terminology used in the museum world, a

9 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

10 Bertin, "La statuette ambassadrice."

11 Togna cited in Boulay, "'De Jade et de nacre'," 17.

12 Tjibaou, cited in Roberta Colombo Dougoud, "Les bambous gravés, objets ambassadeurs de la culture kanak," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 136–137 (2013), 132.

13 Bertin, "La statuette ambassadrice."

terminology that reflects a naturalist ontology that is not universally applicable.[14] This term represents the adaptation of museum vocabulary to a specific context.

The "Kanak ambassador objects" program directly inspired projects in French Polynesia connected to the reopening of Te Fare Iamana – Museum of Tahiti and the Islands (Te Fare Iamana – Musée de Tahiti et des îles): several Polynesian objects preserved in French and British public collections were sent back to Tahiti on loan, for varying lengths of time, to be displayed in the Tahitian museum.[15] In the context of transnational projects, objects associated with *Māori* communities from Aotearoa – New Zealand are also referred to as "ambassadors" and are charged with representing *Māori* culture and attesting to the collaborations established with European museums, including the Natural History Museum (Muséum d'histoire naturelle) in Rouen (France) and the World Cultures Museum (Museum für Völkerkunde) in Leiden (Netherlands). The Kanak example might also be compared to metaphors used in the case of African heritage, conceived as a form of "diaspora" scattered across the world (see "Diaspora").[16] In both cases, we see the personification of objects and an investment in them as cultural representatives on an international scale.

Thus, "ambassador objects" illustrate an alternative approach in debates surrounding collections from colonial contexts: rather than restitution, in the sense of a transfer of ownership, these objects become part of a "shared heritage"[17] between New Caledonia and the "adopting museums"[18] in which they are preserved. This case remains quite singular, however, in that some of the circulation occurs within the borders of the French Republic, between mainland France and an overseas territory. Nonetheless, "ambassador objects" play a central role in rela-

14 Julien Bondaz and Sarah Frioux-Salgas, "Utopies, continuités et discontinuités muséales à l'ère des décolonisations," *Gradhiva* 34 (2022), 12–39.

15 Garance Nyssen, *Ethnographie d'une exposition, Maro 'ura. Un trésor polynésien au musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac*, Mémoire de recherche, Ethnologie, Université Paris Nanterre, 2022.

16 Paul Basu, "Object Diasporas, Resourcing Communities: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape," *Museum Anthropology* 34, 1 (2011), 28–42; John Peffer, "Africa's Diasporas of Images," *Third Text* 19, 4 (2005), 339–355.

17 Emmanuel Kasarhérou, "Les objets ambassadeurs de la culture kanak: un exemple de patrimoine culturel partagé," in *Patrimoine naturel et culturel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, ed. Castets-Renard Céline and Guylène Nicolas (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015), 281–286 ; Emmanuel Kasarhérou, "D'un patrimoine dispersé à un patrimoine partagé," in *Carnets kanak. Voyage en inventaire de Roger Boulay*, ed. Roger Boulay (Paris: Édition du musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac, 2020), 11–14.

18 Gérard Del Rio and Emmanuel Kasarhérou. "Bwenaado: le voyage des 'objets ambassadeurs' de la culture kanak entre leurs 'musées d'adoption' et la Nouvelle-Calédonie." *Mwà Véé. Revue culturelle kanak* 54 (2006).

tionships and collaborations between heritage institutions in New Caledonia and internationally. From a theoretical standpoint, these projects reflect a specific epistemology of heritage, envisioned as dispersed, shared, and circulating.

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Anna Seiderer

P
Phantom

The Phantom Image

> The engraved views will be animated by figures [. . .]
> It is said that the effect of his plates is magical[1]
> (Louis Daguerre, our translation)

Photography and film emerged alongside the colonial expansion of European nations in the 19th century. Despite the technical limitations of these media, they played a key role in the process, acting as both a lever for understanding and a tool for contestation. The frame – a shared denominator of analog still and moving images – carries the promise of reproducibility and of "exporting" reality.[2] It quickly sparked artistic, scientific, and commercial interest. Daguerreotypes accompanied early travels to the Orient[3] and gradually became part of colonial expeditions, moving through territories that were explored, negotiated, or conquered by force. Images thus fed into diplomatic[4] and military relations.[5] These images could also undermine them, as was seen with the publication of the photographs Alice Seeley Harris took, denouncing the atrocities in the Congo Free State.[6] From the earliest technical experiments, photographic and cinematic im-

1 *Excursions daguerriennes. Les vues et les monuments les plus remarquables du globe : Paris, Milan, Venise, Florence, Rome, Naples, la Suisse, l'Allemagne, Londres, Malte, l'Egypte, Saint-Jean d'Acre, Constantinople, Athènes* ; etc. Vol.1, accessed Paril 17, 2025, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86260852/f10.item.r=excursions%20daguerriennes%20vol.

2 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographic Uncertainties: Between Evidence and Reassurance," *History and Anthropology* 25, 2 (2014), 171–188; Kelley Wilder and Gregg Mitman, eds., *Documenting the World: Film, Photography and the Scientific Record* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

3 Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet accompanied his uncle Horace Vernet to the Orient. In Alexandria, he produced the famous, now-lost image of the first daguerreotype. A few years later, Maxime Du Camp, travel companion of Gustave Flaubert, created albums of Egypt, Nubia, Palestine, and Syria (1849–1851).

4 Félix-Jacques Moulin (1802–1879) created a photographic album of Algeria, which he dedicated to Napoleon III. The photographs of Roland Bonaparte and Philippe Jacques Potteau also attest to the importance of photographic portraits in diplomatic relations.

5 Daniel Foliard, *Combattre, punir, photographier. Empires coloniaux, 1890–1914* (Paris: La Découverte, 2020).

6 John Harris and Moorel Edmond, *The Congo Atrocities: A Lecture To Accompany a Series of 60 Photographic Slides* (London: London School of Economics, 1909).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-019

ages were caught between two opposing poles – art and information.[7] Here, the still is understood as both a concept and a performative object that crystallizes various forms of transmission of the colonial past.

Photogram

The invention of the photographic device was officially attributed to Louis Daguerre on January 7, 1839, yet there exist other technical experiments that preceded or coincided with his work.[8] Without the political and financial support required for the development of these experiments, such as heliography on tin plates developed by Nicéphore Niépce, Hippolyte Bayard's direct positive process, William Talbot's photograms, or even Hercule Florence's gold ore experiments in Brazil, it could not have achieved widespread recognition. In *L'image extractive* (2021), artist Daphné Le Sergent envisages a photograph made with gold ores rather than the silver salts of analog photography. This video connects the history of these technical inventions to the extraction policies that devastate the environments they exploit.

The photogram, also referred to as a "photogenic drawing", was experimented with by Talbot and is a photographic print made not with a camera but by placing an object between the paper and the light source. Although historically distinct from the mechanical process perfected by Daguerre, the photogram laid the groundwork for *photo-graphy*. This process is more closely aligned with the Greek etymology *graphein*, which denotes an inscription process common to both writing and drawing. This inscription gradually gave way to representation, intended as the revelation of the "latent image" that Daguerre would unveil in the darkroom, with the promise of documenting the world through mechanized reproduction.

Visual Inventory of the Globe

Olivier Lugon notes that the concept of "documentary photography" took shape as a reaction to the pictorialist movement of the 1880s. Established as a genre,

7 André Gunther and Michel Poivert, ed., *L'art de la Photographie. Des Origine à nos jours* (Paris: Citadelles, 2007).

8 Paul-Louis Roubert, "La génération du Daguerréotype," in *L'art de la Photographie. Des Origine à nos jours*, ed. André Gunther and Michel Poivert (Paris: Citadelles, 2007), 12–39; Linda Fregni Nagler, ed., *Hercule Florence, Le Nouveau Robinson* (Paris: Presses du réel, 2017).

belief in its scientific and educational virtues lay at the heart of numerous documentary collection projects.[9] From 1909 to 1931, philanthropist banker Albert Kahn sent a team of ten operators around the world to document it. His humanist project was based on the idea that these visual archives of human diversity would foster tolerance and bring people closer together. Several thousand autochrome plates and kilometers of film were created to build an archive of a world whose modernity hastened its decline. The encyclopedic use of photographic and cinematic media has been strongly criticized by thinkers such as Johannes Fabian,[10] James Clifford and George Marcus,[11] and Valentin Mudimbe.[12] The primary critiques involve the disregard or misinterpretation of the cultural and religious contexts of the captured images and the anachronistic projections they involve.

The Phantom Image

The dialectical approach to the Warburgian image[13] informs a number of artistic reinterpretations of these visual corpora produced in colonial contexts.[14] For instance, the image shown below features the artist Thuthuka Sibisi extending his microphone toward the photographed silhouettes in Dahomey in 1930, for The Archives of the Planet (see Fig. 25).

Sibisi listens to the sounds within the images, to the voices they carry, which commentary alone cannot render audible. The historical caption for the autoch-

9 Lugon, "L'esthétique du document", 358–421.

10 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

11 James Clifford, and Marcus George, eds., *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

12 Valentin Mudimbe, *L'invention de l'Afrique. Gnose, philosophie et ordre de la connaissance* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1988).

13 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2002) ; Anna Seiderer, "Images fantômes. Anamnèse coloniale," in *Africa in the World, the World in Africa / L'Africa nel mondo, il mondo in Africa*, ed. Alessandro Gori and Fabio Viti (Milano: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2022), 217–235.

14 This research was developed as part of the Labex project "Les passés dans le présent" 2019–2022, titled *Images animées, mémoires controversées* (CINEMAF). Within this research framework, Didier Houénoudé (INMAAC/University of Abomey-Calavi), Bronwyn Lace (visual artist and co-founder of the Centre For The Less Good Idea), and Anna Seiderer (AIAC/EPHA/Université Paris 8) conducted an artistic investigation into the Dahomey collection of The Archives of the Planet, https://lessgoodidea.com/thinking-in-archives-2022.

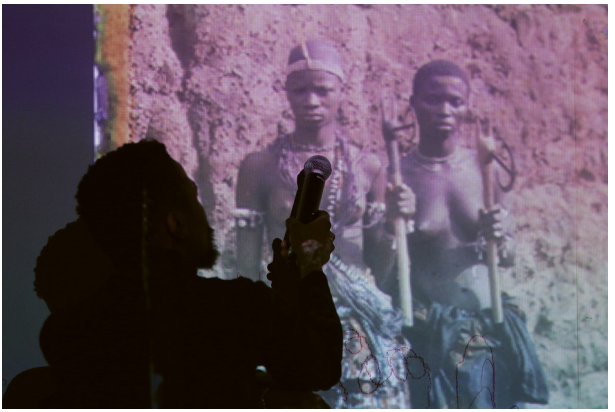

Fig. 25: Thuthuka Sibisi at Arts |Archives| Performances workshop at the Centre For the Less Good Idea, Johannesburg, 2022.

rome notes "two thunder-priestesses, or Hèbiôssô" from the Zado region. This collection of still and moving images from Dahomey was entrusted to missionary Francis Aupiais, a connoisseur and admirer of vodǔn religious practices from the Gulf of Benin, and to the photographer Frédéric Gadmer.[15] The autochrome Sibisi engages with is part of a set of images depicting initiates, photographed in pairs or groups at the base of royal palace walls. The autochrome technique, using color impressions on glass plates, shares the same transparency of image as film. It was brought to life by commentary which accompanied projection sessions in the early 20th century. Lugon notes that the autochrome image only achieved meaning within this "commented unveiling".[16]

A completely different visual economy was implemented in the context of the Arts | Archives | Performances workshop organized at the Centre for The Less Good Idea in August 2022.[17] Like Thuthuka Sibisi's intervention, each participant engaged in dialogue with an image from the corpus. This initial encounter went on in a workspace equipped with a Pepper's ghost device. This 19th-century illusionist technique has the unique quality of making ghosts appear within the

15 Martine Balard, *Dahomey 1930: mission catholique et culte vodoun. L'œuvre de Francis Aupiais (1877–1945) Missionnaire et ethnographe* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1999); Gaetano Ciarcia, "Reconnaître et convertir. Le cas du corpus filmique. Le Dahomey chrétien dans l'œuvre éditoriale et filmique de Francis Aupiais," *Ethnographiques.org* (2019), accessed February 14, 2022, https://www.ethnographiques.org/2019/Ciarcia.

16 Lugon, "L'esthétique du document", 365.

17 The *Centre For The Less Good Idea* was founded in 2016 by William Kentridge and Bronwyn Lace, accessed April 17, 2025, https://lessgoodidea.com.

image, highlighting its phantom-like quality. Autochromes and film excerpts devoted to vodǔn rituals,[18] all recorded in Dahomey in 1930, were projected onto the angled mirror in the studio. Contrary to the (magical) belief in a faithful representation of reality, the prevailing belief in the early days of photography, the use of this device in a South African post-apartheid artistic context literally and figuratively shifts the discursive frameworks within which these images were conceived. This technique allows one to enter the image and intervene in the narration that once accompanied it, multiplying its meanings and perspectives. The silhouettes imprinted on colonial archival images blend with those produced today. In this way, these artistic experiments dialecticize the archival image and the faith held in its discursive unveilings, exploring its powers of affective, memorial, and unconscious transmission.

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Harris, John, Moorel Edmond. *The Congo Atrocities: A Lecture to Accompany a Series of 60 Photographic Slides*. London: London School of Economics, 1909.

18 *Vodǔn* is an animist religion widely practiced in the southern Gulf of Guinea. The *vodǔn* pantheon comprises several hundred deities, each with specific characteristics and attributes. It is still practiced in southern West Africa, notably in Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Ghana. The transatlantic trade led to its spread, and thus it can also be found in North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe.

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Centre For The Less Good Idea. 2022. Accessed March 28, 2025, https://lessgoodidea.com/thinking-in-archives-2022

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Christine Le Quellec Cottier

Q
Questioning

Life Traces, Academic Questionnaires, and Women Authors' Words. Archive and Living Forces: The Case of Werewere Liking

Currently, the Manuscript Department of the Cantonal and University Library of Lausanne (Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne, BCUL) carefully preserves 46 questionnaires which were sent to Francophone Sub-Saharan African women authors. This remarkable archive was created in the mid-1990s by Jean-Marie Volet, a Swiss researcher who taught at the University of Western Australia[1] and who wanted his personal library and documentation to contribute to the "Pôle pour les études africaines de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne" (PEALL), founded in 2017.[2] The work conducted in the Southern Hemisphere by Jean-Marie Volet and Beverley Ormerod, then professor and head of the Francophone Literature Department, shed light on a previously unknown and misunderstood world: that of women who had taken up writing to permit the marginalized and subaltern voices of Sub-Saharan Africa to be heard. Encouraged by Mariama Bâ's 1981 assertion that women must "use, like men, the peaceful but powerful weapon of writing",[3] these authors engaged with literature and contributed to forms of social recognition. Emerging several decades after the first Francophone Sub-Saharan male authors – due to the fact that girls were rarely sent to French schools under colonial rule – their life testimonies marked the first publications, including autobiographies and interview collections,[4] before fiction revealing the intimate living conditions within families[5] emerged. From the early

1 Jean-Marie Volet presented his activities in a video produced by the BCUL on June 25, 2019 (9'40), accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfXRauwwDOI. More details are available in the Africana booklet, published in 2020 on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name (8–15).

2 PEALL: https://unil.ch/fra/pole-etudes-africaines. The blog of Ch. Gizzi (BCUL) reports on this global journey: accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.bcu-lausanne.ch/nos-collections/de-lausanne-a-lafrique-en-passant-par-laustralie-et-retour/.

3 Mariama Bâ, "La fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites," *Écriture africaine dans le monde* 3 (1981), 7.

4 We refer to two significant publications: *Femme d'Afrique: la vie d'Aoua Keïta racontée par elle-même*, published in 1975, and *Parole aux Négresses* by Awa Thiam, published in 1978.

5 In the early 1980s, Ken Bugul made a strong impact with *Le Baobab fou*, followed by Calixthe Beyala starting in 1987. In 2006, traditional society was also denounced in Fatou Diome's novel *Ketala*.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-020

1990s, Jean-Marie Volet regularly traveled to Sub-Saharan Africa to build his research and identify materials for his teaching, meeting women who revealed the subaltern experience, be it due to social constraints or the challenge of publishing and distributing their work.[6]

Much of the correspondence preserved in the "Fonds Jean-Marie Volet" reflects the surprise these authors felt that their short stories, novels, poems, plays, or children's books had been discovered. However, alongside these initial contacts or meetings, Volet would quickly send a questionnaire by mail from Australia to the various African countries. This document consisted of five double-sided typewritten pages, followed by a final page with an eleventh point, "Additional details you would like to mention". Each page had lines of typographic dots reserved for handwritten responses which were organized into categories: "Your full name; Your origins; Your family during your childhood; Schools you attended; Your life now; Friends and hobbies; Your professional activity; Your writing career; Your work". Each category contained several questions. The goal was to identify the authors, to render them visible on both local and international artistic and intellectual scenes – a confirmation of their professional existence. Among the information sought were details on how French schooling had been present in their childhood, how the desire to write had emerged and whether it had been supported by their families, as well as their perception of the place of women writers in post-independence society. The responses, delayed by lost letters, incomplete addresses, and long contact delays, proved invaluable in mapping the personal journeys of African women towards artistic and literary expression, and providing a female perspective, often expressing a sense of disillusionment, on community and political issues. The resulting archive enriches the understanding of individual literary paths while allowing for a broad overview of the collective emergence of female, Sub-Saharan, continental, and diasporic voices, where writing, whether testimonial or fictional, is the essential focal point.

Among the many questionnaires that formed the basis of the volume published by Volet and Ormerod in 1994, *Romancières africaines d'expression française*, I found that of Cameroonian artist Werewere Liking particularly relevant. Born in 1950, the author, poet, director, singer, and visual artist also founded the Ki-Yi M'Bock Creation Village in 1985, which is described as an initiatory school for the diversity of arts. After an initial contact for research, Volet had the opportunity to meet her at her home in Cameroon, where he took notes during an interview that went on whilst collecting performance posters and assembling a press file. This included an article from *L'Impartial* dated September 22, 1990, as the

6 Raphaël Thierry, *Le marché du livre africain et ses dynamiques littéraires* (Bordeaux: PUBAPELA, 2015).

troupe had presented "Singe Mura" in La Chaux-de-Fonds for the Biennale du Théâtre Populaire Romand.

The responses of the author of the renowned "chant-roman" *Elle sera de jaspe ou de corail* (1983) – where the term "misovire" was coined to describe a woman who finds no man respectable – spell out, as politically as Mariama Bâ, her decision to write:

> 1) For those who would like to share a utopia but have not had the privilege of formulating it. 2) For those who sign in the name of Africa without knowing it and without at least looking for it. For my grandchildren and their generation, so they know we did not all agree to sell out Africa (our translation).[7]

Her motivations are still relevant today, and the *Ki-Yi Village*, driven by a team that continues to create performances with a pan-Africanist focus, still exists. The artist draws inspiration from the history of civilizations, poetry, the art of language, music, dance, and body adornments. This multidisciplinarity is reflected in the seven-page, typewritten CV she attached to the written interview. To render the questionnaire completed over thirty years ago public, Werewere's approval was necessary. We managed to reach the artist, and she clearly remembered Volet's original process and even wanted to review the original questionnaire to update her initial responses. This act highlights the fact that archives are, indeed, alive, reflecting multiple temporalities and spaces that are updated through their reception and interpretation, reaching beyond the original experience. From the Ki-Yi Village, where she still resides, she did not, for instance, change her three-part answer to the question "Why and for whom do you write?" but added biographical or personal details:

- What seems most important in your life right now?
  The Ki-Yi group I created, which is intended to be the seed of a great pan-African movement *for the* renaissance *of the brightest cultures on this continent and its entire diasporas* (our translation).[8]

This affirmation of a commitment, focused both on cultural creation and extended to the diasporas, undoubtedly reflects a maturity and confidence gained through experience and recognition. In 2023, Werewere Liking is an essential figure in the art world, not only in Africa but internationally, whose acknowledgment was far less present in the early 1990s. This is further illustrated by the additions she made in 2023 to explain her pseudonym and its significance, all

7 Section "Your career". Omission of the number "3)" before "For my grandchildren . . .".
8 *The addition of 2023.*

contributing to the image of a strong woman, as evidenced by the comparison of her answers:

1991
- Full name: WEREWERE LIKING
- Is this a pseudonym or a different name from what you use in daily life? *My married name, maiden name Eddy-Njock.*
- If so, why did you choose this name? –

2023
- Full name: WEREWERE LIKING
- Is this a pseudonym or a different name from what you use in daily life? *It's my married name; I've used it every day since my marriage to Mr. Liking Li Basso, my first husband. Werewere, derived from the English word "Velvety" or "Welwety" refers to silk velvet, a precious fabric known for its softness and sheen, worn only for grand ceremonies. This name is generally given to people considered very soft and brilliant. It was a name given to me by my mother-in-law at my marriage to her son, hence the combination of Werewere, my name, with her son's surname, Liking, to signify our union. My maiden name is Eddy-Njock, daughter of Njock Njock, and I've been married to Gnepo since 1998.*
- Why did you choose the name Werewere-Liking?

It was the name that corresponded to how my in-laws perceived me: "Soft and Brilliant" like silk velvet. It closely reflected my true nature, as I felt and lived it. I simply accepted to adopt it by publishing all my artistic works under this name (our translation).

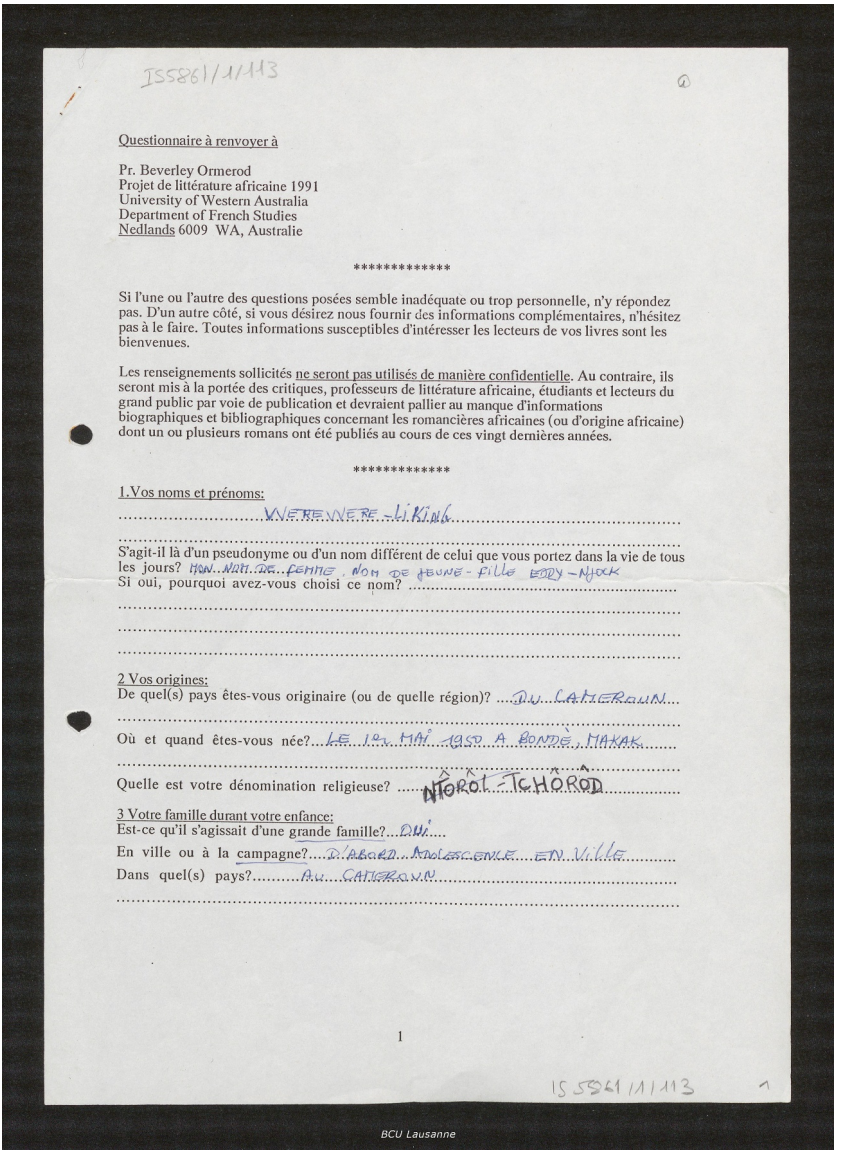
The page reproduced from the 1991 questionnaire allow us to appreciate the structure and content, designed to give visibility to female writers whom Jean-Marie Volet also introduced via websites (see Fig. 26).[9]

This approach, innovative at the time, quickly transformed the status of these authors and access to their works. This personal and academic sharing experience coincided with the rise of a research field, where preserved documents, letters, and diverse sources serve as key witnesses.

While the issue of archives and heritage has become crucial in Sub-Saharan Africa,[10] these documents are preserved in French-speaking Switzerland. The collection was received in 2018 by the Manuscript Department of the BCUL, which promptly inventoried the researcher's personal archives. The "Littérature francophone d'Afrique" collection was suddenly enriched with 3,000 volumes written

9 He created the websites: accessed April 17, 2025, https://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au and https://aflit.arts.uwa.edu.au.

10 In 1987, A. Ndiaye had already published "Les archives en Afrique occidentale francophone. Bilan et perspectives"; The Sarr-Savoy Report (2018) reignited the debate on the status of museum pieces.



IS5861/1/113

Questionnaire à renvoyer à

Pr. Beverley Ormerod
Projet de littérature africaine 1991
University of Western Australia
Department of French Studies
Nedlands 6009 WA, Australie

****

Si l'une ou l'autre des questions posées semble inadéquate ou trop personnelle, n'y répondez pas. D'un autre côté, si vous désirez nous fournir des informations complémentaires, n'hésitez pas à le faire. Toutes informations susceptibles d'intéresser les lecteurs de vos livres sont les bienvenues.

Les renseignements sollicités ne seront pas utilisés de manière confidentielle. Au contraire, ils seront mis à la portée des critiques, professeurs de littérature africaine, étudiants et lecteurs du grand public par voie de publication et devraient pallier au manque d'informations biographiques et bibliographiques concernant les romancières africaines (ou d'origine africaine) dont un ou plusieurs romans ont été publiés au cours de ces vingt dernières années.

****

1.Vos noms et prénoms:
WERENNERE-LIKING

S'agit-il là d'un pseudonyme ou d'un nom différent de celui que vous portez dans la vie de tous les jours? NOM DE FEMME, NOM DE JEUNE-FILLE EDDY-NJOCK
Si oui, pourquoi avez-vous choisi ce nom?

2 Vos origines:
De quel(s) pays êtes-vous originaire (ou de quelle région)? DU CAMEROUN

Où et quand êtes-vous née? LE 1er MAI 1950 A BONDE, MAKAK

Quelle est votre dénomination religieuse? NTÔRÔT-TCHORÔD

3 Votre famille durant votre enfance:
Est-ce qu'il s'agissait d'une grande famille? OUI
En ville ou à la campagne? D'ABORD ADOLESCENCE EN VILLE
Dans quel(s) pays? AU CAMEROUN

1

IS5861/1/113

BCU Lausanne

Fig. 26: First of six typewritten pages from the questionnaire, with typographic lines designed for handwritten responses, addressed to Werewere Liking by Jean-Marie Volet as part of the African Literature Research Project at the University of Western Australia, 1991.

by African women.[11] The valorization of this exceptional set continues, following a 2022 exhibition that launched the public events *Africana. Figures de femmes et formes de pouvoir*. Originally established in Australia by an English-speaking team who developed the field of "Francophone Sub-Saharan Women's Literature", scarcely represented up to the early 1990s, this archive now forms the foundation of a fully recognized international domain, both in Africa and beyond. Its Swiss deposit is one step in a process that began outside the African continent, before becoming embedded there through meetings and subsequently spreading worldwide. As such, the "Fonds Jean-Marie Volet", packed with envelopes covered in colorful stamps, symbolizes what our institutions call "cultural participation".[12] This idea of collaboration and intercultural exchange aligns with the mission of the "Pôle pour les études africaines de la Faculté des lettres" (PEALL-UNIL). The presence of these questionnaires in Lausanne enhances the multicultural understanding of Francophone literatures which, rather than merely constituting pieces of a long-forgotten heritage, now serve as a network of gendered reflections on women's creative output, often shaped by social conditioning and prolonged domination under tutelage.

Within this evolving heritage, the ontological experience of women authors and the knowledge acquired by researchers become two complementary aspects of an existential and cultural, aesthetic quest that is taking shape through words. The interaction between these forms of knowledge continually updates the archives, the lives they contain, and how they are perceived across different times and spaces. These universes, expressed in French, symbolize the appropriation of a language of domination that has become a space for creation, a female breath which is also an act of empowerment stretching beyond the archive.

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11 Many thanks to Ramona Fritschi, curator in charge of manuscripts, and Jean-François Wullyamoz, head of general collections, for their involvement.

12 On the subject, the podcast of the round table "D'où tu causes?" on April 27, 2023 at the Centre socioculturel Pôle Sud: accessed April 17, 2025, https://www.mixcloud.com/looseantenna/doù-tu-causes-conférence-pôle-sud-27042023/.

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Jean Tanguay

R
Reappropriation

Following the Moose's Trail . . .
Artistic Journeying and Cultural Reappropriation

Cultural reappropriation involves acquiring the knowledge and skills that ceased to be passed down through generations. For individuals and communities alike, this process is driven by a sense of cultural loss or the erosion of traditional identity references. It serves as a response to the blending of cultures, where they intermingle and influence each other.

Whatever cultural reappropriation may be, it must be distinguished from cultural appropriation. Although the latter is inseparable from the reappropriation of a cultural heritage, it also denotes a contested practice involving the usurpation of a cultural identity. In other words, an individual or even a group with a shared quest claims the cultural identity of another culture.

Among minority groups, such as the First Peoples of Canada, the preservation of traditions and cultural appreciation give rise to initiatives promoting knowledge transmission. This entails reaching out to "tradition bearers" who have inherited teachings from their predecessors and who, through the transmission of heritage, provide a form of "cultural security" to members of their community. This revitalization may rely on the support of related communities where language and traditions remain vibrant.

These cultural reappropriation efforts contribute to the process of decolonization and affirmation in which Canada's First Peoples are engaged. The 19th century in Canada marked an era of territorial dispossession and state control over the fate of Quebec's 11 Indigenous Nations. Due to demographic changes, such as the gradual loss of military ally status, colonization, and the exploitation of forest resources on Indigenous lands, former allies were condemned to become wards of the state. This dispossession is evident through the establishment of the first reserves, which were parcels of land set aside for Indigenous use but under federal jurisdiction and administered by a band council and an Indian Affairs agent. It is also reflected in the adoption of the Indian Act in 1876, which aimed to govern all aspects of the lives of the original inhabitants, even to the point of defining the criteria of national belonging based on blood quantum.

The Canadian government pursued an assimilation policy intended to turn Indigenous Peoples into "ordinary citizens", which was perceived, from a 19th-century ideological perspective, as a near-messianic mission. The rigid benches of residen-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-021

tial schools would become one of the primary means of "killing the Indian within the Indian", with the support of religious communities who believed they were performing acts of humanity. This policy severed intergenerational ties within communities and, consequently, restricted the transmission of language and cultural traditions.

Art as a Quest for Origins

Ginette Kakakos Aubin (1959–) is an Indigenous painter from the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation (Maliseet of Cacouna). She trained in fine arts at the University of Quebec in Montreal (Université du Québec à Montréal). Her work connects deeply to the history of her family, her community, and her nation. The dominant theme in her art remains the search for identity, a quest shared by all the members of her nation, who are spread across Quebec, Canada, and the United States. This search for origins is also one shared by many Indigenous Peoples who have experienced the assimilative laws of Canadian colonial power.

For more than twenty years, Ginette Kakakos Aubin has exhibited her work in numerous venues: at the Centre de Créativité du Gesù, La Guilde Gallery, the Grande Bibliothèque in Montreal, at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, at the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec City, at the Musée des Abénakis in Odanak, at The Acadian Archives and University of Maine Gallery in Fort Kent and at the Abbe Museum in Maine. Humble about her career, Ginette Kakakos Aubin was invited in 2000 to exhibit her work alongside Guido Molinari of the Plasticians group at Gallery 3273 in Montreal. The following year, she exhibited with Jean-Paul Riopelle and other Indigenous artists in the Mont-Saint-Hilaire area. Her works have since been acquired by many collectors and public institutions, including Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Musée de la Civilisation, the City of Montreal, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

In 2022, Ginette Kakakos Aubin served as curator for the exhibition KMAW-QEPIYAPON (We are sitting in the same circle) at the Bas-Saint-Laurent Museum (Musée du Bas-Saint-Laurent). The exhibition brought together fifteen Indigenous artists from the historic Wabanaki Confederacy, including Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy artists. This gathering of such a large linguistic and cultural family had never before taken place on the traditional territory of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk First Nation and was the result of the artist's dedicated work.

For Memory: The Dispersion of the Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk People

Ginette Kakakos Aubin's artistic journey is guided by three thematic axes: the narratives of a national history, the rebirth of her nation, and decolonization. Her work *My Dispersed People 1869* stands out from her usual productions because the creation involved a process of cultural reappropriation – acquiring traditional knowledge and skills that had not been transmitted across generations (see Figs. 27 and 28). The piece took shape alongside the artist's daily learning experiences.

Fig. 27: Ginette Kakakos Aubin, *Mon peuple dispersé 1869 (My Scattered People 1869).*

Ginette Kakakos Aubin's work recounts the loss of Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk lands in Viger in 1869, as well as the ensuing dispersal of families. These lands were located behind the seigneury of L'Isle-Verte in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region. Granted by the Canadian government in 1826 as the very first reserve for Indigenous Peoples, this land would later be acquired under dubious circumstances by the Crown, with the complicity of religious authorities, to be subsequently subdivided into lots for settlers. The Wolastoqiyik inhabited the area from 1826 to 1869. Today, the loss of the Viger lands is seen as the primary cause of dispersal of the nation's members. The experiences of the nation's members epitomize the imposition of the reserve system, the administration of Indigenous affairs, and their territorial loss to settlers.

In 1989, 118 years after this dispossession, the artist's father, Jean-Marie Aubin, succeeded in obtaining official recognition from the Canadian government and the Quebec National Assembly of the Wolastoqiyik as the 11th Indigenous na-

Fig. 28: Ginette Kakakos Aubin, *Mon peuple dispersé 1869 (My Scattered People 1869)*.

tion in Quebec. *My Dispersed People 1869* transcends elements of the collective memory of the Wolastoqiyik people, the tragic events of its history, and the expression of its survival and "rebirth", its message symbolically representing significant events and phenomena in Canadian society, notably the process of decolonization and affirmation in which Canada's Indigenous Nations are engaged.

The Cultural Significance of Moose in the Wabanaki Confederacy

The moose, the animal from which the artwork is crafted, holds a prominent place in Ginette Kakakos Aubin's body of work. In her art as in tradition, it embodies traditional nomadism, personifies leadership – particularly that of the artist's father – and invites new generations to reclaim their presence on the land. The moose is closely tied to the subsistence of the Wabanaki Confederacy members (Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy), whose traditional territories span Canada and the United States. Known as the animal "that gives everything", it has the power to nourish, clothe, and equip nomadic peoples, and, given its importance over the millennia, the moose is held in great reverence. After creating many paintings featuring the moose, Ginette Kakakos Aubin set out to create an installation piece dedicated to this animal.

In the fall of 2013, the artist enlisted the collaboration of her Band Council and hunters from her nation to procure one of the moose hunted during the community hunt. The skin and skeleton of the animal would form the foundation of this unique artwork which tells the story of the Wolastoqiyik. Ginette Kakakos

Aubin had no prior knowledge of how to process the skin and bones of this large cervid, but thanks to her close connections with Mi'kmaq communities in the Maritimes, cultural kin of the Wolastoqiyik she was able to meet the challenge. Thus, the piece stands at an intersection between artistic endeavor and cultural quest. It exemplifies the social, collaborative, and knowledge-sharing phenomena that exist among Indigenous nations.

Through this piece, Ginette Kakakos Aubin celebrates the political and cultural rebirth of the Wolastoqiyik, emerging as a pioneer and an authority in the identity reaffirmation currently taking place within her nation. This work is particularly groundbreaking as it consolidates these elements, while honoring the spirit of the animal, which becomes its conduit. The artist brings a neglected worldview to light. Monumental in scope, the piece required hundreds of hours of work over a period of two years.

A Story and Symbols of Dispossession

My Dispersed People 1869 is presented as a narrative interwoven with symbols. This "installation canvas", crafted from hides, fur, bones, and decorative elements, unveils a story of dispossession, survival, and rebirth.

The moose hide is first painted with symbols inspired by traditional motifs from the larger Wabanaki family. For the artist, this circular motif evokes the historical bonds within the Wolastoqiyik nation and serves as an invitation to reunite and to create a strong union. Small bone fragments, one-cent pieces, and moose hair tufts are attached to this same surface. These assemblages are bound with copper wire extending to the other side of the hide, where it is adorned with glass beads. Like her distant ancestors, the artist uses copper – the only metal known and used by First Nations before European contact. The use of this material undoubtedly reflects how solidly her nation is rooted in its traditional territory.

On the fur side of the hide, the artist has created additional assemblages. Two significant elements are incorporated as a demonstration of respect for the animal: the community hunting tag no. 03062 and the bullet fragment discovered during the cleaning of the hide. The latter is threaded onto copper wire with glass beads and a one-cent Canadian coin placed on the maple leaf side, revealing the year, 1989. This element commemorates the Canadian and Quebec governments' recognition of the Maliseet of Viger as the 11th Indigenous Nation in Quebec.

To represent her nation's territorial loss in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region – symbolized by the construction of Route 132 along the river – Ginette Kakakos Aubin scattered 132 small squares of babiche, each holding moose hair assemblages, across the piece. On some, she has drawn a crow, symbolizing the name her grandfather, François-Xavier Aubin, gave her: Kakakos. In so doing, the artist reaffirms the contemporary presence of her family clan, the Aubins, in the Bas-Saint-Laurent and the Wolastoqiyik on their ancestral land.

The border of the artwork is decorated with copper threads strung with glass beads, one-cent coins, and tufts of moose hair. The coins symbolize the sale of ancestral lands to settlers for a truly meager sum. On the rawhide side, these coins display the face of Queen Elizabeth II, representing the British Crown, while the reverse side shows the maple leaf, a symbol of the moose's territory.

The moose's bones, separated, portray the fragmentation and dispersion of her nation, and form a mound reminiscent of ancient burial cairns, symbolizing the Wolastoqiyik's deep connection to the land.

The skull and antlers are suspended at the top of the piece, signifying the strength, memory, and leadership of the people. On the front of the nasal bone, the artist painted a blue diamond and double white curves, the antlers adorned with bone and crow feather assemblages as her signature.

Each component of the work holds symbolic value. The narrative it tells is illustrative of the experiences of many Indigenous Nations in Quebec and Canada. It recalls territorial loss to settlers, the imposition of the reserve system and Indian affairs administration, as well as the political reunification and decolonization process in which all Indigenous nations in Canada are now engaged.

Conclusion

The work *My Dispersed People 1869* transcends elements of the collective memory of the Wolastoqiyik people, the unfortunate events of its history, and the expression of its survival and "rebirth" in an exceptional manner. It recalls significant social phenomena, such as the importance of renewed knowledge transmission, particularly between Indigenous nations. In fact, in creating this work, the artist had to engage in a parallel process of cultural reappropriation with Mi'kmaq tradition bearers. In the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 11, see "Justice"), Ginette Kakakos Aubin's artistic approach revives the cultural traditions of the Wolastoqiyik. Through its message, the work deconstructs colonialism to bring together members of her nation in a unifying circle. It reconciles the soul, the people, through the story it shares. Few

works bear such powerful symbolism with such pride – and ease. To this effect, Canadian society cannot deny the harm this group was subjected to, the dismemberment of the community, and the chasm thereby created. The dispersion of the Wolastoqiyik is a fact in Canadian social history, a story that was once suppressed – or at very least, understated – but which now must be reckoned with by all.

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Hans Fässler

S
Service

Johannes Von Hallwyl, Serving Colonial France in Saint-Domingue

The profession of war and professionally organized violence is sometimes known as "military service". In traditional Swiss historiography, mercenary service and capitulated service are grouped under the term "foreign service". In the 21st century – and in the era of the private army "Wagner" at the service of Vladimir Putin – these designations raise questions: In whose service? In the service of the "warlords" of the early modern period? In the service of military entrepreneurs? In the service of the patrician elites of Schwyz, Bern, Lucerne, or Graubünden? In the service of the French ambassadors' court in Solothurn? In the service of the crowns of Spain, Austria, Savoy, Hungary, or the *stadtholders* of the United Provinces of the Netherlands? In the service of the king of France, or, as the epitaph in the photograph declares, "REGIS GALLIARUM" (see Fig. 29)?

The case of Johannes von Hallwyl (1688–1753) from Aargau not only widens the geopolitical horizon but also the limits of terminology. In the service of European colonialism? In the service of those exploiting Indigenous Peoples and nature in the Americas? Complicit in a crime against humanity? As an auxiliary to the formation of racialized capitalism? As a beneficiary of the *Maafa*,[1] that is, the enslavement, deportation, and forced labour of millions of women, men, and children of African origin?

Johannes von Hallwyl came from the noble von Hallwyl lineage, established in the Aargau region as early as the 12th century and, after a period in the service of the House of Habsburg, was admitted to the Bernese patriciate when the southwestern part of today's canton was annexed by Bern and became the Bernese Aargau.[2] Due to various family conflicts and legal disputes, the family, with four daughters and three sons, fell into dynastic disgrace, so to speak, and had to flee Hallwyl for Zurich, where they led a modest life. In historical literature, one finds the term "poverty".

1 The term "Maafa", used by some African American historians, means "catastrophe", "terrible event", or "great tragedy" in the Kiswahili language and is even compared to the Holocaust.

2 For the biography of Johannes von Hallwyl, I have generally relied, unless otherwise noted, on Carl Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl* (Seengen: Hallwyl-Stiftung, 2006), 204–213; and Sarah Caspers, "Johannes von Hallwyl (1688–1753). Offizier und Händler in der Karibik," *Blütenduft und Pulverdampf. Vier Leben, vier Düfte*, ed. Sarah Casper, Gabriela Gehrig and Lea Schieback (Schloss Hallwyl: Museum Aargau, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-022

Fig. 29: Funerary plaque of Johannes von Hallwyl in his castle, featuring the Latin word "ultramarinis", meaning overseas.

However, among aristocrats, poverty does not mean the same as the destitution of the disenfranchised. The day labourers, migrant workers, villagers, spinners, weavers, impoverished servants, and exploited maidservants of that time could not simply choose a military career as Johannes and his brothers did.[3] Not to mention the miserable fate of enslaved men and women on the sugarcane plantations of Saint-Domingue, which had already been a French colony for eleven years when Johannes von Hallwyl took his first step up the career ladder in "foreign" armies.[4]

He did not enter French service immediately. The Netherlands had been Europe's dominant maritime power since the 17th century, and, as a small country, they were always in desperate need of soldiers. In 1708, Johannes became a cadet in the Zurich Regiment Lochmann in the service of the Netherlands, joined the Bernese-Dutch regiment of Gabriel May in 1709, was promoted to ensign in 1714, and to sub-lieutenant in 1716 in the Goumoëns Regiment. Due to the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, which – as the "first world war" of the 18th century – was fought not only in Europe but also in South America and the Caribbean, Johannes (like his two brothers) lost his military position.

3 Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl*.

4 The western part of the island of Hispaniola officially became a French colony in 1697 after the Treaty of Ryswick forced Spain to recognize France's occupation.

But, unlike the disenfranchised, for whom unemployment could (and still can) mean a grim fate, new doors and horizons quickly opened for Johannes von Hallwyl, doors to overseas and colonial horizons. Through the mediation by a distant relative, he met Franz Adam Karrer (1672–1741) in Thann, a military entrepreneur with a long career behind him. Karrer had been authorized on December 15, 1719, by the French Minister of the Navy to raise a regiment in Switzerland and Alsace for the Compagnie des Indes. The selection of officers was Karrer's responsibility, and so, on March 1, 1720, Johannes von Hallwyl became a lieutenant in the regiment's first company.[5]

These are the stages of integration for the scion of a patrician family from the Bernese Aargau into the transatlantic colonial and slavery system. In 1722, we find him first in La Rochelle, France's second-largest slave-trading port, then with his company of 200 soldiers at Fort Royal on the island of Martinique. In 1723, he traveled to Nantes on the vessel Union, a slave- ship in the hands of a Nantes slaver, who, between 1715 and 1729, organized the deportation of 1,700 African men, women, and children to the plantations of Saint-Domingue.[6] In 1724, Johannes von Hallwyl, now a captain-lieutenant, was the commander of the Swiss company garrisoned at Petit-Goâve on Saint-Domingue. Saint-Domingue, which would become Haiti in 1804, was on its way to becoming the "Pearl of the Antilles", the most profitable colony in the Americas, thanks to the forced and unpaid labour of African men, women, and children. In 1735, he was promoted to captain, and in January 1737, he left the colony abruptly, as he had to take over family affairs in Hallwyl after the sudden death of his brother Johann Anton and the passing of the posthumously born male heir. He would eventually rebuild the family estate, which included the beautiful moated Hallwyl Castle, through a costly legal dispute that lasted until 1742.[7]

With what financial resources? What legal and economic skills? What useful networks? Although he did indeed incur debts to cover legal fees, he had at his disposal the economic, social, and cultural capital he had accumulated as a military entrepreneur and colonial trader in Saint-Domingue and the Atlantic world.

From Petit-Goâve in Saint-Domingue, Johannes von Hallwyl was engaged in the export of slave-produced colonial goods: sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton, bark from the *Cinchona* tree, and piastres (silver coins). In the opposite direction, he

5 Didier Delaloye, "Le Régiment de Karrer/Hallwyl (1719–1763). Une troupe suisse dans les colonies françaises d'Amérique," text taken from the lecture given at ASEAA Valais in 2013, adaptation Capitaine Philippe Bossey, *Bulletin* (2013), 46.

6 Caspers, "Johannes von Hallwyl (1688–1753)."

7 Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl*, 205–210.

imported European goods such as cotton cloth, textile ribbons, shirt cuffs, stockings, cheese, wine, brandy, and wigs.[8] He sailed from Saint-Domingue back to Europe at least three times: in 1725, 1729, and 1734.[9] Even after his return from the colony in 1737, he continued trading in Saint-Domingue's colonial goods almost up until his death in 1753.[10]

Did Johannes von Hallwyl own plantations with enslaved people in Saint-Domingue? Carl Brun, the family chronicler, was convinced of it, and many (myself included) have recounted this story in the same way.[11] However, recent research increasingly questions this hypothesis.[12] It is unlikely that he could have afforded to own plantations and enslaved people on his military pay alone, and there is no evidence of plantation ownership in his letters or in the lists of plantation owners in Saint-Domingue.[13] Nevertheless, it seems very likely that he owned a few enslaved people for his household in Petit-Goâve. In one of his letters, we learn that a fellow countryman complained to Johannes about his own difficult financial situation and asked him for two barrels of flour and "four n***".[14]

A year after his death in Thann, Alsace, in 1753, the Karrer Regiment, founded in 1719 by a distant relative of Johannes von Hallwyl with the motto *Fidelitate et Honore, Terra et Mari* ("With loyalty and honour, by land and sea"),[15] passed into the hands of his distant cousin, Colonel Franz Joseph von Hallwyl from Solothurn. Renamed the Hallwyl Regiment until its dissolution in 1763, it continued the missions it had been assigned since its creation: supporting slavery, or in other words, complicity in crime against humanity. In 1758, for example, when François Mackandal, leader of the revolt of enslaved people, was executed in Cap-Français, sparking a riot among the Black audience, it was a detachment of Swiss soldiers from the Hallwyl Regiment tasked with clearing the execution site.[16]

8 Simon Kalberer, "Koloniale Verflechtungen von Johannes von Hallwyl – eine Spurensuche," conference as part of the research project under the supervision of Sarah Caspers, Château de Hallwyl, September 29, 2022.

9 Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl*, 204, 338.

10 Kalberer, "Koloniale Verflechtungen von Johannes von Hallwyl."

11 Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl*, 204.

12 Kalberer, "Koloniale Verflechtungen von Johannes von Hallwyl."

13 Oliver Gliech, "Colons, anciens propriétaires, autres habitants de Saint-Domingue sans propriété foncière, héritiers des anciens colons," research site, Berlin: Domingino Verlag, accessed September 16, 2023, www.domingino.de/stdomin/index_colons_a_z.html.

14 Caspers, "Johannes von Hallwyl (1688–1753)."

15 See the regimental standard of a foreign regiment in French service (Swiss regiment), in: *Les uniformes et les drapeaux de l'armée du roi* (1889).

16 Paul Farmer, *Sida en Haïti. La victime accusée* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1996), 200.

By that time, Johannes von Hallwyl's mortal remains had long since rested in the family vault beneath Seengen church, commemorated by an epitaph crafted by Johann Friedrich Funk.[17] This epitaph, now located in the rear entrance of the castle by the Aabach River, does not mention that his income during his lifetime had been either paid as military wages by colonial powers like the Netherlands and France or derived from the unpaid and forced labour of African men and women in Saint-Domingue. It bears the image of a sailing ship and the words CENTVRIONI OLIM IN REGIS GALLIARUM COPIIS VLTRAMARINIS,[18] which means "formerly a captain in the overseas troops of the king of France".[19]

Half a century after Johannes von Hallwyl's death, Swiss soldiers intervened once more (and for the last time) in sustaining slavery: 635 soldiers and officers from the first battalion of the third Helvetic half-brigade in the service of colonial and Napoleonic France were sent from Ajaccio, Corsica, to Saint-Domingue to reinforce the desperate French troops of General Charles Victoire Emmanuel Leclerc's expeditionary corps. They were dispatched despite assurances that had been given to the Helvetic Republic that these auxiliary troops would not be sent overseas. Upon arrival in Port-au-Prince on April 5, 1803, the Swiss battalion was immediately integrated into the fifth light infantry half-brigade of the French army. But all in vain. Most of the 635 auxiliaries perished in battles during the revolution led by enslaved people, or from yellow fever; only eleven survived.[20]

17 Brun, *Geschichte der Herren von Hallwyl*, 213. Johann Friedrich Funk (1706–1775) was a Swiss sculptor from Nidau/Morat/Bern, known for his signs, portals, reliefs, fountains, statues, funerary monuments, and epitaphs.

18 The full Latin text on the funerary plaque is as follows: "NOBILI ET STRENUO / IOHANNI DE HALLWYL / DATO KALEND. APRIL. MDCLXXXVIII / CENTVRIONI OLIM IN REGIS GALLIARUM / COPIIS VLTRAMARINIS / RESTAVRATO MAIORVM PACTO / GENTIS HALLWYLENSIS / THANNI ALSATIAE DIE XXIII MAII / ANNO MDCCLII / FATIS FUNCTO / MONVMENTVM HOC POSVIT / SVPERSTES CVM TRIBVS LIBERIS / MOESTISSIMA CONIVX / B.E.D.D."

19 I extend my warm thanks to epigraphist Bärbel Schnegg, my former colleague from the Appenzell Ausserrhoden Cantonal High School (KST), residing in Trogen AR, for the Latin translation.

20 Fernando Bernoulli, *Die helvetischen Halbbrigaden im Dienste Frankreichs 1798–1805* (Frauenfeld: Verlag Huber, 1934).

In 1804, Johannes von Hallwyl's garrison post at Petit-Goâve was no longer within the French colony of Saint-Domingue but in Ayiti, the first Black republic, whose 1805 constitution proclaimed: "Slavery is forever abolished."[21]

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21 *Constitution Impériale d'Haïti. Haiti and the Atlantic World*, 1805, accessed September 17, 2023, https://haitidoi.com/constitutions/1805-2.

Irène Hirt, Caroline Desbiens, and Hélène Boivin

T
Territory

Bringing the Territory to the Museum: Ilnu Perspectives on the Péribonka River and Hydroelectric Development

Geographic Categories As (Colonial) Ordering of the World

"Fleuve" or "rivière"? In French, the former is defined as a major waterway flowing into the sea, while the latter refers to a waterway of less importance, flowing into a body of water or a larger watercourse.[1] In Quebec, these definitions are applied by the Quebec Commission of Toponymy.[2] Consequently, only the Saint Lawrence – which the Algonquins called Magtogoek ("the path that walks") – is considered a "*fleuve*", that is a major river, while many "*rivières*" are deprived of this designation despite their length and flow, often far more substantial than some "*fleuves*" in France or Switzerland.[3] The implications of this categorization extend beyond linguistics, encompassing cultural and political dimensions that impose an order and hierarchy on the world. Within a context shaped by European colonial legacies, these terms are a further reflection of the colonial power dynamics that obscure Indigenous Peoples' connections to the land. For although the Saint Lawrence is seen as the heart of agricultural colonization and Québécois culture, few Québécois are aware of the cultural and historical significance of these so-called "*rivières*" for First Nations, especially since their territories were historically viewed by settlers as *terra nullius* ("land belonging to no one"), a principle in international law that allowed for the appropriation and exploitation of inhabited spaces deemed ungoverned by a state (in the European sense of the word).

For nomadic societies who lived by hunting, fishing, and trapping before they gradually adopted a more sedentary life-style in the 19th and 20th centuries, waterways were simultaneously inland access routes, spaces of life and subsistence, and the foundations of their material and spiritual culture. They were part of a rela-

1 In English, both words – "rivière" and "fleuve" – are translated by "river".

2 Caroline Desbiens, "Appreciating Difference? A View from Indigenous Rivers," *The Canadian Geographer/ Le Géographe Canadien* 63, 4 (2019), 540–552.

3 Desbiens, "Appreciating Difference? A View from Indigenous Rivers."

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-023

tional geography, "a whole world *enacted* minute by minute, day by day, through an infinity of practices connecting a multitude of humans and non-humans" (our translation) (animals, plants, rocks, wind, water, etc.);[4] in other words, these waterways were closely tied to a way of being-in-the-world (an "ontology") that only has meaning through the "dense network of interrelations and materiality" (our translation) interweaving the beings and entities comprising the world.[5]

Pelipauka Shipi: From "Canoe Culture" to "Hydroelectric Culture"

> The Péribonka is the school. The school of learning to live the way you should live on this land.
> (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1952, interviewed in 2012, our translation)

The Péribonka River originates in the Otish Mountains and flows into Lake Saint-Jean, or Pekuakami ("flat, shallow lake" in *Nehlueun*), as the Pekuakamiulnuatsh – one of the nine Innu First Nations of Quebec[6] – call it. Its name derives from the Ilnu term *Pelipauka shipi* ("the river water is cloudy; dug into the sand"). With a length of 547 km, a watershed area of 26,936 km, and a flow rate of 589 m^3/s,[7] this "*rivière*" rivals many more modest "*fleuves*" in French (major rivers). The Péribonka, along with its tributaries – the Manouane, Savane, Grand Loutre, and Serpent Rivers – and its lakes – Péribonka, Onistagan, Manouane, and Plétipi – is one of the cradles of the "canoe culture" of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh. For them, the river also bears multiple other names, reflecting its natural features, the events experienced there, or the intensity and nature of human activity. It is marked by campsites, burial sites, and portages (trails that bypass obstacles like waterfalls or rapids on the watercourse).[8]

4 Arturo Escobar, *Sentir-penser avec la Terre: l'écologie au-delà de l'Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), 119–120.

5 Escobar, *Sentir-penser avec la Terre*, 120.

6 The Pekuakamiulnuatsh use the invariable ilnu spelling, unlike the Innu form used on the North Shore. A member of the First Nation is an ilnu or Pekuakamiulnu (plural: Ilnuatsh; Pekuakamiulnuatsh). The *Nehlueun* spoken by the Pekuakamiulnuatsh is a dialect of the Innu language (*Innu-aimun*).

7 Accessed April 24, 2023, https://archives.bape.gouv.qc.ca/sections/mandats/La%20Romaine/documents/DA42.pdf.

8 For a romanticized history of this relationship between the Pekuakamiulnuatsh and the Péribonka River, see: Michel Jean, *Kukum* (La Roche-sur-Yon: Dépaysage, 2019).

The Pekuakamiulnuatsh were gradually settled, initially through the creation of the Mashteuiatsh "reserve" in 1856, through to the late 20th century. However, it was less the "territorial assignment" [our translation][9] to a limited area than the cumulative impacts of industrial exploitation (hydroelectric infrastructure, mining, logging, etc.) of *Nitassinan/Tshitassinu*[10] that altered their relationship with the Péribonka. In the context of energy and aluminum production in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, the river was dramatically transformed by the construction of reservoirs (Lac Manouane and Passes-Dangereuses in the 1940s) and power plants (Chute-du-Diable, 1952; Chute-à-la-Savane, 1953; Chute-des-Passes, 1959).[11] The relational geography of the Ilnu was thus overlaid with the dualist ontology of modern capitalist economics, reducing the river to an inanimate, manipulable "object". After several decades, the river became unsuitable for navigation. Consequently, by the late 1930s, many Pekuakamiulnuatsh had begun traveling inland by road. The successive harnessing of the Péribonka has, however, allowed other rivers, such as the Ashuapmushuan, to remain untouched.

Remembering and Reclaiming the River: A Counterpoint Narrative

> You can't let go of that, never, never. When there's nothing left there, not a damned piece of wood, absolutely nothing, the mountains will still be there, and we'll still have our memories there . . .
> (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1923, interviewed in 1978, our translation)

The Mashteuiatsh Ilnu Museum (Kakanauelitakanitshuap) places strong emphasis on history, cultural heritage, and territory in its museum activities. It also serves as a space dedicated to fostering the cultural expression of community members.

In 2011, researchers from Laval University, the Ilnu Heritage Committee of Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan, and the Museum formed a research partnership

9 Claire Hancock, "Décoloniser les représentations: esquisse d'une géographie culturelle de nos 'Autres'," *Annales de géographie* 2–3, 660-661 (2008), 116–128.

10 Names given by the Ilnuatsh to their ancestral territory. Nitassinan is used to address people outside the Innu nation, Tshitassinu when the Ilnuatsh speak among themselves.

11 These infrastructures, owned by Rio Tinto Alcan, a private company, were built at a time when Indigenous rights were not taken into account. The Péribonka IV power station and dam, commissioned in 2008, are operated by Hydro-Québec, a Quebec state-owned corporation, and are the subject of a financial agreement with Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan (Mashteuiatsh Band Council).

entitled "*Tshishipiminu* ['our river']: Ilnu occupation of the Péribonka River and hydroelectric development". The Ilnuatsh wanted to focus the project on the river, developing a narrative of their own as a counterpoint to the dominant history of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, which often portrays hydroelectric development either as the foundation of capitalist resource development or as a tool for affirming Québécois identity. The aim of this alternative narrative was to convey the river's cultural and historical significance for the Ilnuatsh to the First Nation members, and to encourage the memory work of those who feel strongly attached to the river. This collaborative approach prioritized the goals of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh. Therefore, the creation of an exhibition to ensure the dissemination of knowledge within the community was considered as a primary objective rather than as a by-product of the research. The team highlighted existing data or publications that, for various reasons (academic formats that are not adapted for general audiences, data available at the Museum but not processed, etc.), rarely circulate within the community. Missing information was gathered through interviews and archival research.[12]

The Exhibition

Ten posters, developed with the assistance of a graphic designer (Géraldine Laurendeau), were mounted on wooden panels affixed to the walls of a temporary exhibition room in the museum. The exhibition ran from November 2013 to February 2014 in Mashteuiatsh, before traveling along the North Shore to Pessamit and Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam, two other Innu First Nations also impacted by hydroelectric development on their own waterways,[13] and to the (non-Indigenous) North Shore Regional Museum (Musée régional de la Côte-Nord).

A free booklet was distributed to Mashteuiatsh residents in order to preserve this work within the community, which was accompanied by a map of Nitassinan that includes Ilnu toponyms, either validated or pending validation by Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan.

12 Caroline Desbiens, Irène Hirt and Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan – Comité Patrimoine Ilnu, "'Il ne faut pas avoir peur de voir petit': l'acclimatation engagée comme principe de recherche en contexte autochtone," in *Boîte à outils des principes de la recherche en contexte autochtone : éthique, respect, équité, réciprocité, collaboration et culture*, ed. Nancy Gros-Louis, Karine Gentelet and Suzy Basile (Québec: CSSSPNQL, CRDP, UQAT, 2014), 69–75.

13 Justine Gagnon, Nitshissituten *: mémoire et continuité culturelle des Pessamiulnuat en territoires inondés*, Thèse de doctorat, Géographie, Université Laval, Québec, 2019.

Besides the general context, the research partners gave each panel a distinct theme, thus detailing the occupation of the Péribonka River and Ilnu perspectives on its transformation by hydroelectricity: from the river as a living environment, to the submersion of territory, to constructing a new relationship with the waterway despite its modifications. Each theme was summarized and then described from an Ilnu perspective supported by interview excerpts. These texts were complemented by photographs of places or objects related to the Péribonka, subtly rendered in shades of blue and light gray. One panel also displayed an industrial, mechanical view of the river.

The exhibition highlighted that during nomadic times, the Péribonka River had been central to certain families' territories, while others had simply passed through it on their way to other areas within *Nitassinan*. For most, the Péribonka served as a gateway into the territory: families gathered at the "Fourches", the junction of the Manouane and Péribonka Rivers, to head inland in the autumn or return southward in the spring:

> Everyone met there. Sometimes, they would stay there for a week, and then they would leave. Some went up through the Manouane. Some went up through the Péribonka. It was right at the fork of the two rivers. My mother used to say there were almost always people at the forks of the Manouane.[14] (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1936, interviewed in 2012, our translation)

The Péribonka, far more than a mere resource extraction site, was also a vibrant social space, woven with encounters, marriages, births, and deaths:

> I met my husband in the woods. He was hunting with us. He would travel up the Péribonka and to the Manouane Forks too. When I first met him, my husband had no parents at all. Each time he joined us on a trip, he would always give us a big greeting.[15] (our translation)

In the exhibition, the disruption of the balance between humans, non-humans, and the land caused by hydroelectric development was highlighted by emphasizing three types of impact. Firstly, the flooding of the land and fluctuating waters had led to a loss of geographic markers which, compounded by the logs transported by log driving, made navigation dangerous, if not impossible (see Fig. 30):

14 The texts in quotation marks in this section are taken from the exhibition, Caroline Desbiens, ed., Tshishipiminu*: occupation Ilnu de la rivière Péribonka et développement hydroélectrique* (Québec: Département de géographie, Université Laval, 2015).

15 Anne-Marie Siméon, cited in Anne-Marie Siméon and Camil Girard, *Un monde autour de moi. Témoignage d'une Montagnaise*, Chicoutimi: UQAC, 1997, Accessed April 17, 2025, http://classiques.uqac.ca/.

Fig. 30: Panel on the "ennoiement du territoire et fluctuation des eaux" (Dimensions: 1m x 0.75cm; Design: Géraldine Laurendeau). Exhibition, Ilnu Museum of Mashteuiatsh - Kakanauelitakanitshuap.

> [Y]ou arrive, and the whole landscape is changed, the places the Indians loved to go before aren't the same at all. There were beautiful places to rest before; it's all flooded now because of the dams and clear-cutting. We can't even find shelter . . . So you move to another lake, another place, it is a constant relocation for the animals, the fish, and the Indians too. (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1923, interviewed in 1978, our translation)

Secondly, the visuals in the exhibition portrayed the upheaval experienced by animals, whom the Ilnuatsh regard as the primary victims of the river's ecological destruction (see Fig. 31):

> The animals probably lost even more than the humans did. The little hare, he doesn't realize that the water is rising. When his plateau is flooded in the space of eight hours, well, there's a good chance that . . . (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1952, interviewed in 2012, our translation)

Third, the focus was on the loss of *tshisselitamun*, the ancestral knowledge encompassing the skills needed for survival on the land, history, stories, and Ilnu spirituality. One of the panels referenced the Katimashashu, ancestors who could only be seen from their sides, vanishing stealthily into the cracks of a cliff along

Fig. 31: Panel "Impacts pour les animaux" (Dimensions: 1m x 0.75cm; Design: Géraldine Laurendeau). Exhibition, Ilnu Museum of Mashteuiatsh - Kakanauelitakanitshuap.

the Manouane River when glimpsed by the living. The turbine for the Péribonka IV dam was built at this very site.

The final panel emphasized the desire of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh to look toward the future, to build new foundations. One participant pointed out, in a play on words, that the process will take time: "Before you claim new knowledge, a lot of water will have flowed" (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1952, interviewed in 2012, our translation). Another person noted that attachment to the land remains, regardless of its transformations: "I often say that a dam hurts the generation that experiences it. Future generations will live with it; they'll be used to it" (Pekuakamiulnu, born in 1947, interviewed in 2012, our translation). For the Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan, the political authority for the Pekuakamiulnuatsh and Mashteuiatsh, the exhibition highlights the fact that the community has chosen "to participate in and even initiate certain developments", in a refusal to suffer the exploitation of *Nitassinan* by non-Indigenous

peoples and, rather, to shape the conditions, thus "raising the socio-economic status of the nation" (our translation).[16]

Conclusion

It would be fair to say that the exhibition stands as a successful example of knowledge co-production between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners.

With limited resources but by taking the necessary time to establish mutual trust, the project created a "self-empowerment tool" for Indigenous partners, as it allowed them to decide both what they wished to convey and how they wanted to convey it,[17] a process facilitated by the fact that the museum hosting the exhibition is Indigenous.

In terms of its dissemination, one would assume that ten years on, in 2023, the exhibition has resonated beyond the regional context of Saguenay and the Côte-Nord. With the worsening environmental crisis, the value and legitimacy of Indigenous relational geographies receive increasing recognition. The granting of legal personhood to rivers that acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and practices – as with the Whanganui River in New Zealand in 2014, or Quebec's Magpie River (*Muteshekau-shipu*) in 2021[18] is an illustration of this, and the Péribonka River has become the focus of a protected area project downstream from the Peribonka IV dam (MELCCFP 2022). Even though they are involved in the initiative, the Pekuakamiulnuatsh, however, have to work with other regional actors whose visions and priorities they do not necessarily share. The active development of a network of territorial guardians in Canada and Quebec suggests that Indigenous ontologies of rivers – as well as of forests, animals, and life in a holistic view – will now be an essential aspect of territorial management.[19]

16 Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan, *Politique d'affirmation culturelle des Pekuakamiulnuatsh* (Mashteuiatsh, 2005).

17 Élisabeth Kaine, "Récit d'une incursion autochtone en territoire muséal," *ICOFOM Study Series* 49–2 (2021), 116–131.

18 Caroline Desbiens, "Personnalité juridique de la rivière Magpie / Muteshekau-Shipu : une première au Canada," *Network in Canadian History of the Environment/Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l'environnement (NiCHE),* May 7, 2021, accessed September 20, 2023, https://niche-canada.org/2021/05/07/personnalite-juridique-de-la-riviere-magpie-muteshekau-shipu-une-premiere-au-canada/.

19 Steph Kwetásel'wet Wood and Ainslie Cruickshank, "Indigenous Guardians Connected by New National Network: The First of Its Kind in the World," *The Narwhal*, December 9, 2022, accessed April 26, 2023, https://thenarwhal.ca/first-nations-guardians-network/.

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Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, and Alice Hertzog

U
Uhunmwu-Elao

Commemorative Heads From the Benin Kingdom

Uhunmwu-Elao is a foreign term hailing from a non-European language, from the Edo language of the Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria. This term refers to a commemorative head, and it merits an entry not only for its cultural significance in Benin, but the role it is playing in reconfiguring relationships between European museums and African partners. The Uhunmwu-Elao lie at the center of ongoing discussions regarding restitution, and the colonial displacement of cultural and spiritual heritage. They have come to symbolize the struggle for the return of the looted Benin Bronzes, seized by the British army in an attack in 1897, to Nigeria. Initially crafted as sacred altar pieces, in the context of museums, they have been celebrated as exquisite works of art. Today, they are undergoing yet another transformation, symbolizing a new phase in the re-negotiation of who owns colonial collections. Indeed, the letter "U" could also stand for "U-Turn" in the position of many European museums, who after resisting calls for their return are now increasingly embracing the restitution of looted commemorative heads to Nigeria.

Uhunmwu-Elao translates literally as "head of an ancestor" but these objects are more commonly known as commemorative heads. Uhunmwo-Elao are one of the most recognizable forms of Benin Royal Treasures. In many oral, pre-colonial societies material culture played a key role in documenting the past. The Benin Kingdom was no exception. Uhunmwu-Elao are sculptures of idealized likeness of a past Oba (King) either in wood, clay or brass, commissioned by a successive Oba to honour his predecessor who has transited into the realm of the ancestors. These heads are placed on ancestral altar dedicated and devoted to each of the previous Obas. From the 14th century onwards, brass was predominantly used in the production of commemorative heads. This was and still is a process of memory preservation, where this cast-brass sculpture depicts the idealized likeness of a King. According to edo tradition, only after the death of an Oba can a commemorative head be made in his honor by his predecessor or his descendants. It is a taboo to make a likeness of the Oba while he is still alive. Even today, one of the first duties of a Crown Prince is to commission a commemorative head of the deceased Oba in order to honor his predecessor. These practices of ancestral worship were interrupted by the invasion of Benin City by British army forces in 1897, during which shrines in the palace, but also local family and community shrines were looted. The displaced Uhunmwu-Elao along with many other looted objects were then distributed through museums and on the art market.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-024

In 1897 the British Army attacked the Kingdom of Benin, seeking to control and expand its colonial territory in West Africa. During the assault on its capital, Benin City the Royal Palace was plundered and burnt to the ground. An estimated 10'000 objects made of brass, ivory and wood were looted by British soldiers – including hundreds of Uhunmwo-Elao.[1] The reigning Oba Ovonramwen was sent into exile, leading to the loss of royal patronage that the artisan guilds had enjoyed for over five centuries. Without the patronage of the palace, the artisan guilds lacked the power to standardize their craft and struggled to maintain the aesthetic standard which became synonymous with their craft in Europe.

The Uhunmwo-Elao having been taken from the palace were sold off, donated and traded over the years either formally by the British government, or by the individual soldiers who took them. Today, the Benin heritage is fragmented, dispersed all over the world. It has also been decontextualized, the Uhunmwo-Elao have circulated as one-off pieces, separated from other items on the ancestral shrine with which their meaning would have been associated. Today, on the art market, commemorative heads have become the subject of extreme speculation. The Uhunmwu-Elao have been dispersed, and today it is difficult to tell which Oba each one corresponds to. But they have also been separated from their corresponding Aken'ni Elao (carved Ivory tusk) –these are the carved ivory tusks that were placed on the Uhunmwo-Elao. Each commemorative head has a round opening at the top, designed as a stand for a corresponding ivory tusk. These tusks were carved with various scenes, animals, chiefs and symbols selected to narrate the reign of the deceased Oba. Like the Uhunmwo-Elao the tusks were also looted, and resold on the art market, either to art dealers or museums. However, given the extreme dispersion of both the commemorative heads and the tusks, it is today incredibly difficult, if not impossible to reconnect the heads and the tusks whose symbolic and narrative elements would help identify which Oba each Uhunmwu-Elao was intended to honor. In this sense, the return of the Uhunmwu-Elao will not restitute the knowledge that has been lost through the chaos of looting and the consequent dispersal of Benin cultural heritage.

The most important collection of Uhunmwu-Elao is in the British Museum in London. Of the 267 commemorative heads listed on the online database Digital Benin, 40 are to be found there, with in comparison only 17 at the National Museum in Benin and 4 in the National Museum of Lagos.[2] Others are distributed far and wide, from the Seattle Art Museum, to the Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Mu-

1 Dan Hicks, The Brutish Museums, *The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

2 "Digital Benin." Accessed March 17.03, 2025, https://www.digitalbenin.org.

seum in Paris, the Weltmuseum in Vienna and the Peabody at Harvard. Uhunmwo-Elao feature in the catalogues of university, art, ethnographic and sciences museums worldwide. Even the Picasso museum in Paris holds a Uhunmwo Elao – a pointer to the inspiration Benin heritage provided to early twentieth century European art.

As ritual objects, belonging to the Oba of Benin and passed down the royal lineage these Uhunmwu-Elao would, under no circumstance have been given or sold. Yet today these altar pieces have undergone transitions, once functional altar pieces, partaking in ritual practices of worship and commemoration they have become coveted works of art. The price of Uhunmwu-Elao on the private art market peeked in 2021 when a commemorative head from the private collection of the British tribal art dealer Ernest Ohly sold for 10 million pounds.[3] Double the price paid previously in 2007 for the sale of a seventeenth century Uhunmwo Elao at Sothebys. However, in another turn of events, current restitutions, and increased scrutiny on the looted treasures have dampened the market. It is unlikely, given current debates on restitution, that any Uhunmwu-Elao from private collections will surface soon, with sellers likely to wait until scrutiny dies down.

Nigerian officials were once constrained to repurchase Benin heritage on the art market – outbidding collectors at auctions in the 1970s to repatriate the artefacts. Now, it is the museums who after many years of dodging and impeding restitution requests are returning Benin heritage to Nigeria. When in 2022 Germany and Nigeria signed a restitution agreement concerning more than one thousand Benin items the German foreign minister and Nigeria's culture minister stood behind a Uhunmwo Elao, smiling as they held the declarations in their embossed blue files. The Uhunmwo Elao looked straight ahead at the cameras – an actor in its own sense in the negotiations. Other museums will follow, with the Smithsonian, Pitt-Rivers, Cambridge University Museum all pledging to return their looted collections to Benin.

These discussions have also taken place in Switzerland, where we have been working as a research duo, investigating the provenance of Benin heritage in eight Swiss public museums. This research has been undertaken in the context of the Swiss Benin Initiative. There are 53 objects in these museums which we consider either looted, or likely to have been looted from Benin City in 1897. Three of these are brass Uhunmwo Elao to be found in Basel and Zurich, that we present briefly here (see Figs. 32, 33 and 34).

3 Barnaby Phillips, "The Art Dealer, the £10m Benin Bronze and the Holocaust," BBC News, April 14, 2021, accessed March 28, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56292809.

Fig. 32: Uhunmwu Elao, commemorative head, Museum der Kulturen Basel, Inventory number III 1033.

The oldest Uhunmwo Elao in Switzerland is currently at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, a museum founded in 1893 by an ethnographic society. It was produced as early as the 16th or 17th century, and would have been commissioned from the Igun Eronmwon, the Royal Bronze Casting Guild by the Palace. The Oba is depicted wearing a helmet of coral beads, a collar of beads rises up to his lower lip, plated hair falling to each side of his face – round cheeks, and three markings above each eye. For over two centuries, this Uhunmwo Elao would have stood on an ancestral shrine, entering into the ownership of Oba Ovonramwen when he came to the throne in 1888. Looted in 1897, it was purchased two years later from the British ethnographica dealer William Downing Webster. The museum's annual report of that year remarks that other ethnographic museums were acquiring the Benin Bronzes, admiring the quality, whilst making racist statements, and justifying the acquisitions in the name of salvage anthropology "the spoils of the Benin war were thrown on to the market this year, and we believed it was our duty to salvage at least a few samples from this culture that has now disappeared

Fig. 33: Uhunmwo Elao, Ethnographic Museum, University of Zurich, Inventory number 10001.

for good".[4] Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, reading this report as a Benin historian first elicited laughter. So they said we would disappear for good? No, not at all, we the Edo people are here, we still exist, only our Uhunmwo Elao, our Ama, our Ahianmwẹ-Ọrọ, our Uhunmwu-Ẹkuẹ, our heritage has gone – but we are still here, with our songs, and praise, and dance, and palace rituals and casting and carving and all that we have salvaged from the ruins of 1897.

The second Uhunmwo Elao is in the depots of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich. Another collection founded around the similar time, one year after the looting of Benin City by an ethnographic association. This Uhunmwo Elao has been allocated the inventory number 10001 – it is younger than the commemorative head in Basel, this we can tell from the addition of a trim along its base, featuring various symbols, such as the leopard, that are repre-

4 Museum der Kulturen, *Jahres Bericht* (Basel: 1899).

Fig. 34: Uhunmwo Elao, commemorative head of Oba Osemwende, Museum Rietberg, Inventory number RAF 601.

sentative of the Oba. Again the Oba wears a beaded collar and helmet, this time adorned with wings. It is not clear how this piece travelled from the Royal Palace to Switzerland, it might have been via the German trader Johann Friederich Gustav Umlauff based in Hamburg. What we do know is that it was purchased before 1931 by the Swiss art collector Han Coray, and that when he went bankrupt in the late 1930s it was seized as an asset by the Schweizerische Volksbank. The ethnographic collection of the University of Zurich was then tasked with compiling an inventory of Coray's African collection, and managed to acquire a selection of the pieces, including the Uhunmwo Elao. The commemorative head is heavy, so heavy that when we visit the pieces in the depot it isn't brought to the examining table – instead we head the back of the bunker, and kneel down between the shelves to have a look at the piece. Its weight weighs down. So heavy, to have been taken from our palace, through a battlefield, all the way to Europe. This is not a small war trophy, slipped into one pocket to take home and pass around as tales of battle are told. The weight of the Uhunmwo Elao tells us it should not be moved. The casters made it strong, like the Oba, strong to support the Aken'ni Elao. Today its absence too is heavy.

The third Uhunmwo Elao, is in the Museum Rietberg. A museum founded in 1952, as a museum for world art with the founding collection donated by Eduard von der Heydt, a German banker who was later naturalized in Switzerland. This Uhunmwo Elao comes from his collection, how he acquired it we do not know, but it was gifted to the Museum Rietberg in 1952. This is the commemorative head of the Oba Osemwende, and would have been commissioned by his heir, the Oba

Adolo around 1850, and remained in the Royal Palace until the looting of 1897. During our first visit to the collections in Switzerland, it was the encounter with this piece that moved us most. Not only is at piece of national interest in Nigeria, it is also part of Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe's family history. As a student her professor had set her the task of retracing her family genealogy, which let to her finding out that her great great-grandfather was Oba Osemwende's third son. This head should be in an altar in the Oba's palace she said, and yet, I feel so honored to see it here in Switzerland, to have the privilege of coming here to hold it. It's overwhelming she added.

What is to become of these three Uhunmwo Elao? Will they remain in their depots and behind their vitrines? Along with the other participating museums of the Swiss Benin Initiative, the museums in Basel and Zurich have agreed to return the ownership of these pieces to their original owners. Whether this means that they return to a palace shrine, to a museum in Lagos, or remain on loan in Switzerland, we do not know. However, what it does mean, is that the role, the weight, the relevance of these Uhunmwo Elao has been recognized, along with the colonial injustice experienced and prolonged by the looting and dispersion of Benin heritage. With this in mind, may they sit easier, knowing that both the descendants and the museum staff whose care they are entrusted into, honor this.

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Museum der Kulturen. *Jahres Bericht*. Basel, 1899.

Daniel Dinato, Ibã Huni Kuin, Carla Rangel, Antoine Bertron,
and Nuria Carton de Grammont

V
Vende

Vende Tela, Compra Terra. *Art and Territorial Recuperation*

MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin) is a collective of Indigenous artists and researchers from the Huni Kuin[1] people, residing in the state of Acre, Brazil. Founded in 2012, the collective includes Ibã Huni Kuin, Cleiber Bane, Pedro Maná, Acelino Tuin, Kássia Borges, Cleudo Tuin, Rita Dani, Edilene Yaka, and Isaka Menegildo. The collective emerged out of intergenerational research on huni meka[2] chants, initiated by Ibã Huni Kuin in the 1980s. By transposing these ritual chants into paintings and drawings, the collective creates works that allow us to connect with the relational ontology[3] of the Huni Kuin people. Through this artistic practice, MAHKU employs strategies of exchange and transmission to preserve knowledge and to protect ancestral lands, thus ensuring the autonomy of their peoples and the transformation of their culture. In 2023, a retrospective of the collective's work was exhibited at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), and in 2024, they participated in the 60th Venice Biennale with a 750-square-meter mural titled *Kapewë Pukeni* (Alligator Bridge).

Recording of Ibã Huni Kuin, June 10, 2022.

Good evening, good morning, good afternoon. I am very pleased to talk about the research work that I do. I am a painting artist.

In 2014, the artist Naziha Mestaoui invited us to work at Cidade Matarazzo in São Paulo. We had a total of twelve days to work, but we only took eight to complete the mural. You know,

1 The Huni Kuin ("true humans"), also known as Kaxinawá, speak hantxa kuin ("true language") from the Pano linguistic family. They live in the state of Acre (Brazil) and in Peru.

2 The *huni meka* ("songs of the liana") are traditional songs that guide participants in ayahuasca rituals (called "*nixi pae*", or the enchanted thread). In this context, they function as visual pathways, connecting listeners with various spirit-images (*yuxin*) of the forest.

3 A relational ontology can be defined "as one in which nothing preexist the relations that constitute it", Arthuro Escobar, "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South," *AIBR Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana* 11, 1 (2016): 18, accessed March 28, 2025, https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e. According to Poirier, "In a relational ontology, relations (between humans and between human and non-human agencies) are an intrinsic and dynamic part of local ways of being in the world. Relations are embodied to the extent that they are constitutive of one's self (of one's corporeality, bodily-self) and identity" (our translation), Sylvie Poirier, "Reflections on Indigenous Cosmopolitics – Poetics," *Anthropologica* 50, 1 (2008): 77.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-025

murals can't be sold. So, in the remaining four days, we created a painting of the Nai Mapu Yubekã chant, and we sold it to Alexandre (Allard).

He bought the painting for 40 000 reais and transferred the money to my account. I thought: "This painting is a piece of heritage, this painting is the spirit of the forest wherein I translate the language of the spirit". With that money, I didn't want to buy just anything; no, I wanted to buy something of value, something that would last, something alive. I bought land, ten hectares in the forest. Then people asked me: "What are you doing?" I said: "selling the painting, buying land". And that's how heritage continues. The Nai Mapu Yubekã chant became land, a piece of land of ten hectares that we bought.

So, the canvas, the painting, continued to live. Music is life, the nixi pae *(ayahuasca) is life. The painting lives in the museum, in the gallery, in people's homes, it lives with us. The painting is life.*

The painting is also our weapon, what I mean is, it's our product, our creation, just like music. We create it. So, that's it: sell the painting, buy land. Sell the painting, buy a house. Sell the painting, buy an engine. Sell the painting, buy food, clothes, medicine. Sell the painting, and help the family. The canvas remains alive this way.

At the same time, I am a student. I studied with professors from the Federal University of Acre, the Federal University of Southern Bahia, the Federal University of Minas Gerais, the Federal University of Amazonia, Uberlandia, Brasília, so in all the universities I went to, I met many students, professors, and researchers.

When students, teachers, and friends wanted to visit my community and see the territory, they couldn't, because our land is federal government property – it's not ours, it belongs to the federal government. At that time, FUNAI [Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas, previously Fundação Nacional do Índio] *said that no one could enter my community without their permission. So, I extended our land so that students and researchers could see and feel it, to understand the power of painting and land.*

The canvas becomes land. The music becomes painting. We feel the painting, and it feels us. Just as you now feel the works Nai Mapu Yubekã and Yame Awa Kawanai. If someone buys them, we take the money. White people invented money, paper. Today, that money helps us to live. We need it to buy our essentials. That's it, that's the poetics of MAHKU: sell the painting, buy land. In this way, we expand our lands. The lands marked off by the federal government are not ours, they belong to the federal government. Only what we buy is truly ours. It wasn't always like this. That's why we sell canvases, paintings, to buy land.

This article began with the words of Ibã Huni Kuin, founder and member of MAHKU, explaining the cosmological complexity and political significance of what a painting represents for him and for the Indigenous Huni Kuin people who gave rise to MAHKU. Inspired by this excerpt, the phrase *Vende tela, compra terra* (sell the canvas, buy land) was chosen as the title for the exhibition co-curated by Ibã Huni Kuin and Daniel Dinato, with support from the SBC Gallery of Contem-

porary Art team, including Nuria Carton de Grammont, Carla Rangel, and Antoine Bertron, in Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyaang / Montreal, Canada, in the fall of 2022 (see Fig. 35).

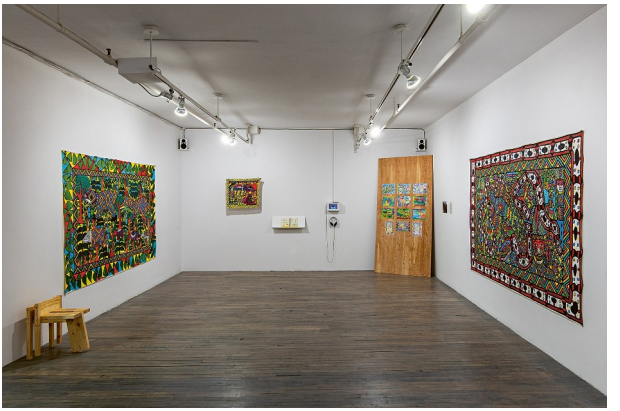

Fig. 35: View of the exhibition *Vende tela, compra terra*, 2022, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art.

This exhibition marks the foundation of a collaborative project whose curatorial approach aligns with a broader understanding the role of art within postcolonial studies and the associated reconfiguration of museum institutions. The *curator-txai* concept, developed by Daniel Dinato and extended to the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art team, envisages curation as a long-term, engaged, and self-reflective relationship, attentive to MAHKU's needs and supporting the peculiarities of their artistic practice. The use of the term *txai* here is largely inspired by the "ethnographic pact"[4] established between anthropologist Bruce Albert and shaman Davi Kopenawa, and proposes to maintain a critical lens on the framework of ethnographic observation itself. *Txai*,[5] described as "the relational term par excellence for the

4 "The 'ethnographic pact' aims to: The first, of course, was to be scrupulous in doing justice to my hosts' conceptual imagination; the second, to think rigorously through the sociopolitical, local, and global context in which their society was embedded; and the third, to maintain a critical overview of the framework of the very act of ethnographic observation itself", Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky. Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013): 569.

5 *Txai* derives from *txain*, a term used by the Huni Kuin to refer to their brothers-in-law.

Huni Kuin",[6] is frequently used in the context of inter-ethnic relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the region, and refers to a "generic term for an 'other', a non-relative with whom one seeks friendly or, at least, neutral relations, allowing for exchange, that is, relationship".[7]

On this basis, we asked ourselves what it would mean to exhibit MAHKU's work at SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, a center dedicated to exploring the intersection of art and politics and the fostering of hemispheric exchanges.[8] How could we create a socially responsible exchange between this collective of artists from the Global South and an institution based in Canada? What would the artistic, even political implications be of presenting their worldview, rooted in the Amazonian landscape, within a North American context?

These questions resonate with the field of inquiry that Daniel Dinato has been pursuing since he started to collaborate with MAHKU in 2016, during his master's in social anthropology at the University of Campinas, and which he continues today through his doctoral research. Focusing on a deeper understanding of the production context of MAHKU's works and the collective's organizational structure, Dinato's research reveals two major points that informed our curatorial approach. The first concerns the development of the MAHKU artist practice within a myriad of other collective responsibilities, including planting and harvesting, hunting, and village maintenance. Artistic practice is not viewed as a separate *profession* but as one activity among the many subsistence strategies integral to the community. The second highlights the importance of interpersonal relations of trust and exchange, often set within an asymmetric context between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Critical examination of power dynamics is essential to maintaining relationships that extend beyond the professional context.

Organized around three main themes – cosmology, pedagogy, and political strategies – the exhibition at SBC showcased paintings, drawings, objects, legal documentation, and audiovisual recordings that attest to the complexity of MAHKU's claims for political, financial, and territorial autonomy, as well as their use of art as an activist practice. The exhibition experience works by following each thematic axis, starting with the artistic process behind the canvases, their meaning, and their significance for the Huni Kuin people.

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6 Els Lagrou, "Figures, Patterns, and Songs: Traditional Knowledge and Contemporary Art Movements in the Amazon," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 79, 1 (2023): 47.

7 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Contra-Antropologia, contra o Estado: uma conversa com Eduardo Viveiros de Castro." *Revista Habitus IFCS/UFRJ*, 12, 2 (2014): 158.

8 SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art is a non-profit exhibition center located in Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyaang/Montreal (Quebec).

Through ayahuasca chants (*huni meka*) the Huni Kuin have learned to feel and communicate with the spirits of the forest. As Ibã explains, these chants are the "language and science of the *jiboias*[9] (*boa constrictors*)"[10] that generate constantly transforming images during rituals (known as *miração*), which are then depicted in MAHKU's works (see Fig. 36).

Fig. 36: Bane Huni Kuin and Pedro Maná (MAHKU), The Mural *Hawe henewakame (The Great River)*, 2023, Paul-Émile Sauvageau Pool, L.-O.-Taillon Park, Montreal, Canada.

The collective's artworks result from a composition created using, on the one hand, the references present in the *huni meka* chants, which are common to all, and, on the other hand, the experience of *miração*, which each person experiences uniquely. Thus, even if the song is painted a thousand times, it will never repeat itself, they say. Although the works bear individual signatures, production is a community endeavor, interspersed with informal exchanges. MAHKU occasionally organizes drawing workshops where young people learn about the chants. MAHKU's methodology takes on a highly significant dimension, as it allows the community to reclaim their knowledge sustainably. One of the collective's main goals is to assert autonomy in their relationship with the Whites (as they refer to all non-Indigenous peoples). This autonomy was partially achieved in 2014 when they purchased their first plot of land with funds from the sale of the *Nai Mapu Yubekã* canvas. On these ten hectares, the collective founded the Independent MAHKU Center, a place dedicated to forest preservation and ancestral knowledge.

9 The Huni Kuin, through their ancestor Yube Inu, learned knowledge related to ayahuasca (songs, preparation, cultivation . . .) from boa constrictors.

10 Ibã Huni Kuin, "Miração." Telephone communication, July 28, 2022.

Through their paintings, the artists enable others, particularly non-Indigenous peoples, to experience the power of the forest and understand the nature of *mirações*. As Ibã says, they show us a universe where "everything is alive, everything looks and listens".[11]

To further explore MAHKU's practice, we created an extended curatorial program during which artists Bane Huni Kuin and Pedro Maná were welcomed to Montreal in July 2023 (see Fig. 37).

Fig. 37: Public Program *Assi Sheueiau / Mai Kemaname Kani / Échos des Territoires*, 2023, Ilnu Museum of Mashteuiatsh.

The presence of MAHKU's community in Quebec aimed to create additional spaces for exchange, especially with Indigenous Peoples from the northern continent. We developed the program *Sheueu Tshitassinu / Mai Kemaname Kani / Échos des territoires* in partnership with the Ilnu Museum in Mashteuiatsh, which also hosted a reactivation of the *Vende tela, compra terra* exhibition from February to May 2024. This program included a painting and chant workshop and a talking circle led by multidisciplinary Ilnu artists Sonia Robertson, Soleil Launière, and Amélie Courtois, in collaboration with elders and various members of the Pekuakamiulnuatsh (Ilnu of Lac-Saint-Jean) community. Inviting the public to discover some of the Indigenous approaches and artistic practices in which territory is placed at the center of their

11 Amilton Pelegrino de Mattos and Ibã Huni Kuin, "Por Que Canta O Mahku – Movimento Dos Artistas Huni Kuin?," *GIS – Gesto, Imagem E Som – Revista de Antropologia* 2, 1 (2017): 74, accessed March 28, 2025, https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2525-3123.gis.2017.128974.

concerns, MAHKU also transformed the song *Hawe henewakame* (The Great River) into a large mural on the walls of the Paul-Émile Sauvageau Pool in L.-O.-Taillon Park, along the Saint Lawrence River in the Mercier–Hochelaga-Maisonneuve borough on the east side of Tiohtià:ke / Mooniyaang / Montreal. In this process, we learned to adapt, to respect, and to defend different temporalities and ways of doing things.

The key questions we asked ourselves at the beginning of our collaboration remain open, and there are a multitude of possible responses regarding the complex journey of our relational commitments. The only certainty that has emerged – if any – is the need for reflection and transformation within our curatorial and institutional practices that the experiential opportunities with Indigenous artists have prompted. Contrary to the title of this collaboration, *Vende tela, compra terra*, the main goal of the project was never to sell the collective's works, but rather to foster encounters with other artists, cultural workers, and communities by instigating new ways of working. It was about encouraging sustainable, reciprocal relationships that might continue beyond the purchase of an artwork.

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Sandra Bornand, and Cécile Leguy

W
Words

"Paroles d'Afrique" Exhibition at the Bordeaux Ethnography Museum (MEB) or How to Bring Words to Life for the Public

According to a Wolof proverb (Senegal), "words are like gunshots; once they escape, it is too late to take them back". This definition presents words as a force that, once released from the mouth that produced them, follows its own trajectory. As conceived and experienced in Africa, speech is incorporated through socialization and embodied in everyday life as well as in key social moments. Far from being a mere tool of transmission of information, it is primarily a moment of sharing, exchange, and building or challenging – sometimes even destroying, in the case of curses – social bonds. Powerful, sparking both positive and negative effects. Understanding it in all its dimensions requires an initiatory process of sorts, aimed at learning to speak well, which implies being able to hear beyond words and mastering oneself, to avoid letting just any thought escape from one's mouth; as expressed in a Soninke saying (Mali) quoted by Diawara: "silence is the elder of speech".[1] The first objective of the *Paroles d'Afrique* exhibition, presented at the Bordeaux Ethnography Museum (Musée d'ethnographie de l'université de Bordeaux, MEB) during the 2012–2013 academic year, was to deconstruct stereotypes about the African continent, which is often portrayed as monolithic and timeless, lacking writings, and a place from which words of ancestral wisdom emanate, allegedly hindering people's everyday lives. The aim was also to invite the public to reassess their own conception of language and, by experiencing different forms of speech throughout the exhibition, see African contexts as sources of inspiration for European societies.

Distancing ourselves from collection methods that treat words as age-old texts analyzed in a decontextualized manner, our research methods relied on long periods of repeated immersion over the years, focusing on performance and the context of the spoken word. This approach enabled us to weave relationships based on listening and mutual trust. The subject of "speech" was chosen as a starting point in the field, with local concepts and practices being taken seriously, and the dialogic nature of the research highlighted.

1 Mamadou Diawara, *L'empire du verbe et l'éloquence du silence* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, 2003), 275.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-026

Questions such as “Where am I speaking from?”, “Who am I to speak?”, and “How can I get subaltern voices heard?” confront any researcher committed to fulfilling their role as an intermediary who has, at some point, accepted the position of relearning everything; primarily, what words are, how to speak well, and how to nurture social bonds. This art of speech, practiced daily, was what we sought to display in order to encourage the public to shift their perspective and grasp the nature of words as understood and experienced in the contexts we studied, in the hope of imagining how this might be applied in situations where social bonds seem strained. In this sense, this reflection on speech is eminently political.

Feeling Words: A Museum Experience at the MEB

As linguistic anthropologists working on orality in different field sites (one with the Bwa in Mali, the other with the Zarma in Niger), yet both located in West Africa, we have each experienced the power of certain words: the naming that bonds namesakes, the words that bless or curse, the genealogist griot’s praise which makes the listener tremble, the diviner who gives voice to the invisible world, and so on. We thus designed the *Paroles d’Afrique* exhibition to make words come alive for the public, to enable them to feel their effects, discover their richness and diversity, and become aware of the possibilities of interacting differently through language in a world in crisis.

As visitors, we had experienced other exhibitions where “the curator” (to use Varutti’s term[2]) sought to stir emotion in the public: *Nous autres* at the Geneva Ethnography Museum (Musée d’ethnographie de Genève[3]), where sight and sound led visitors to rethink their relationship with others; *Bruits* at the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel[4]), where one journeyed through whispers and crashes echoing the immaterial. Though we are not museum specialists, we aligned with a recent museum trend harnessing experience and emotion to better engage the public.

Recognizing the emphasis placed on mastering both speech and self, in initiation processes as well as daily life (akin to the *pulaaku* among the Fulani[5]), we chose to

2 Marzia Varutti, “Vers une muséologie des émotions,” *Culture & Musées* 36 (2020): 171–177, accessed March 28, 2025, https://journals.openedition.org/culturemusees/5751.

3 Erica Deubler Ziegler and Geneviève Perret, eds., *Nous autres* (Gollion: Info éditions, 2005).

4 Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Bernard Knodel, Yann Laville and Grégoire Mayor, eds., *Bruits. Échos du patrimoine culturel immatériel* (Neuchâtel: Musée d’Ethnographie, 2011).

5 Amadou Oumarou, *Dynamique du Pulaaku dans les sociétés peules du Dallol Bosso (Niger)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012).

design the exhibition on a rhythm inspired by this process, alternating between noisy words and silence. At the entrance, a mix of greetings in different languages welcomed visitors, inviting them into the world of words but not allowing them to grasp the meaning of the spoken words, like a newborn, rocked by the musicality of voices. In the first room, various displays and objects encouraged reasoning; guessing games (Mossi, Burkina Faso) and proverbial interpretations (Gbaya, DRC; Bwa) were offered. The public had to search for meaning beyond the words, mirroring the mental flexibility children learn as soon as they start to speak. As they did so, they progressed along the winding paths of speech, learning various means of indirect communication. Why was this boy named "Fend for Yourself" by his maternal grandparents?[6] What is meant when a woman wears a wrap called "The Eye of My Rival"? What do the balafon notes that echo the tones of a language signify? This introduction to words also revealed the diversity of their mediums: while orality is often associated with Africa, writing has existed there for a long time in some regions – Ethiopian texts in Ge'ez, the Quran in Ajami – and on various mediums, from dream letters sent to the radio, to urban writings and multilingual text messages.

After exploring the diversity of speech and recognizing the importance of the implicit, visitors were then immersed in conflict situations and the ways of managing them. The first situations were experienced through soundscapes (comparing two opinions, one among the Gbaya and the other among the Zarma), while the second was conveyed in silence, through a comic strip by Ali Mont-Rose illustrating joking relations between the Fulani and Bobo (Burkina Faso), created for the exhibition, and a hands-on game introducing visitors to verbal sparring.

This tense moment of testing one's mastery of speech was followed by a literary pause. In the third room, a calm space where the public – surrounded by chordophones and portraits of performers – could sit and grasp the nuances of Fulani poetry (Mali), a Zarma genealogist griot's storytelling, and the praises of Manding hunter-masters (Mali), with a lounge extension dedicated to literature written in both African and Western languages. This aimed to highlight the existence of a rich, yet often overlooked, body of literature where the choice of language is also a political act. As Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi said, "I write in French, because it was in this language that the people to whom I bear witness were violated. I remember my own innocence. And my relationship with the French language is one of utmost resistance" (our translation).[7] Visitors, comfortably seated on cushions, could leaf through novels, poetry, children's books, and

6 This message is indirectly addressed to the child's mother. The maternal grandparents are using the birth of the child to convey a message to their daughter by choosing this name.

7 Sony Labou Tansi, "Sony Labou Tansi face à douze mots," *Équateur* 1 (1986): 30.

other publications in a room with walls adorned with portraits of writers (Wole Soyinka, Aminata Sow Fall, Ngugi wa Thiong, etc.), quotes about words, and a display of rare books.

After this quiet moment, a passage through a dark room with only one illuminated phrase, "The griot knows the words that kill", prepared the public for what awaited them in the next room: a powerful, rhythmic projection of performative words. The goal was for people to feel the power of speech, immersed in darkness as if withdrawn to the sacred forest in the liminal phase of an initiation rite, allowing them to experience words both physically and intellectually, such as a Muslim blessing sealing and protecting a Zarma marriage, followed by songs invoking a spirit to manifest protection over the bride, accompanied by the trance that ensued, and the repeated phrases of the diviner seeking to discover a person's secret name among the Bwa (Mali). After this climactic, emotion-filled point in the exhibition, visitors found themselves on the way back into the world, gradually, like the dead leaf in a Dioula proverb from Côte d'Ivoire: "If you see a dead leaf saying that tomorrow it will be on the other side of the river, it's because the words of the wind reached its ears". Primarily, this way highlighted the way that practices and words circulate across continents. The reproduction of a *home studio* producing Tanzanian slam and Senegalese rap showcased an interactive touchscreen where the public could, by clicking on words, discover their journey.

Before returning to the outside world, visitors entered a small room where the role of speech in our society was brought into question, at a time when social bonds are weakening, and people no longer always take the time to speak to one another. They encountered initiatives, inspired by African experiences, which aimed at rebuilding connections and reclaiming this essential function of language. The final exit was symbolized by a talking tree with cardboard leaves conceived of as the seeds of words, where everyone could leave their own message (see Fig. 38).

Visitors were thus invited to write to others and, in turn, to take a leaf-seed-of-words with them.

By inviting the public into the world of words through a whisper, and having them experience both its power and its gentleness throughout the journey, we aimed for them to leave transformed, remembering that "silence is a form of speech" (Hausa, Nigeria) and that "the words conceived in the heart are not all released by the mouth" (Boulou, Cameroon), two of the proverbs that accompanied the *Paroles d'Afrique* exhibition, transcribed on the floor.

This exhibition, designed to immerse visitors in the diverse and fascinating world of African words, was experienced on many levels, as reflected in comments left in the guestbook. For some, it was a dive into the unknown; for others, it awakened memories. No one remained indifferent to this journey between sound and silence, solitude and connection, action and meaning.

Fig. 38: Tree of Word-Seeds before the Opening. 2012. Source: DVD & website of the "*Paroles d'Afrique*" exhibition (@Gustave Deghilage). *Paroles d'Afrique*, Musée d'ethnographie de l'université de Bordeaux, co-produced with Llacan (Langage, Langues et Cultures d'Afrique Noire – CNRS), 2012.

To extend this experience and make it available to those who could not visit the exhibition, a DVD was produced, following the organization of the rooms, and presenting the various themes explored and displayed elements, enriched with filmed interviews with anthropologists, linguists, and African literature specialists, as well as explanatory extras and information on the objects and other exhibits. The choice of a DVD format was motivated by the desire to distribute the exhibition on the African continent, where internet access was still quite limited. DVDs were thus distributed to universities, libraries, and interested individuals. The DVD's content is now available online.[8]

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Aldo Trucchio

X
Xenophobia

Borders, Migrants, and Activist Art

Xenophobia is a "dispositive of power" based on the representation of foreigners as a threat to the host community.[1] This dispositive is a constitutive element of the social and political life of the contemporary Western world. The term *xenophobia*, despite being composed of two Greek words, is a recent neologism. In antiquity, the term *xenos*, usually translated as "foreigner", could refer to an outsider to the community or even to a guest with whom one might form a friendship. For centuries, the rules of hospitality, known as *xenia*, were central to tradition: the passing stranger was invited into one's home to rest, wash, and eat, before being asked questions about their origins or the purpose of their journey. However, it is worth noting that *xenos* was used exclusively for Greeks: the *xenos* was not an "autochthonous",[2] but resembled one, due to shared language and religion.

It was Anatole France who, during the Dreyfus Affair and the resurgence of French nationalism, first juxtaposed *phobos* (fear) with *xenos* to denote the attitude of those suspicious of the foreigners living in France.[3] Anatole France likely coined this term from *xenos* (acknowledging the meanings of *stranger*, *guest*, and *friend*) to refer positively to the same people that Charles Maurras disdainfully called *métèques* in French, using the Greek term to indicate immigrants with inferior status to that of other citizens.

Since World War II, mutual distrust among European citizens of differing countries has diminished. The economic crisis following the 1973 oil shock was not, as is often claimed, a cause but, rather, a political opportunity for leaders of various European countries to revise immigration policies, which quickly became anti-immigration measures aimed at discouraging immigration and portraying foreigners as a risk or threat to society.[4] The two decades following the end of the Soviet Union also saw Eastern Europeans fall victim to xenophobia, whereas to-

1 Michel Foucault, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique, cours au Collège de France, 1973–1974* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2003).

2 Marcel Detienne, *Comment être autochtone. Du pur Athénien au Français raciné* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

3 Pierre Villard, "Naissance d'un mot grec en 1900. Anatole France et les xénophobes," *Mots. Les langages du politique* 8 (1984): 191 -195.

4 Didier Fassin, Alain Morice and Catherine Quiminal, eds, *Les lois de l'inhospitalité: les politiques de l'immigration à l'épreuve des sans-papiers* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997)

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-027

day's xenophobes view migrants from Africa's and Asia's former colonies as the principal "foreigners". Over the centuries, the numerous European countries that participated, directly or indirectly, in colonial ventures developed an ideological framework on which to justify their enterprises, a framework based on the supposed cultural superiority of the colonizers. It was a framework supported not only by politicians of all parties but also by soldiers, civil servants, doctors, scientists, artists, intellectuals, religious figures, and teachers. This systematic devaluation of Indigenous cultures was reactivated when the residents of those colonies then became migrants and immigrants.

Today's "foreigner," in the xenophobic mind, has nothing in common with the Greek *xenos*. To understand this figure, as denigrated as it is stereotyped, one should revisit the history of the term *barbaros*, which was used for those who did not speak Greek, eventually coming to denote the Indigenous Peoples of the colonies. Or we might consider the image of the *agrioi*, the wild women and men who, according to Herodotus, inhabited western Libya (*Histories*, 4.191). This figure of wild humanity runs through medieval and modern iconography (*homo agrestis* or *silvaticus*), eventually becoming a model for the representation of Indigenous communities from diverse latitudes.[5] On closer inspection, many negative images of otherness converged in the colonial imagination and were systematized by 19th-century physical anthropology and associated scientific disciplines. The ideological framework that justified violence in the name of civilization still underpins the discourse of 19th-century racist anthropologists.[6]

In Europe, people use the term "xenophobe" rather than "racist" to avoid directly accusing someone hostile to migrants of racism. In the United States and Canada, the use of the word "race" in expressions such as "racial profiling" and "systemic racism" does not imply the biological existence of races but, rather, power relations. In Europe, this term remains intimately tied to the Nazi-fascist catastrophe, widely used in propaganda, and is thus confined to historical inquiries. However, the semantic distinction between racism and xenophobia creates a risk of obscuring the fact that the latter primarily targets *racialized* individuals today. The victims of xenophobia are, in fact, men and women who are assigned a racial identity and are perceived as belonging to a group deemed inferior to an assumed European identity: *Black people, Arabs, Africans, Asians*, as well as innumerable other slang and pejorative variations.

It has been widely demonstrated that many political, economic, cultural, and scientific leaders actively support the portrayal of migrants as a danger to society

5 Giuliano Gliozzi, *Adamo e il Nuovo Mondo. La nascita dell'antropologia come ideologia coloniale: dalle genealogie bibliche alle teorie razziali (1500–1700)* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1977).
6 Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale (1860–1930)* (Paris: PUF, 2006).

and the state.[7] The xenophobia of European state institutions materializes along migrant routes, in strategic locations that thus represent Europe's true borders, even though they might be outside its territory. The European Union has funded migrant detention camps in over twenty countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as the construction of immense fences in Spain's Moroccan enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Inside Europe, despite the Schengen Agreement, border checks are increasingly frequent and primarily target racialized individuals suspected of being in Europe "illegally".[8] Across Europe, many migrants (including minors) are imprisoned in detention centers, the denomination varying depending on the country; these are individuals who have committed no crime besides an administrative offense (that is, lacking the proper documents) and are nonetheless deprived of their freedom and subjected to psychological and physical violence. But it is in the Mediterranean that European governments' xenophobia manifests most starkly. Efforts to push boats carrying migrants back to North Africa, particularly Libya and its detention camps, as well as delays in assistance due to conflicts between states over the acceptance of rescue vessels, have led to over 26,000 recorded drownings over the past decade (official estimates, which likely need to be revised upward). This horrific tally is accessible to all citizens, as the media regularly report on shipwrecks or at least those with the most casualties, with photos of floating bodies or those washed ashore. Yet, public reaction to the anti-immigration policies' death toll has been sporadic. Xenophobia is deeply ingrained not only in European institutions but also in the minds of citizens.

For decades, many artists have addressed the theme of migration, working to raise public awareness, criticize immigration policies, and challenge xenophobia in both institutions and society at large.[9] In 2019, Christoph Büchel's installation was one of the most highly discussed works at the Venice Biennale, gaining

7 Jérôme Valluy, "Du retournement de l'asile (1948–2008) à la xénophobie de gouvernement: construction d'un objet d'étude," *Cultures & Conflits* 69 (2008): 81–111, accessed March 28, 2025, https://doi.org/10.4000/conflits.10752.

8 Sarah Bachellerie, "La traque policière des étranger·es à la frontière franco-italienne (Hautes-Alpes) comme 'maintien de l'ordre' social et racial," *Journal of Alpine Research / Revue de géographie alpine* 108, 2 (2020), accessed September 29, 2023, https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.7208; Boriss Cilevičs, "Le profilage ethnique en Europe: une question très préoccupante," *Commission sur l'égalité et la non-discrimination. Conseil de l'Europe*, doc. 14545, renvoi 4387 du 25 juin 2018, première partie de session, 2020, accessed September 29, 2023, https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-FR.asp?fileid=28889&lang=FR.

9 Cécile Croce, "Quand l'art investit le corps migrant: la fabrique du réel," *Corps* 10, 1 (2012): 193–201, accessed September 29, 2023, https://doi.org/10.3917/corp1.010.0193; Karina Horsti, "Imagining Europeans Borders: Commemorative Art on Migrant Tragedies," in *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*, ed. Mannik Lynda (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016, 118–143).

worldwide attention. This Swiss artist exhibited the wreckage of a migrant boat that sank on April 18, 2015, in the Mediterranean, killing nearly a thousand people. The installation's title, *Barca Nostra*, provocatively recalled the *Mare Nostrum* rescue mission, launched after a 2013 shipwreck but later replaced by the Triton mission, which cost less than a third of the former and was aimed at border surveillance rather than saving migrants. The drastic reduction in rescue resources was thus a major cause of this shipwreck (see Fig. 39).

Fig. 39: Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra*, Venice, 2019. / Blue and red shipwreck displayed outdoors on metal supports with visitors walking nearby.

Büchel's installation faced strong criticism, on the grounds that it "aestheticized" death and reduced commemoration to spectacle and provocation.[10] Without delving into the details of this controversy, it is worth noting that Büchel (like most artists who aim to draw public attention to migration tragedies) did not consider involving migrants at any stage of the creation of his installation. This form of art, known as activist art, cannot be reduced to its outcome or its impact on the audience; rather, it must be seen as a process that loses all meaning if it revolves solely around the artist as an individual and creator. The act of (re)appropriating and displaying objects and images linked to migrants – especially if the creative

10 Javier Pes and Naomi Rea, "'Absolutely Vile' or 'Powerful'? Christoph Buchel's Migrant Boat Is the Most Divisive Work at the Venice Biennale," May 16, 2019, accessed April 28, 2025, https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/barca-nostra-1548946.

process remains confined to the exclusive and privileged sphere of Western artists within the narrow world of the art market – does nothing to challenge xenophobia as a mechanism of power. Instead, it preserves the distance and fundamental difference between *us*, European citizens who claim the right to decide who to welcome, and *them*, the others, the foreigners, who can only hope for our sensitivity and generosity.

Another vessel, which was not strictly conceived as an art installation, presents a better example of activist art. In 2020, the street artist Banksy purchased an old French customs vessel, renamed it Louise Michel in honor of the French anarchist and feminist activist, painted it pink, and decorated it with his graffiti, before donating it to the NGO Sea-Watch, active in Mediterranean rescue operations (see Fig. 40).

Fig. 40: Bansky, *M.V. Louise Michel*, Lampedusa, 2023.

Far beyond any form of denunciation, the Louise Michel is used to save, shelter, and *welcome* migrants. The Italian government, which took office in October 2022 and includes several members who openly resort to xenophobic language and rhetoric, detained the vessel for twenty days between April and May 2023 on the grounds that the crew had rescued boats encountered after an initially authorized rescue operation, but without official permission (implying that the *legal* alternative would have been to let them drift). The Louise Michel thus forced the political authorities to openly display the xenophobia underpinning their discourse. It has crossed boundaries between art and political activism, between nations, and, even more importantly, the fundamental boundary of xenophobia it-

self – the division between *us* and *them*. Ultimately, every human being is a *xenos* to another: a stranger, unknown indeed, but also alike; not unworthy of welcome, trust, and perhaps even friendship.

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Gabriel Caiffa

Xenophobia II

Paint For People

Paint For People is a self-financed project that consists of painting free and legal street art for anyone who wants to all around the world in countries such as Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Mauritania. This project is not directed at museums or galleries: my works are created on private homes or abandoned buildings, shops, schools or even on vehicles of transporters and traders. The murals are realized at the request of local residents and without asking for anything in return. The subjects of the artworks are chosen according to the different cultural areas in which they are proposed.

My work is a mix of different influences, as I draw inspiration from everything that is authentic and created from the heart. I hope that people can be empowered by these works of art, created in the most hidden corners of cities and suburbs.

Courage, people need courage.

A lady asked if I could paint an artwork on the door of her shop, which was a women's hair salon (see Fig. 41).

Fig. 41: Gabriel Caiffa, *Hairdresser for women*, Marrakech, August 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-028

In Marrakech the project took place in the narrow and colorful streets of Medina, the historic center of the city. Here I painted houses, shops and vehicles, portraying typical and characteristic subjects of Moroccan culture.

The face depicted belongs to a Nubian boy (see Fig. 42).

Fig. 42: Gabriel Caiffa, *I'm here, now*, Nubian Village of Aswan, Egypt, December 2022.

The Nubian village is located near the Egyptian city of Aswan, on the west bank of the Nile. These people are refugees, as their native villages were submerged by the waters of the Nile after the construction of the Aswan Dam. Now they live on Egyptian land and desperately try to preserve their culture.

Fig. 43: Gabriel Caiffa, *Fennec fox*, Terjit Oasis, Mauritania, August 2023.

The fennec, or “desert fox”, is the symbolic animal of Mauritania, whose territory is made up of 97% desert (see Fig. 43).

The Terjit Oasis is inhabited by some Tuareg families, who settled there hundreds of years ago. Here the project included the decoration of the houses, stables and water wells.

Olabiyi Babalola Yai

Y
Yoruba

Tradition and the Yoruba Artist

Extract from: Olabiyi Babalola Yai. 1999. Tradition and the Yoruba Artist, *African Arts*, Spring, 1999, vol. 32, No. 1, Special Issue: Authorship in African Art, Part 2, pp. 32–35.[1]

At the symposium held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last February in association with its exhibition "Master Hand: Individuality and Creativity among Yoruba Sculptors", I opened my presentation with an *iba*, or homage, which in the Yoruba tradition is the indispensable overture to any orally performed intellectual discourse. To me there was no worthier *iba* for this occasion than the following proverb:

> *Gbenagbena se tire tan*
> *O ku ti gbenugbenu.*
> Here ends the work of the
> sculptor
> Let the critic start his own.

This is a metacritical proverb, almost always ritually proffered by a sculptor after the completion of a work to satisfaction. It underscores the complementarity and the dialectic between sculptor and art historian, between artist and critic, between first-and second-order creativity. The saying suggests that the work of the artist and that of his critic at once precede and follow each other in an unending cycle. But we are also faced with the predicament of translation. I glossed the Yoruba word *gbenugbenu* as "critic", but am fully aware that this translation does not exhaust the range and depth of meaning of the Yoruba term.

A *gbenugbenu* is not a critic in the usual English sense. Literally the term refers to "one who carves with one's mouth (voice)" – a sculptor of words. While in the Western tradition the function of critics is viewed as radically different from that of artists, in the tradition of the Yoruba, *gbenugbenus* by necessity *are* artists. Theirs is no ordinary discourse in ordinary language. As wordsmiths, their duty is to continue the work of the sculptors by other means. The public expects them

1 We would like to express our deep gratitude to Saskia Cousin for suggesting the inclusion of this article in the *Abécédaire*. We are also deeply thankful to Olabiyi Babalola Yai's son for granting us the authorization to republish this article.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-029

to orally perform a text that at once reflects the sculpture and departs from it. Such a work is artistically marked. It is a *monument*, not just a document. In Western philosophical parlance it is first-and second-order discourses artistically interwoyen. Invariably this orally performed text is an *oriki* of both the work of art and the person who produced it, for they are indissolubly linked.

Under normal circumstances my presentation at the "Master Hand" symposium would have been performed as a collective *oriki* of Olowe, Bamgboye, Abatan, Adigbologe, Fagbite, Esubiyi . . . But I lack the *ohun iyo*, the "sweet or salt- ed voice", that is a *sine qua non* of Yoruba poetry performance, particularly when the subjects of the *oriki* are such distinguished artists. More important perhaps, because the works were in an extraterritorial situation, an *oriki* offered in Yoruba would have fallen on deaf ears anyway.

I hope, however, that critics in the United States will someday be able to perform a local English-language equivalent of *oriki*. Only then would the enlightened American public optimally apprehend and comprehend African art. This is predicated on a translation gesture ("translation" in the sense of the Latin word *translatio*, or transfer), that is, on the willingness to move and the actual act of moving from one's primary location – from one's culture – to the other, thereby creating possibilities for an encounter.

The Linguistic Turn and the Principle of Reversibility

At this juncture in the history of the discipline called African art history (and, indeed, a similar case could be made for the collective called African studies), a linguistic turn – the use of African indigenous concepts and discourses in African languages to investigate African cultural features[2] – will help us best perform our duties as *gbenugbenu*. Yes, we can still pay homage in English to our African artists, provided we revisit our concepts and check them against those elaborated in African-language art criticism. Otherwise we would unintentionally be encouraging what I call "intransitive discourses" – those that fail to reach out to the objects and the human beings who are the historical agents of these objects. The

2 Kwasi Wiredu, "Towards Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religions," *ASQ (African Studies Quarterly)* 1, 3, February (1998), 79–135. *The online Journal of African Studies. Gainesville: University of Florida, Gainesville, Center for African Studies*, accessed April 28, 2025, https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/Vol-1-Issue-4-Wiredu.pdf.

result would be the promotion of dubious universals and all brands of what the French theorist Roland Barthes called "white mythology".

Let me take just two examples. "Anonymous" and "naive" are ubiquitous descriptions in African and diaspora art criticism: we hear of "anonymous sculptors" and "naive painting". In the spirit of the linguistic turn, the relevant question to be asked about these concepts involves their reversibility. How does one begin to translate to an African or a Haitian artist our concept of "naive art"? Any serious attempt to do so would most likely expose the naivete of the critic. The artist naively called naive would surely have the last laugh, ideally expressed in the critical idiom of his native tongue. And how does one translate "anonymous" in Kikongo, Baule, Macua, Fon, or Yoruba when it applies to a work of art ? Is "anonymous" an indigenous concept in these traditions? Certainly not. The reality is that for a noncolonized African sensibility, such notions as "naive art" and "anonymous artist" are counterintuitive. Furthermore, they are patronizing, perhaps unconsciously so, as they are used almost exclusively in relation to the arts of enslaved and colonized peoples.

To justify the pertinence of the notion of "anonymous artist" and its continual use in the discourse on African art history, it has been argued that in Africa the artist's identity is not a significant attribute of the work of art as it is in Western art history. It is precisely this mode of reasoning that exposes the extraneous, non-African, and contrastive nature of the notion of anonymity. For the point is: Must African art history conform to the way it is in the West? Besides, even if, for the sake of argument, one accepted the proposition that the African artist's identity is not a significant attribute of the work of art, this does not establish the anonymity of the "traditional" African artist. That condition is predicated on the unsurprisingly different courses taken by art history in Africa and Europe. Societies vary in the way they relate cultural products to agents, in the way things, people, and fame are interfaced. There are similarities and dissimilarities, and there is no justifiable cause for lamenting the absence of universals. The insistence on labeling as "anonymous" any work whose mechanism or process of identification does not replicate the West's is an exercise in cultural violence and intellectual myopia (see "Naming").

As is to be expected, various art objects serve various functions, and the emphasis on art objects, their functions, and their creators, supposing we must always dichotomize them, varies from culture to culture. But even in the extreme case of, say, a sculpture with an exclusively religious function, its efficacy will ultimately be a function of how harmoniously it fits in an encounter of ritual, visual, and verbal excellence. To be sure, a diviner who wishes to endow a sculpture with power and efficacy will not commission it from an apprentice sculptor.

Notions like the "anonymous" artist and "naive art" cannot pass the test of reversibility. They are not derived from the discursive practices of the African cultures and peoples whose artistic traditions they claim to investigate, nor can they be therein accommodated. As such, they are colonial inventions, lacking descriptive and analytical relevance. Part of a vast terminological arsenal used by the West in its discourse about other cultures, they derive their truth value from uncritical repetition by generations of art critics, *not* from empirically and rationally established links with African cultural practices. In African art history these concepts prolong the ethnologist's "African unanimity" fallacy aptly chastised by the Beninois philosopher Paulin Hountondji, whereby "everyone agrees with everyone", leaving little or no room for the expression of individual creativity and dissent.[3]

We Africanist scholars must humbly acknowledge the limitations of our models and methodologies. The overwhelming nature of the colonial situations and ideologies of which we all are victims – but to which through constant vigilance we must endeavor not to remain involuntary accomplices – induces us to inadvertently smuggle false issues, nonissues, and extraneous notions and concepts into the disciplines of African studies. More important, the critique of the notion of "anonymous" suggests the need for a linguistic turn in African art history and, indeed, in African studies in general, if our goal remains to achieve, in African parlance, "deep knowledge". In my opinion it is the uncircumventable way by which we can hope to be truthful to Africa, her arts and artists, and to meet the legitimate expectations of the international audience of art lovers. The stake is a healthy dialogue between cultures in which art critics play the role of faithful translators and interpreters, mindful of the unique responsibility of any translator (*tradutore*), who is also a potential traducer (*traditore*).

Under normal circumstances, a linguistic turn in any area studies should be self-evident and needs no apologists. But African studies, as a body of disciplines, was not born, and is not currently operating, under normal circumstances. Colonial and postcolonial/neocolonial situations are abnormalities. The fact is that African studies so far has resisted a linguistic turn.

We assume that such discourses are nonexistent, an assumption based on the Western unexamined dogma that associates discourse and discursivity with writing, despite Derrida's numerous epigrams that warn against logocentrism. These epigrams are often quoted by his African and Africanist admirers and epigones even as they fail to ponder their implications for epistemology in the context of

3 Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy, Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996 [1976]).

African orality. An unfortunate consequence of this "Eurocentric and scriptocentric bias" is the emergence of the oft-mentioned "absence of evidence". But in this case, as the saying goes, absence of evidence is no evidence of absence. Only our scriptocentric bias blocks our way to the discovery and critical use of important corpora of African-language oral texts on African cultural practices.

The Yoruba Case

In the context of a culture like that of the Yoruba, which places a premium on individuality to the point of deifying it as *ori*,[4] the idea of an anonymous sculpture is a conceptual *non sequitur*. It simply does not pass the test of cultural receivability in the discursive practice of *gbenugbenu*. It is against the background of cultural relevance and receivability that I suggest we examine the basic concepts expressing individuality and creativity in Yoruba art, indeed, in African art in general.

First, a few words of clarification are in order. As I will straddle English and Yoruba – or, rather, since I conduct my discourse in English using Yoruba concepts – it is important to declare that I will not be using my role as translator to smuggle English-language ideas into the Yoruba world view. Cultural nationalists routinely do this in an obsessive effort to prove that any concept in the Western tradition also exists in African cultures. The concepts I refer to have been passed down from the discursive practice of Yoruba intellectuals since precolonial times: they are part of a metalanguage "already there". The only thing novel is my linguistic analysis. In more empirical terms, I try, as much as is humanly possible for a colonized person, to position myself as a monolingual and monocultural Yoruba, as were most of the artists in the "Master Hand" exhibition and the overwhelming majority of their primary and natural public. It is from that position that I invite readers to accomplish an intellectual and affective gesture of *translatio*, a transfer.

Since sculpture is an activity performed within a cultural envelope, perhaps the very concept of tradition should be examined first. *Àṣà* is the Yoruba concept that most aptly translates as "tradition". The noun is derived from the verb *sa*, which means to select, to discern, to discriminate. When it refers to a human society, *àṣà* is the set of behaviours, deeds, and habits that characterize it after it has been subjected to a historical process of deliberate choice. It can thus aptly be

4 Rowland Abiodun, "Verbal and Visual Metaphors: Mythical Allusions in Yoruba Ritualistic Art of Ori," *Word and Image* 3, 3 (1987): 252–70.

described as a tradition that is permanently open to innovation informed by preceding phases in the process. *Àṣà* can be individual or societal, held by groups, cities, villages, lineages, or, indeed, nations. Of course, various *àṣà* may intersect at certain levels. When new elements are added that are not based on an understanding of earlier elements of the process, the Yoruba mark the oddity with the concept of *àṣà* – a word with exactly the same syllables, but with different tones (mid-tones instead of the low tones of the former). *Àṣà* (with mid-tones) is therefore an attempt – a vain attempt in Yoruba as well as other West African world views – to innovate *ex nihilo*.[5]

Informed departure from tradition is expressed through the verb *da*: to break, to split, to create, to depart. Thus *da asa* means to innovate, to create a new style, literally, "to split or break the tradition". A potter or sculptor may thus have her own *àṣà*, as could a lineage or just a workshop of sculptors.

The language and metalanguage of the Yoruba visual and verbal arts often overlap. The key concept for this discussion is expressed through the verb *ya* (to deviate, to bifurcate, to pass or surpass), as in the expressions *ya ere,* to carve, and *ya aworan*, to design, to paint. Similarly in the verbal arts, the same verb *ya* occurs to sanction the contours of a distinct unit of performance in the centerless and intertextual tapestry of units that is *oriki.*

> *Ori kan nu un ni*
> *Iyato kan nu un ni.*
> Here stands one poem
> And here we bifurcate.

Any Yoruba sculptor, like the historical/mythical Lagbayi, is expected to *pagi da, sogi deniyan* – transform wood and turn it into a human being. By doing so he establishes a relationship with his creation that is akin to that between two human beings of the same lineage. It is precisely this lineage-like kinship that establishes the basis for an *oriki* common to both. And after *gbenagbena's* (the artist's) finishing touches, *gbenugbenu* (the critic) follows up, sculpting words that beautifully invoke the carver, his work, the orisa, the patrons, actual and potential admirers, and the *gbenugbenu* herself.

With such an ecumenical collaboration in the birth and the life of a Yoruba art form, it should be easy to understand the poverty, if not the irrelevance or radical meaninglessness, of an "anonymous art" in the context of Yoruba culture. It also becomes clearer why a sculpture should best be apprehended as an *oriki* of at once individual and collective hands, eyes, voices, and feelings.

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5 Wiredu, "Towards Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religions."

The ideal artist in Yoruba tradition is an *are*. Lagbayi, the paradigmatic Yoruba sculptor, lived as an *are*. No etymology of the word has been attempted, but the most plausible one would derive it from the verb *re*, which means to depart. *Ares* are itinerant individuals, wanderers, permanent strangers precisely because they can be permanent nowhere. They always seek to depart from current states of affairs. They go about *(re)* and bifurcate or pass *(ya)* constantly in life. And when they are unable to bifurcate in the physical and geographical sense of the word, they will endeavor to do so from sculpture, even if only to become a better artist. Hence the *are* will be an Osun priestess (as was Abatan), a diviner-healer (like Ayo), or a Gelede elder (like Duga).

In Yoruba culture, *ori* is the central principle of individuality. A famous Ifa divination verse says, "*Ko sorisa tii da ni igbe leyin ori eni*" (No orisa can save one without the help of one's *ori*), and it is little surprise that the privileged idiom of artistic expression, indeed, the mode of existence of art, should be constant departure. Artists are at their best when they are literally "not at home". This is the deep meaning of the *oriki* phrase of the transcendental sculptor Lagbayi: *Okosanmijulelo (Oko san mi ju ilé lo:* I am better off on the farm than in the hometown).

Ordinary citizens and even titled people are called Ilésanmi (I am better off in my hometown). This personal name, which like many Yoruba names begins a proverb, is the equivalent of the Western saying "Charity begins at home". But Lagbayi is no ordinary citizen, and an ordinary proverb will not suffice to portray his personality. Hence Lagbayi, and by implication all good artists, turn the proverb upside down: he is better off when he departs from the walls of his hometown. For these artists "charity begins abroad": "*Oko san mi ju ilé lo*".

Here *oko*, "farm", stands as a metaphor for that which is novel, not ordinary, far from home; it is contrasted with *ilé*, "home", a metaphor for the daily, the familiar, the given. In the Yoruba world view, *oko* is the antonym of *ilé*. In terms of artistic practice and discourse, the best way to recognize reality and engage it is to depart from it. Any entity or reality worth respecting is approached from this point of view.

Thus the essence of art is universal bifurcation. It is safe to suggest that the preferred Yoruba mode of artistically engaging reality is more metonymic than metaphoric. I would suggest a metonymic paraphrase carved out of Auerbach's celebrated opus: Metamesis, not mimesis.

The perception of tradition as iteration of acts made by individual and collective *ori* based on choice in an infinite figure of contiguity is the inspiration behind the seemingly oxymoronic statement of many Yoruba artists: "Our tradition is very modern".[6] This statement resists translation into Yoruba and will not pass the test of reversibility and receivability, for *àṣà* is at once the traditional and the modem, tradition and innovation, the individual and the collective.

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6 C. A. Waterman, "Our Tradition Is Very Modem: Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity," *Ethnomusicology* 34, 3 (1990): 367–379.

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Mondher Kilani

Z
Zoo

Human Zoo, or Exhibiting the Other

The human zoo, which emerged in the 19th century, is the product of at least three factors: the large-scale establishment of European colonial empires, the scientific formulation of a "racial hierarchy", and the expression of a negative image of the "other", presented as "barbaric" or "savage".[1] Through these displays, which staged entire populations that had been forcibly or willingly relocated to colonial metropoles and confined to enclosures, often alongside exotic animals, visitors were encouraged to reaffirm their belief in the superiority of their own "civilization" over "tribes" depicted as representative of an obsolete stage in human evolution. The term "zoo" is no exaggeration, as these displays operated along four zoo-like dimensions: the confinement of individuals transported from faraway lands; their classification by "type" and "race"; their "training" to perform certain activities; and finally, their exhibition to an audience subscribing to the ideology of progress and colonial conquest. They also have the particularity of taking place in fairs and circuses, museums and scientific institutions, colonial and universal exhibitions.

Human zoos, which gained prominence in the second half of the 19th century and lasted up until the early 20th century, had precedents in modern European history. Hernan Cortes, the conqueror of the Aztec Empire, for instance, exhibited several Indigenous Peoples at the Spanish court. During the Valladolid debate of 1555, which questioned whether the inhabitants of the "New World" had souls, a few "Indians", as they were then called, were presented as "specimens" on whom experiments were to be conducted.[2] Similarly, the Frenchman Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, founder of the short-lived French colony in Brazil known as Antarc-

1 For definitions and further discussion on the "human zoo", see notably Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boetsch, Éric Deroo and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Zoos humains. XIX^e^ et XX^e^ siècles* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002); TDC (Textes et Documents pour la Classe), *Exhibitions. L'invention du sauvage*, 1023, November 2011, accessed April 28, 2025, https://achac.com/sites/default/files/achac/medias/expositions/fichiers/2-1.10-expo-zoos-humains–tdc-exhibitions.pdf; Mondher Kilani, "Musées et zoos humains ou l'exhibition cannibale," in *Du goût de l'autre. Fragments d'un discours cannibale* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), 221–245. See the documentary on Arte, "Sauvages au cœur des zoos humains", accessed April 28, 2025, https://educ.arte.tv/program/sauvages-au-c-ur-des-zoos-humains.

2 Michel Fabre, "La controverse de Valladolid ou la problématique de l'altérité," *Le Télémaque* 29 (2006): 7–16.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-030

tic France, brought fifty Tupis from Guanabara Bay, known in Tupi as *Iguaá-Mbara* and later as Rio de Janeiro, back to Rouen in 1550, where he arranged them in a "Brazilian village" that King Henry II of France and his court visited.[3] During the "Great Discoveries" of the 16th century, the "Savage" – from the Latin *silva*, meaning forest – emerged on the European scene as a symbol of exoticism and philosophical wonder. However, by the end of the 18th century, the "savage" had become entirely confined to a state of nature, seen as either degenerate or incapable of improvement. The "savage" was by now viewed as a relic of a bygone stage in history. In the 19th century, anthropological science established a unifying category, that of "race", to conceptualize human differences and hierarchies (see "Xenophobia"). "Comparative anatomy of races" became a popular field within physical anthropology, and craniology (the study of skull shape and volume) became its preferred method of quantification.[4]

As part of the scientific naturalization of the "savage" and "primitive" human, scientific institutions instructed their members to amass collections of skeletons and skulls, make molds of humans, and photograph them from all angles. Thus, the phrenologist Pierre-Marie-Alexandre Dumoutier, an expert in molding techniques, joined Jules Dumont d'Urville's Antarctic expedition. On his return in 1840, the scientific campaign had gathered hundreds of skull and bust molds of "primitives", which, aside from being displayed to the public, also supplied the reserves of anthropology museums.[5] Samples of these molds can still be seen today at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. This same focus mobilized scientists around the so-called "Hottentot Venus" in the early 19th century.[6] Due to an alleged physical deformity, Saartjie Baartman, her real name, was exhibited at fairs in London and Paris. After she died in 1816, a mold of her body was made before its dissection by the renowned naturalist Cuvier, who considered her representative of an "inferior race". Her organs were preserved in jars of formalin, and the mold of her body was publicly displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1976, after which she was repatriated to South Africa in 2002 following a long campaign.[7]

3 Frank Lestringant, *Le cannibale. Grandeur et décadence* (Paris: Perrin, 1994), 85–88.

4 Stephen Jay Gould, *La Mal-mesure de l'homme* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1981).

5 Erwin H. P. Ackerknecht, "M. A. Dumoutier et la collection phrénologique du musée de l'Homme," *Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris* VII, fasc. 5–6 (1956): 289–308.

6 Gérard Badou, *L'Énigme de la Vénus hottentote* (Paris: Payot, 2002).

7 In 2010, filmmaker Abdellatif Kechiche dedicated a film to this figure under the title *Vénus noire.*

The exhibition and objectification of Saartjie Baartman foreshadowed, by several decades, the rise of cabinets of monstrosities or *freak shows*, which began to appear around 1840 under the initiative of American impresario Phineas Taylor Barnum, the inventor of the circus concept. Barnum was later followed by the German Carl Hagenbeck, the first to speak of anthropozoological exhibitions. Individuals with physical deformities – dwarfs, bearded women, torso men, hermaphrodites, etc. – were shown to an audience eager for such spectacles. They were exhibited alongside so-called "savage" peoples. In 1876 in Philadelphia, Barnum exhibited Fijians labeled as cannibals, despite the fact that these three individuals were actually fluent English speakers who had been raised in a Christian mission. The agent even assigned them a "Fijian princess", who was, in fact, a Virginia-born African American servant.[8] As for domestic curiosities, Barnum displayed Lakota chiefs who had fought against the American army during its conquest of the West. Thus, Sitting Bull, known as *Tȟatȟáŋka Íyotake* in Lakota and the victor of the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, was recruited into "The Wild West Show", alongside Buffalo Bill, the person responsible for the massacre of Indigenous Plains peoples.[9]

This type of exhibition – featuring exotic animals and humans transported from distant lands to Europe or the United States – was taken up by scientific institutions such as the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation in Paris, which organized at least thirty human exhibitions between 1877 and 1912 (see Fig. 44).

In August 1897, the esteemed institution displayed animals from the Horn of Africa and Sudan accompanied by fourteen Nubians, in a spectacle promoted by none other than Carl Hagenbeck. The success of this exhibition led to several others, including one featuring six "Eskimos" from Greenland, known as Inuit, which drew additional crowds. The following year, "Lapps" from Scandinavia, known as Sami, were exhibited.[10] Between 1840 and 1940, 125 universal or colonial exhibitions included at least one booth showcasing exotic peoples.[11] Host countries included colonial powers like Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and the United States, as well as countries with no direct colonies yet involved in the spirit and momentum of European colonialism, such as Switzerland, which organized two "Black Villages": the first as part of the

8 Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions. Representations of the "Native" People and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

9 Éric Vuillard, *Tristesse de la terre. Une histoire de Buffalo Bill Cody* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2014).

10 William H. Schneider, "Les expositions ethnographiques du Jardin zoologique d'acclimatation," in *Zoos humain. XIX^e^ et XX^e^ siècles*, ed. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boetsch, Éric Deroo and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 72–80.

11 TDC, *Exhibitions. L'invention du sauvage*, 6.

Affiche de Francisco Tamagno pour l'Exposition coloniale de Lyon, 1894

Fig. 44: *Exposition coloniale de Lyon. Villages sénégalais et dahoméens. Troupe de 160 indigènes*, poster signed by Francisco Tamagno, imprimerie Camis, 1894.

Swiss National Exhibition in Geneva in 1896[12] and the second at Comptoir suisse in Lausanne in 1925. This is what the *Tribune de Genève* reported on the preparations for the "N*** Village":

> Mr. Alexandre, a major merchant from Ste-Croix de Ténériffe, residing in Geneva, [. . .] will bring in a Black Village, with 100 to 150 individuals. [. . .] There will be a museum featuring collections of weapons and tools; live animals. The natives – men, women, and children –

12 Patrick Minder, "Émile Yung et le Village noir de l'Exposition nationale suisse de Genève en 1896," in *L'Invention de la race. Des représentations scientifiques aux exhibitions populaires*, ed. Nicolas Bancel, David Thomas and Thomas Dominic (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), 303–314.

> will carry out their daily tasks [. . .]. The Black Village will consist of distinct races, spanning regions from the Sahara to the savannas (our translation).[13]

Regarding their arrival, the other local newspaper, *Journal de Genève*, reported:

> Last night, at 7 p.m., the tribe of n*** from Senegal arrived and was led to the Parc de Plaisance in an endless procession of carriages and carts. Men, women, and children of the deepest ebony, with some remarkable types among them. An extraordinary crowd gathered along the route of this novel parade, a prelude to the May festivities (our translation).

Later, the same newspaper added:

> If it may interest our readers, we will note that the n*** composing the village at the Parc de Plaisance belong to fourteen groups, two of which, it appears, have never been represented in Europe before: the *Laobés* and the Peuhls or *Foulahs* (our translation).

Scientific institutions, which frequently collaborated with human zoo entrepreneurs, amassed substantial collections of skulls, skeletons, and remains from around the world, some of which were displayed to the public as scientific trophies and as illustrations of the evolution of peoples on a unilinear historical scale. Starting in the 1970s, calls for the restitution of these items were issued by the populations that had been affected by this kind of plunder. Scientific communities, however, were particularly reluctant to part with the 'scientific objects' stored in their collections. The prestigious Smithsonian Institution in Washington only relinquished its "loot" in the 1990s, following the passage of the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*, which mandated the return of human remains and funerary objects to their rightful descendants.[14] The reparations initiated across Europe and the United States during this period provided museums with an opportunity for introspection, prompting them to question the ideas and practices that contributed to objectifying others under the guise of understanding them, and exhibiting them under the pretense of showing interest. In this vein, to cite just one example, the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum (Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel) in organized an exhibition in 2002–2003 titled *Le Musée cannibale*. This exhibition offered a critical perspective on "the desire to consume others, which had presided over the creation and development of ethnographic museums" (our translation).[15]

The perspective that deconstructs the figures of the "savage" and the colonized, questioning ethnological knowledge and museographic practices, has sparked in-

13 *Tribune de Genève*, July 12, 1895.

14 Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Ishi's Brain, Ishi's Aches. Anthropology and Genocide," *Anthropology Today* 17, 1 (2001): 12–18.

15 Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel, *Le Musée cannibale* (Neuchâtel: Texpo huit, 2002–2003).

terest toward the model of the "human zoo", not only to draw historical and epistemological lessons but also to shed light on present-day realities. The exhibition *Exhibit B* by white South African artist Brett Bailey, which toured Europe from 2013 to 2015,[16] epitomized precisely this. Consisting of a series of twelve tableaux depicting scenes from both colonial and postcolonial history, it thus highlighted a continuity between the "savage" of the past and the "savage" of today. In one example, a Black woman, evoking the "Black Venus", was displayed as if at a fair, while another scene showed her with a basket overflowing with severed hands on her lap, a reference to the treatment inflicted by Belgian colonizers on Congolese workers who did not meet the required latex quotas. The work also presented a gallery of contemporary portraits, including those of a Congolese refugee, an Eritrean migrant, and a Somali who died during deportation. While such an exhibition helped raise awareness of colonial violence in some audiences, it also unsettled others who were disturbed by the position in which Black performers were placed in this 'exhibition', being subjected to the same treatment that was once reserved for participants in the actual "human zoo" (see Fig. 45).

"Exhibit B", de Brett Bailey au Festival d'Avignon, le 11 juillet 2013. AFP/FRANCK PENNANT

Fig. 45: Brett Bailey, *Exhibit B*, 67th International Theatre festival of Avignon, July 11, 2013.

16 See *Théâtre contemporain*. Net, accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.theatre-contemporain.net/spectacles/EXHIBIT-B-12448; and *Exhibit B*, Théâtre Gérard Philippe, 2014, accessed April 28, 2025, http://www.theatregerardphilipe.com/cdn/exhibit-b.

This critique was further amplified by highlighting the "monopoly" that white voices continue to hold over colonial and racial issues.[17] Regardless of the outcome of the controversy, it raises the recurring question of how to represent violence without reproducing it, and, more fundamentally, how to represent the Other while simultaneously representing oneself within the same act.

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17 For more on the controversy, see accessed April 28, 2025, https://www.slate.fr/story/95219/exhibit-b-raciste; and https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2014/11/27/exhibit-b-l-evocation-des-zoo-humains-dechaine-la-polemique_4530471_1654999.html.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-031

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-032

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112218259-033