Museum Studies

An Anthology of Contexts

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Chapter 6 | Françoise Lionnet

The Mirror and the Tomb | Africa, Museums, and Memory

In Michel Tournier's 1987 novel *La Goutte d'or (The Golden Droplet)*, Idris, a Berber shepherd, leaves Tabelbala, his Saharan oasis, in search of a snapshot of himself taken by a blond Parisian female tourist. His journey north to Paris produces a series of encounters that lead to a progressive loss of innocence, his handsome features being appropriated time and time again by a visual culture, quite unlike his own, that puts a premium on images. On the road, his first experience of radical depersonalization occurs in a nearby village. As he wanders through the streets looking for food, he walks past an exclusive resort hotel from whose outskirts he is banished without ceremony; eventually he finds himself "at the door of the Saharan Museum, an offshoot of the Arid Zones Laboratory funded by the French National Center for Scientific Research" (or CNRS) (p. 65). Slipping unnoticed into a group of senior citizens on a tour, Idris enters the museum and discovers to his astonishment that utensils and objects used daily by his fellow oasis dwellers are part of a scientific exhibit that describes their habitat, beliefs, and customs:

> Idris opened his eyes wide. All these objects, of unreal cleanliness, frozen in their eternal essences, intangible, mummified, had surrounded his childhood and adolescence. Less than forty-eight hours before, he had eaten from that dish, watched his mother using that grinder (p. 67).

These simple and familiar objects are suddenly transformed into symbols. Behind the glass of the display case, the mortar and pestle, the grinder, the pitchers, and the leather bottles suddenly arrest the "native" viewer's attention, produce a sense of wonder and defamiliarization. Idris is fascinated, captivated by the seeming uniqueness of a perfectly ordinary kitchen utensil, now transformed into its remarkable and "eternal essence," frozen in time. He experiences a sense of estrangement and wonder that shatters his usual frame of reference, reshapes his world, makes him see it anew as though for the very first time. Yet, listening to the tour guide explain his people's cultural codes and rules for living, he discovers self-consciousness and alienation in its purest form. The guide turns the oasis dwellers' existence into an exotic scenario,

Françoise Lionnet, "The Mirror and the Tomb: Africa, Museums, and Memory" from *African Arts* 34:3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 50–9, 93. Reproduced by permission of the University of California, Los Angeles. (Reprinted without illustrations.)

while the museum presents the material elements of their lives and the photographed faces of their women "covered with ritual paintings" (p. 68) to the attentive scrutiny of this group of foreign visitors. Spontaneous or ritual activities of ordinary life are now transformed into formulaic knowledge, mouthed pleasantly and humorously by a tour guide who remakes Idris's world in front of his astonished eyes:

> Idris listened attentively to a speech whose every phrase, every word, concerned him.... "Here, mesdames et messieurs, you will look in vain for the head of a dog, the silhouette of a camel, a scarab, and especially for a man or a woman. No; Saharan jewels are nonrepresentational. They are abstract geometrical forms whose value lies in signs, not images. Here are solid-silver crosses, crescents, stars, rosettes.... The anklets are supposed to prevent the demons of the earth from climbing up a person's legs and invading the whole body" (pp. 65, 68).

As Idris takes in the lessons being dispensed to the group, including the ones about the "supernatural or superstitious aspects of his religion, he "had the impression that he was being forcibly removed from himself, as if his soul had suddenly left his body and was observing him from outside with astonishment" (p. 68). As the visitors leave, Idris lingers behind in order to approach the display case, still fascinated and full of wonder. But as he approaches, he sees his own reflection in the glass, and now becomes, like the other objects, an item within this ethnographic collection. Tournier concludes the scene with this extraordinary comment:

> Finally, as he was moving away from the glass, he saw the reflection of a head of unruly hair and a thin, vulnerable, anxious face; it was himself, his evanescent presence in this taxidermist's version of the Sahara (p. 68).

The display is thus both a mirror and a tomb: Idris's features and culture are no sooner reflected back to him than they are split off from each other. His presence is but an ephemeral, "evanescent," and transparent human one, superimposed onto an ossified culture, represented under glass by inanimate, soulless objects which have only stereotypical meanings.

This early episode of the novel captures brilliantly, and in the form of an entertaining narrative, what has since become theorized as the problematic relationship of the "native" spectator to the traditional anthropological museum exhibit. Tournier's story sums up the politics of representation within a discipline that concentrates on "typical" or "authentic" cultural artifacts in order to synthesize a given culture's "heritage." Postmodern anthropologists (Clifford 1988; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Karp 1991) have since exposed the limits of such museum practices and articulated the complex links between spectatorship, subjectivity, and ethnographic authority and desire. For Tournier the ethnographic approach turns human subjects into dead animal specimens, similar to those prepared by taxidermists for a natural history display. A gently patronizing attitude is thus encouraged by the museum, and temporal as well as spatial distance is firmly established between the modern viewers and the objectified "traditional" culture. Tournier uses the following exchange between the guide and one of the pensioners to recapitulate the problem:

> "I see neither spoons nor forks," an old lady said in astonishment.

> "That, madame, is because the oasis dweller, like our ancestor Adam, eats with his fingers. There is no shame attached to that. Everyone picks up a little handful of food with his right hand, transfers it into the hollow of his left palm, rounds it into a little pellet, and then with the thumb of his right hand pushes it to the tip of his fingers and puts it into his mouth" (p. 67).

As he proceeds to demonstrate the gesture, the guide is "imitated by a few of the tourists, whose clumsiness raised some laughter." The "clumsiness" of the tourists underscores the unsurmountable gap between these modern travelers and the oasis dwellers who represent the pre-history of mankind ("like our ancestor Adam"), that is, a premodern approach to everyday life and feeding practices. Johannes Fabian (1983: 31) has eloquently shown how this anthropological gaze implies a denial of coevalness that situates the viewed and living culture in another temporal framework: one that belies its status as contemporary, evolving, and dynamic, and thus reinforces the Western viewer's false sense of superiority.

As Tournier's anecdote makes clear, both spectatorship and performance take place at the site of display, and although the border between the viewer and the viewed seems to be easily crossed as the tourists try their hand at a "primitive" style of feeding, this activity only serves to buttress the viewers' sense of their own advantage over such clumsy beginnings. Indeed, the visitors enact the alimentary behavior of the oasis dwellers, but in so doing, they experience their own civilized difference from and advantage over the "natives." Finally, they receive from the guide a perfectly composed and succinct ethnographic lesson on the virtues and system of values of this belated – i.e., temporally "remote" – Saharan culture, about which he must nonetheless talk in the *present* tense, since they exist in the here and now of the Saharan universe:

> But you must not believe that the oasis dweller is therefore lacking in civility. The elementary rules of politeness in the Sahara are well known. Before every meal, one must wash one's hands, and not in stagnant water. . . . Allah's blessing must also be invoked. One does not drink while eating, but after the main dish . . . (p. 67)

Respectful understanding of the other thus serves to reassure the modern spectator that despite the (constructed) temporal and geographic distance, these peoples are indeed the human ancestors we seek to comprehend so that we might understand ourselves better. Their existence and their religious beliefs are contextualized before our now deferential eyes. Their culture is given a certain degree of "thick description" (Geertz 1973: 3) as the tour guide's narrative completes and gives meaning to the objects presented. Reassurance about the role of difference in the human community is then the ultimate outcome of the exhibit. The spectators are reconfirmed in their own sense of identity; they have safely evolved beyond the archaic stages of primitive behavior represented by these cultural or human specimens to whose values they can also now relate.

The emotions produced in the museum-goer are thus uncannily parallel to those we have associated, since Aristotle's *Poetics*, with the ones produced in the spectator of Greek tragedies. According to Aristotle, the theater-goer undergoes a catharsis as he experiences fear and pity: fear when he identifies with the tragic hero; and pity when he realizes that the hero's fate is different from his own, and this reconfirms him in his present sense of identity and security. Identification is followed by differentiation and separation, and he feels fortunate to be spared, grateful to be safe.

It is this sense of reassurance, and what it might mean to be "reassured" by ethnographic exhibits, that I am interested in exploring in this essay. As a facet of the museum-goer's experience, reassurance can be analyzed alongside other emotions such as "resonance" and "wonder" or "resonance" and "reverberation," two pairs of concepts that form the contours of a spectator's reactions to objects and images, and that have been theorized, respectively, by Stephen Greenblatt (1991) and by Gaston Bachelard (1969) and Patrick T. Houlinan (1991). I want to think about what is "reassuring" and, by contrast, what might be "threatening" in certain types of exhibitions about Africa in particular, and I will do so by focusing on two exhibitions of African art and culture, both held in the United States in 1998. The first, "Treasures of the Tervuren Museum," traveled to several North American cities in early 1998, in celebration of the Belgian museum's centenary. I saw it at the Museum for African Art in New York in May. In April of the same year, the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University commemorated its fiftieth anniversary and the legacy of its founder, Melville J. Herskovits, who, with his wife Frances, was instrumental in establishing "continuities between the cultures of Africa and those of descendants of African slaves in the Americas" (Block Museum of Art 1998: 1). This second exhibition will provide a useful counterpoint to the first and allow me to make my point about the contrasting feelings of reassurance and anxiety that I will associate here with both Aristotelian catharsis and ethnomuseographic performance.

In his essay "Resonance and Wonder," Stephen Greenblatt distinguishes between what he calls "two distinct" models of museographic practices. Resonance, he argues, corresponds to "the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand" (1991: 42), thereby creating its own context despite the fact that it has been removed from its original site. By "wonder," he means "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention." Greenblatt demonstrates that both qualities, wonder and resonance, have a history, are culturally specific, can change over time, and are tied to decisions made by curators to choose certain forms of display over others. These include what he calls "boutique lighting" (p. 49) as a way of aestheticizing or giving a mysterious aura to certain chosen objects meant to "evoke the dream of possession" and to "displace [this dream] onto the museum gift shop."

Gaston Bachelard, on the other hand, makes a distinction between "resonance" and "reverberation," or what he calls the "resonance-reverberation doublet" (1969: xix) in his phenomenological analysis of the poetic image. For him "resonances are dispersed on the different planes of our life in the world," and they are linked to "the outpourings of the mind" toward broad contexts. Resonance suggests the possibility of understanding and making connections with other feelings and echoes; by contrast "reverberations bring about a change in being" (p. xviii) that is effected through a transformation of consciousness and of the deepest aspects of our being. The end result of resonance and reverberation is that together they produce an identification with the image and thus are the means by which a subversion of the subject–object duality occurs. As Bachelard puts it: "At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions" (p. xv).

For Patrick Houlinan (1991) it is Bachelard who allows us to understand the confusion of roles and the reversals that can occur between visitor and object, as is

the case in certain Native American museums of the Northwest in which exhibitions have been designed and *controlled by* those whose culture is on display. Thus, he argues, at the U'mista Cultural Centre in British Columbia it is the objects that appear to be observing the spectators, who become objectified by the masks whose eyes seem to be following their movements. There, the subject-position of visitors is threatened as they walk through a hall in which their presence is a form of intrusion. This experience is radically different from that elicited by the traditional ethnographic museum like the one in the Sahara, where the viewer's status as a full subject is reinforced. I noted earlier that in Tournier's narrative a blurring also occurs when the tourists are encouraged to act out the behavior of the oasis dwellers. But in that case, the blurring is only a necessary and fleeting moment of identification of the spectator with the "native." Once the moment is transcended, this temporary blurring ultimately serves to reinstate and reinforce the prevailing hierarchies and the existing relations of power.

For Idris, however, the experience of depersonalization that can accompany the first stage of spectatorship is a radically new one, and he never recovers from it. He experiences resonance because these objects are familiar and he is able to contextualize them immediately. He is also full of wonder at the way the objects are showcased: they become, like Bachelard's poetic images, a means for him to feel *de*familiarization and *dis*identification. Idris sees his world in a new light, but rather than being transformed and eventually reassured by his passage through this moment of catharsis, he feels lost and numb. The unity of his being is never recovered. It is within himself that the split between subject and object, viewer and viewed, happens; he becomes a presence-absence, in Tournier's words, an "evanescent presence." In fact, in the museum, Idris is invisible to all the tourists – transparent, as it were. Whereas the displays serve to buttress the identity of these tourists, they steal Idris's. For the French visitors, the museum is a way to remember the beginnings or prehistory of civilization, and what has since been gained for them; but it forces Idris to remember his village, his mother's cooking, and what he is now in the process of losing forever: his culture and identity as an oasis dweller. In Tournier's novel the young man is set on a course from which there will be no return, and the museum becomes an unusual point of intersection of two axes: the axis of recovery of what is perceived as past (for the tourists looking *at* this past) and the axis of loss of that so-called past (for Idris looking *for* absent meaning).

That these two axes are able to intersect at all is a result of the museum's location. It is situated in Idris's own geographical territory, but it is conceived by and aimed at those who are external to that space and who possess the means of representation and interpretation. It is thus a heterodiegetic site of cultural memory, whereas the U'mista Cultural Centre in British Columbia discussed by Houlinan, similarly situated in close proximity to the culture it seeks to represent, is a homodiegetic site that addresses the local culture and attempts to coincide with it.[1] Actively engaging the spectator, it neither mirrors nor entombs the viewer (or the objects viewed). Its displays simply unsettle and destabilize the visitor's gaze, resisting every effort to construct the culture as inanimate. The encounter becomes truly dialogical, and a space is created in which both the spectator and the culture on display seem to be equally balanced.

Ethnographic museums are seldom established in the midst of the cultures they aim to show off or make known. The location of the CNRS Saharan laboratory is unusual. It thus makes the conflicting dynamics of identification more clearly visible, and the problems of viewer reception more acute. One can both look *at* and look *for* Africa on this site. This museum embodies perfectly the dialectics of representation – the "ways

of seeing" that John Berger (1972) equates with unequal power relations, and that, I suggest, are implicit in the distinctions between "at" and "for." At the U'mista Cultural Centre, by contrast, an object looks *back* and establishes a presence. Its gaze is without epistemological or memorial purpose; it is simply there and real. It follows the viewer, establishing its undeniable existence and its ability to exceed the process of objectification.

Let me now turn to the two exhibitions of African art and culture that are my case studies. They are useful for examining the dynamics of spectatorship described above and for understanding Bachelard's "resonance-reverberation doublet." I will borrow Bachelard's twin formulation and reframe it in terms of what I would rather call a cathartic "reassurance-threat doublet." I will argue that these emotions can be triggered in the viewer by the accumulation of objects of ethnographic knowledge. As I focus on these two exhibitions and on the emotions they seem to have been programmed to elicit in the spectator, my purpose is neither to provide a critique of the curators' policies and goals nor to presume to make a general statement about museum practices and their general role as "*lieux de mémoire*" (Nora 1989). I rather wish to interrogate my own existential and phenomenological reactions with regard to the means by which Africa was being re-presented and remembered in these two commemorative exhibitions at the turn of the second millennium. The Tervuren Museum (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale) invited us to look *at* its rich collection of objects, but it also made a case for the need for scholars to look *for* lost history and meaning. Northwestern's display, by contrast, sent one looking *for* traces of a living African culture, one that exists in the present of the Americas, and whose traces literally look *back* at the viewer, who is compelled to relate to them directly and dialogically.

The Tervuren Museum, like the CNRS Saharan lab, was considered to be a "scientific institute" at the time of its founding in 1897–98 by King Leopold II of Belgium. Its director, Dirk Thys van den Audenaerde, states in the preface to the catalogue of the "Treasures" exhibition (Verswijver et al. 1996: 7):

> From the beginning, the scientific policy and methodology of Tervuren were directed toward the collection and comparative investigation of large groups of objects from all over Central Africa; this principle held for cultural anthropology as well as for the natural sciences. Thus was the foundation established for the important series of scientific collections for which the Museum is so well known...
>
> The importance of the Museum's extensive ethnographic collections lies in the completeness of these series – which makes stylistic analysis possible – and the age of the objects. Many of these old examples exhibit stylistic traits that no longer exist, and they may be counted as products of disappearing or extinct cultures...
>
> The pace of economic and sociocultural evolution in Central Africa, along with the conditions imposed by a tropical climate – where humidity, mould, termites, and other destructive elements all work against the long-term preservation of wooden objects – have resulted in a situation whereby the majority of venerable pieces have most likely disappeared from their places of origin. By means of this exhibition, the Tervuren Museum hopes to demonstrate the extent of the contribution made by the first collectors and scientists at the turn of the century to our knowledge of Central Africa's cultural heritage.

True to the pattern of loss and retention I outlined above, and that James Clifford has termed the "allegory of salvage" (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 112) so central to anthropology's concerns, the exhibition provided a rich resource that served to

reassure us about the museum expert's role as *conservateur*, in other words, about such a person's ability to "preserve" and curate the past, a past that has been all but eradicated by the experience of colonialism in Africa. The introduction to the catalogue echoes the preface: Gustaaf Verswijver states that the museum possesses "an enormous treasure trove of ethnographic dossiers," that "the [exhibited] pieces' histories can be recovered on the basis of archives and other documents," and that "the quest for the lost identity of objects must continue!" (Verswijver et al. 1996: 9). This "treasure trove" is available to researchers, who are urged to study these documents, and to do so critically in order to contribute to the "understanding of the societies concerned," since, Verswijver adds, "recent fieldwork has shown that the current generation of various ethnic groups can no longer supply specific data concerning the use, fabrication, symbolism, and content of the ingeniously elaborated masks and sculptures that their ancestors made and possessed." The museum's mission, then, we are reassured, has been to salvage what colonialism and climate conditions would have otherwise destroyed: the combined aesthetic, cultural, ritual, and sacred elements of the past.

The Tervuren exhibition showcased beautiful objects that produce "wonder" (Greenblatt) and "reverberation" (Bachelard). Shown under glass and lit in the "boutique" way described by Greenblatt, they projected an undeniable authority and power. The extensive commentaries which accompanied the displays furnished the appropriate elements of "resonance." There were exquisitely carved statuettes, masks, musical instruments, staffs and walking sticks, spears, cups, a drinking horn, a pipe, and an anthropomorphic coffin. The function of certain objects was immediately recognizable: a very fine anthropomorphic *sanza* or lamellophone in the shape of a female body with extended arms is a musical instrument that mimics those who dance to its tune; a drummer figure with rounded, benevolent features colored in red pigment is an elegant statue with harmonious proportions, its slightly lowered eyes denoting a meditative or respectful mood. Nothing was particularly unusual or disturbing about these two figures: they seemed to suggest the universality of music, dance, and creative or religious contemplation. They provided their own context of understanding, and offered a definite level of "reassurance": the activities and emotions they portray conveyed a safe level of (cultural) difference and (human) similarity, since it was easy to see past their aesthetic and ethnographic specificities toward the larger context of collective human endeavors. Like the fictitious tourists of Tournier's tale, we – as viewers – could relate to these two statues and to their contexts without difficulty. These objects confirmed us in a traditional humanist understanding of the world beyond our own.

Other objects, however, immediately struck the Western viewer as "strange." Their appearance was perhaps disquieting, startling, even suspect. They provoked a degree of fear and terror. This was especially true of the *nkondi* statues known as *mangaaka*, a Kongo word that means "one who strikes fear into the beholder." To understand and situate them, we required some explanatory narrative – which was provided, to a certain extent, by the curators. The figures stared back at the viewer, they seemed to frown and shout, and they carried "medicine packs." These "fetishes," the curators explained, were meant to frighten off evil or punish enemies. The white paint on their faces indicated that they represent spirits with supernatural and curative powers. The sacred nature of these figures was thus established by an explanatory narrative that did not succeed in containing their meaning within a completely familiar context. Something vaguely threatening remained. A sense of radical difference emanated from these

strange shapes that expressed fear or anxiety, and conjured it up in the viewer. The glass eyes of one *nkondi* established it as a presence that the spectator could not ignore or subsume within a familiar interpretive framework. This statue thus seemed to observe us and follow our movements.

If I put myself in the position of the stereotypical and fictitious Western spectator, however, I experienced "wonder" and "reverberation": on the one hand, I could identify with the feelings generated in and by these figures; but on the other hand, I felt *de*familiarization because of their sacred and alien nature. My reactions illustrate Bachelard's sense that there is an inversion or subversion of the subject–object duality when we are confronted by a "poetic" image or aesthetic object. The beauty and mystery of the *nkondi* figures were alarming, but at the same time I knew, as do Tournier's French visitors in the Saharan museum, that the strength these objects embody is contained within a sphere of cultural and religious beliefs that does not intersect with my own sense of rationality. It was thus easy, in a second stage, to discount their troubling elements. After an initial shock of recognition, followed by disidentification, I was finally reconfirmed in my own sense of being a full subject, different from the one the statues address, distant in both geographical and temporal terms from the central African culture that produced these beliefs, and safe from the reach of its "fetishes." The boutique lighting in which the figures were bathed thus served to reorient my response in the aesthetic direction rather than the supernatural one, and it reassured me: by adding to the aura of artistic mystery, the lighting undermined the purely sacred power immanent in the objects and set them apart as more inanimate than enduring and spiritual; they were "mummified," like the objects that Idris looks at under glass, and they exemplified what Annie Coombes has called the "museological process of othering" (1994: 221). The cultural recovery performed by the exhibition was thus geared to a heterodiegetic viewer, and it did not create a space for the "native" spectator who might share a world view similar to the one embodied in the statues.

The overall impression created by the Tervuren traveling collection remains one of great power and beauty – removed from the everyday concerns of a contemporary viewer. The patina of the well-preserved wood, the intricate designs, the use of pigments, raffia, beads, cowrie shells, nails, copper, leather, horns, and feathers gave the ritual objects a sensory quality that resonated in a coherent and authoritative fashion, but were dated and marked as past. Their artistic, historical, and ethnographic significance was proven beyond a doubt. Taken individually, each object may have provoked some unsettling reactions and reverberations, but those were fleeting and ephemeral. Looking *at* these objects and looking *for* their meaning in the curators' narratives, we could reconstruct their function in historical context. If we did perceive them as looking *back* at us, it was but a momentary experience that was subsumed within the overall appeal of aesthetic distance, and one that produced no lasting sense of anxiety or threat.

The Program of African Studies at Northwestern University had very different goals in its jubilee celebration. A major "didactic" exhibition, "Living Tradition in Africa and the Americas," was organized at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art on campus. Its purpose, as the title indicates, was precisely to show how cultures survive through transformations, accommodations, and adaptations. The goal, in keeping with Herskovits's own career, was to stress the retentions of past African cultures "living" in the present of what Paul Gilroy (1993) has termed the Black Atlantic. Intended both as a testament to the work of the past and as a resource for the future

(Guyer & Mack 1998: 1), the exhibition featured recordings, photographs, books, letters and personal papers as well as art and artifacts bequeathed by Herskovits to Northwestern University and other institutions. A multimedia experience, it documented the cultural connections established between Dahomey (now Benin) in west Africa, and Suriname, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil, where the Herskovitses did fieldwork between 1928 and 1963. In contrast to the Tervuren collection, "all the art pieces in the [Block] exhibition entrance are contemporary, created from elements of a living tradition for the commercial art markets of the world" (Guyer & Mack 1998: 28). Here too, aesthetic and ethnographic elements merged, but the emphasis was on "retention," "survival," and "syncretism," not on the loss and disappearance of cultural traditions. The continuing importance of Africa to the New World was presented in meticulous details that undermined the stereotypical view that confines African history and geography to a distant realm. African material culture was presented in a way that disrupted the traditional binary dyad, the one that posits a clearcut distinction between the West and its other. The exhibition thus departed from the pattern established by prestigious European institutions such as the Tervuren Museum. From the Block Museum brochure (1998):

> The Herskovitses described a great variety of retentions in all domains of culture but found some of the most striking examples in religious life. Rituals of death, burial, and commemoration revealed similarities throughout the Africa-descended world. Even belief itself and its expression in the intimate daily round of life – in shrines for example – were seen as African in contrast with a Western age marked by skepticism . . .
>
> The variety of configurations and innovations the Herskovitses found in their research defied theorization: In Haiti, practitioners of *vodou* incorporated both African *vodou* and French Catholic elements; in Brazil, *candomblé* rituals retained African sacred language; in Trinidad, the descendants of slaves had adopted European music . . . but they also "shouted" in African style in their religious ceremonies . . .

The approach used by the American anthropologist was revolutionary at the time, and it did not fit into standard explanatory frameworks. But in light of contemporary theories of hybridity, *métissage*, and *mestizaje*, it now appears unproblematic and visionary. African material cultural practices were shown to exist all around us, as Frances Herskovits observed in 1929 (quoted in the brochure):

> A Sunday or two ago, a student took us to the Sanctified Church here in Evanston. . . . What we found was practically a Paramaribo [Suriname] "winti" dance. The same dancing, the same trembling of the body, the hand-clapping. . . . It was astonishing.

Knowledge was presented as embodied, and performed in gestures, rituals, and activities as well as self-representations and artistic objects. The exhibition forced the visitor to take stock of that past in relation to both the present and the future, since it made clear that the patterns of survival and retention of African traditions have only begun to be studied and that "the road is open" for new research. As an invitation to participate in just such a research project, the exhibition eschewed the aesthetic as well as the functionalist pitfalls into which curators who provide static explanatory paradigms might fall. By giving the broad historical contexts of the Herskovitses' research, this event allowed for an open and dialogical encounter with the means of representation and knowledge production that it actually put to use: each viewer was encouraged to participate in the search for the traces of a "living" tradition, to become an actor in

the scenario of recovery of these cultural patterns which are present in the New World, even when they are not always noted as such. The Herskovitses emerged as the most innovative precursors of postcolonial and diaspora studies, their work a model to be emulated by younger scholars.

While the commemorative intent of "Living Tradition" made such a conclusion inevitable, a question remains about its overall ideological impact and engagement with different classes of spectators. One important aspect is that the narrative of "progress" articulated by Tournier's CNRS guide cannot obtain here. The exhibition's model of survival, retention, and transformation undermined the traditional anthropological denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983) and made cathartic disidentification impossible. Reverberations (Bachelard) occurred, and the viewer's consciousness was raised by a convincing demonstration of the dynamic quality of African cultures. Looking at past practices as they inform present performances made the viewer aware of his or her own involvement in diasporic culture. Commonalities could be drawn with all New World cultures and their diasporic origins – whether from Africa or elsewhere. I would argue that this exhibition thus created a strong sense of reassurance about the past. It set in motion the desire for historical knowledge and cultural memory, but not just in the Black Atlantic, since it aimed to implicate all of us in its effort to reconnect the "broken threads" (Du Bois 1969 [1903]) of the social histories of slave societies. It thus empowered all agents to become producers of new knowledge about this past, quite unlike the Tervuren curators who insist that their collections are examples of "disappearing or extinct cultures."

Yet a puzzling image closed the exhibition and its brochure. The back cover features photographer Tony Gleaton's *Un hijo de Yemayá*. This stunning 1992 photograph of an Afro-Belizian youth's head partially submerged and reflected against the calm surface of a lake conveys an ambiguous message. Is his frowning look an expression of worry? Or does he appear threatening? The face seems slightly hostile, yet it also appears to be in danger of being engulfed in water. Like Idris, the boy seems out of place in this exhibition, and no explanation is given.

The photograph is a poetic image that creates, for me, wonder and reverberations. The frowning face appears to interrogate the photographer and beyond him, the visitor. It is tempting to see it as that of the prototypical "native" gazing *back* at the observer, his "vulnerable, anxious face" (Tournier 1987: 68) oscillating between presence and absence, his distorted, liquid reflection symbolizing better than words "the complex interests at stake in representation of culture contact in western museums" (Coombes 1994: 220). Since no context is provided, we may speculate endlessly about it. Is the youth a figure of emergence and resistance, asserting his subjectivity as Gleaton's lens captures his assertive, questioning – perhaps menacing – gaze? Given the general thrust of the exhibition, this may be the intent. But the face may also be expressing puzzlement, fear, or concern before the camera, in the same way that Idris worried about the blond photographer who "stole" his image. The expressive eyes lock with our own and force us to acknowledge him. But his mouth is under water, and this suggests that no voice can or will be heard. He is thus an interesting counterpoint to the *nkondi* figures of the Tervuren with their open, silently shouting mouths.

It is a testament to the artistic quality of this photograph that it refuses to allow itself to be contained within a transparent ideological and "didactic" purpose. Like Bachelard's poetic image, it evokes wonder and reverberation, not resonance, and it is "iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions" (1969: xv), since it

becomes impossible to fix its meaning. No catharsis is possible here: there is no easy identification with the subject of the image, nor identification of its purpose. Staring *back* at the visitors, this image of "un hijo de Yemayà" (a son of Yemayà) seems to take back the power of representation, assert its otherness, and prevent its contours from being set into an explanatory narrative. It conforms to the dynamics Houlinan outlined with regard to the U'mista Cultural Centre. It also marks the space opened up by the contradictions this essay has briefly tried to address. Between mirror and tomb, recovery and loss, ethnography and aesthetics, reassurance and threat, the photograph charts a set of possibilities, an aporia, and a sense of uncertainty that could be the salutary beginning of a more humble approach to knowledge and representation than is usual in academic and museographic contexts. This is the approach that Zora Neale Hurston, who, like Herskovits, was a student of Franz Boas, tried to inject in her highly personal and poetic approach to field research. Her surprising absence from Northwestern's commemorative exhibition is all the more regrettable, as she could have been the one to provide the "voice" that the submerged face from Yemayà cannot.

Hurston's sense of narrative, her understanding of ambiguity, and her belief in "autoethnography" provide me with a useful contrapuntal conclusion. As she once put it, "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you" (1984: 213). Museums can help tell some of these untold stories. But it is perhaps in that space of radical alterity evoked by poetic images that we can enter into a productive dialogue with the subjects of these exhibitions. This would enable us to engage with the gaze and the voice of the other, with the traces of the past and the needs of the future – in other words, with the unformulated questions posed by the eyes of the children of Tabelbala and Yemayà as they too silently ponder the power of knowledge and representation.

Note

1 The terms *heterodiegetic* and *homodiegetic* are used in narrative theory to classify stories. A heterodiegetic narrative is one told by a narrator who is not a character in the story; a homodiegetic narrative, on the other hand, features a narrator who also participates in the events she or he recounts. To the extent that museum exhibits and other forms of installations and performances tell "stories" about peoples and cultures, I feel that it is appropriate to borrow these two narratological terms to distinguish between exhibits mounted by peoples who are representing themselves and exhibits prepared by experts who are external to the story they tell.

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