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Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branly Museum

Globalization in its many manifestations, from the internet to postcolonial theory, has made increasingly visible the problematic legacies of colonialism that have brought what once were called “primitive” artifacts into museums in industrialized metropolises for the pleasure of city visitors. As certain Western curators begin to re-situate Western art within a plurality of art histories and to acknowledge that legacy, the question arises of whether the possibility for reconciliation or atonement exists within the parameters of existing practices of display.ⁱ To what extent have museums with collections that include non-Western art taken into account the imperative articulated by Anthony Shelton in 2001 to “chart their way through the political complexities and ethical compromises that globalisation is unleashing before they can in all sincerity understand and answer audiences that are increasingly made up of peoples they once considered as part of their object” (220).ⁱⁱ How can curators begin to make it possible for the audiences that Shelton evokes to respond positively to exhibitions of objects initially looted or purchased from their cultures of origin through the frequently violent practices of colonialism?

Forgiveness for colonial plunder cannot be imagined, particularly as museums with great resources continue to collect precious objects from disadvantaged people and to display them although they that were only ever meant to be seen by a select few.ⁱⁱⁱ Outright forgiveness “*should not be* normal, normative, normalizing,” explains Jacques Derrida, “[i]t *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary.”^{iv} This essay will therefore

set aside forgiveness as a goal and look instead at how the reconciliation theory of atonement could be applied to shifting practices of display related to the avant-garde aesthetics of French surrealism that influenced how non-Western objects were valued over the course of the twentieth century. I study this development beginning with the surrealists and continue with a look at two collections influenced by surrealist aesthetics: the Menil Collection in Houston (hereafter referred to as the Menil), opened to the public in the 1987, and the Quai Branly Museum in Paris (hereafter referred to as the QBM), created in 2006 from the collections previously housed at the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography and then in the Museum of Man and including objects that were originally collected by the surrealists. Throughout this essay, I will use Western and non-Western as the terms proper to art history and museum studies. In literary texts we often use descriptors such as the global south or distinctions such as the metropole and the periphery. But for the particular objects of this essay, the non-West and West are proper to our consideration.

The Question of Reconciliation

“How could an unjust action be transformed into a just deed?” asks moral philosopher Linda Radzik in *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics*, in which she outlines her reconciliation theory of atonement.^v Atonement, defined as at-one-ment, the “action of setting at one, or condition of being set at one, after discord or strife” (*OED*), is one way to think about this question because it “suggests that the reconciliation of relationships should be the wrongdoer’s main goal” (unlike punishment, which is generally “something that another person imposes upon the wrongdoer”)

(Radzik 6, 7). This premise that the reconciliation of relationships should be founded on recognition and motivated by respect and that it should be “the wrongdoer’s main goal” would then underlie the effort of any curator desiring to attempt a form of reconciliation between cultures that had been divided by the history of colonialism, namely the cultures of origin, the former colonies that produced the non-Western objects, and the “wrongdoers” in question, those allied with institutions made rich with treasures acquired through colonialism.

A museum’s goal of negotiating a new global audience for exhibitions and its hope of serving the dual communities of colonizers and colonized could usefully be negotiated through Radzik’s reconciliation theory which applies to institutions as well as individuals. According to this theory, wrongdoers must work to reestablish “mutual respect for the equal dignity of all parties” (183). Through moral reconciliation, wrongdoers—in this case, curators willing to acknowledge the wrongdoing involved in the past acquisition of goods through colonialism—could pursue the goal of establishing “respectful communication with victims and relevant communities,” that is, members of the communities from whom objects in their collections were taken (186).^{vi}

Some museums and curators have made excellent efforts at “respectful communication” with “relevant communities.” The National Gallery of Australia, for example, has adopted “The Indigenous Australian Art Charter of Principles for Publicly Funding Collecting Institutions” which may be downloaded from their website.^{vii} They also practice respectful communication with the diverse communities they serve through their exhibitions such as the one produced in 2004 on the art of David Malangi (1927-1999), entitled *No Ordinary Place*. Before reaching the essays written for this exhibition

on the website, the viewer is led to a disclaimer that explains: “It is customary in Indigenous communities not to mention the name or reproduce images of, or associated with, the recently deceased. All such mentions and images on this web site have been reproduced with the express permission of the appropriate authorities and family members, wherever it has been possible to locate them.”^{viii} This exhibition was clearly prepared in close consultation with Malangi’s family and his clan, who were consulted prior to publication of texts about their culture and illustrations of their past and contemporary heritage. The first text on the website was written by Malangi’s family and declares proudly: “This exhibition is very important to us. It shows fully the work the old man did during that [life] time as a painter and clan leader, becoming recognised by people all around the world. Even though he passed away, his work still lives on. He didn’t take it with him but left it for generations.”^{ix} By such practices, curators participate respectfully with representatives of the cultures whose objects they work to research, publish, and display.

Another example may be found in the work of Pamela McClusky, who was raised in West Africa, and who collaborated with African scholars of African art for her 2002 exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum, “Art from Africa.” She established respectful communication with relevant communities through careful case histories, in which she explains how the objects found their way into the museum in addition to describing how they was made, by whom, and for what function, emphasizing, for example, the degree to which most of the works were meant to be seen in motion and not statically lying in cases.^x McClusky shows that the museum’s accountability for the origins of its

collections concerns her, thus acknowledging that such accountability has not always been the standard.

Practices of disclosure like McClusky's differ from those practices of display linked to the concept of the universal museum. As Kwame Anthony Appiah eloquently argues, "[w]e can respond to art that is not ours," because what matters is "the connection not through identity but despite difference" that gets "neglected in talk of cultural patrimony."^{xi} Appiah is arguing for the universal appeal of great works of art that transcend a viewer's possible ethnic identification with the people who made the works. The universal museum as a concept defends the presence of non-Western objects in Western museums, based on the belief that museums are the best guardians of universal culture^{xii} and that objects collected by Western anthropologists have helped to preserve otherwise endangered cultural traditions.^{xiii} The universal museum concept nonetheless justifies the continuation of highly problematic practices of acquisition and the retention of such high-profile works of art as the statues from the Parthenon, known as the Elgin Marbles, which, despite protest by the Greek government, remain in the British Museum.

Furthermore, while the fairly recent inclusion of non-Western objects in Western museums could be seen as a step toward a desire for reconciliation—the Menil and the Michael Rockefeller Memorial Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, only opened in the 1980s—such an inclusion tends to situate these objects within a context that dehistoricizes and strips them of their original function, which often would have been spiritual or ritualistic. It identifies such objects as "Art," essentializing them in a very different way than the cultures that produced them had conceived of them. A self-conscious awareness that the European-based Western value system embedded in

the art museum itself is often antithetical to such non-Western subjectivities should also be in the foreground until the possibility of moral reconciliation might become imaginable. Through thoughtful practices of display, opportunities arise for enhanced understanding of disparate cultures that have often been misunderstood and which globalization and the internet have brought closer than ever before, making gestures toward reconciliation more urgently desirable.^{xiv}

From the Museum of Natural History to the Art Museum

Most non-Western objects were displayed initially in museums of natural history or ethnography as scientific examples of distant cultures. They were understood to represent traditional and collective cultural principles that remained unchanged over centuries, often to have religious significance, and to lack marks of an original maker in the Western sense of the heroic artist-genius. They were often misunderstood, in other words, seen to exist outside of history—as though areas that had been colonized by the West had no history. Their interest for explorers and anthropologists was primarily scientific. “In the colonial period,” explains art historian Thomas McEvelley, “objects made by non-Western cultures were brought back to the West not only as booty but as evidence.”^{xv}

The now defunct Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography in Paris, created in 1877 “to celebrate the exploits of French explorers and, more generally, the French nation,” is an example of such a museum.^{xvi} Its African room has been compared to a pirate’s cave and a flea market: dusty and chaotic, noticeably in disarray, filled with mannequins and makeshift cabinets poorly cobbled together from packing cases.^{xvii} A nineteenth-century

photograph shows these cabinets dimly visible in the background behind a jumble of statues; they have miscellaneous bric-a-brac piled on top of them with weapons arranged in fan formation on the wall above under the Victorian picture rail. These “temporary’ glassed-in cupboards,” as Jean-Louis Paudrat describes them, “tottered not only under the weight of the objects they contained, which were heaped together in such a way that one could hardly tell one from another, but even under that of various domestic tools jutting out from above them.”^{xviii} The African room was not dedicated to the instruction of the public as it would be today, Paudrat explains. It was not “methodically classified, well-maintained, and accurately labeled . . . [and] exhibited under good conditions” (142). This was clearly because the purpose of these displays was meant to be scientific more than aesthetic and, moreover, demonstrated the success of French officials in conquering distant territories and bringing back trophies to prove their prowess. Collections were not treated as valuable objects from other cultures intended to serve a didactic function in educating the French public about non-European cultures. There was nothing about the Trocadéro’s presentation that anticipated what it might be like if some of the museum’s visitors were to be what Shelton refers to as “peoples they [the curators] once considered as part of their object.” Since the Trocadéro was created to champion France’s status as an empire, its curators clearly were not considering moral reconciliation with the cultures from which these objects came as a priority. Movement towards an attitude of desire for reconciliation began to occur only in the twentieth century, when avant-garde artists like the surrealists began to admire, collect, and, perhaps more importantly, *study* objects that were still widely available in Paris out of a new curiosity about the cultures that produced them.

Nonetheless, avant-garde artists and collectors like André Dérain, René Daumal, and Guillaume Apollinaire admired this place where “you could make sensational searches and discoveries” (in Kelly 16). They began to recognize and admire what they saw as the modernist aesthetics of such objects and to value them in a way they had not been valued at the Trocadéro, including them in their personal collections. They elevated these objects in their own minds from scientific specimens to masterpieces of art, thus showing new respect for the objects while simultaneously de-historicizing them in new, intellectually colonizing ways.

The surrealist collection stands as a twentieth-century version of the Wunderkammer or cabinet of curiosity from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, baroque collections that combined natural and man-made objects, including many objects that had been acquired through imperialist conquest.^{xix} The founder of the surrealist movement, André Breton, for example, began his collection of non-Western art with an Easter Island statuette he bought as a teenager with prize money he received for good grades.^{xx} By 1929, the surrealists had created a distorted map that highlighted the parts of the world that interested them and that showed the global reach of the places of origin for the objects they collected and admired which had aroused their curiosity, including Easter Island, New Guinea, and Alaska. Breton’s study encompassed objects from all around the world including Australia and the American southwest, displayed adjacent to works by friends like Man Ray and Alberto Giacometti and alongside stones from riverbeds and European curios from the flea market. Such a collection, like an avant-garde Wunderkammer, generated its own imaginary space that, in the words of Silvia Spitta, “could encompass and contain the whole world.”^{xxi} However, as objects like

African and Oceanic masks or Pacific Northwest coast shields moved from museums of natural history and ethnography like the Trocadéro to personal art collections in the 1900s and 1920s like Breton's and then to public art collections in increasing number in the 1980s, they lost key contextualizing information that would have allowed museum-goers to understand better why they were made, for what kind of function, and by whom.

I examine here two collections—the Menil in Houston and the Quai Branly Museum in Paris. The Menil combines twentieth-century Western art, with an emphasis on surrealism, and non-Western art. It contains within it, tucked into a corner room labeled “Witnesses,” the recreation of a personal surrealist collection from the first half of the twentieth century. The Quai Branly Museum, a Parisian stand-alone museum devoted to non-Western art also influenced by surrealist modernist aesthetics, represents the latest step in this migration of non-Western objects into museums of art in France. Critiques of the Branly open up new ideas for how to improve upon current practices of display for the purposes of reconciliation.^{xxii}

While none of these collections, from the private surrealist collection to the public QBM, achieves what could be called a position reaching out for reconciliation with the cultures who created the objects they so admiringly displayed, the migration of these objects from the Trocadéro, where they were allowed to collect dust, to private collections like Breton's and the Menil's, and then to high profile museums like the QBM, reflects slow shifts of consciousness. Such shifts, beginning in the early twentieth century with a transformed aesthetic appreciation through modernism, has led to a growing awareness of what kinds of histories such objects represent. These changes in awareness have made possible exhibitions like those at the National Gallery of Australia

and the Seattle Art Museum involving altered display practices that disrupt and make visible the unquestioning association between colonial plunder and museum institutions, both for those peoples Shelton evokes, who identify with the cultures of origin of these objects, and also for those people linked to the colonizing nations.

Witnesses at the Menil

The Menil's name for the Witnesses Room presumably comes from Pablo Picasso's description of the non-Western art he kept in his studio in Paris. "For me," he said in a 1923 interview, "the masks were . . . magical objects . . . intercessors . . . the African sculptures that hang around almost everywhere in my studios are more witnesses than models."^{xxiii} The story goes that in 1907 Picasso visited the African room at the Trocadéro, which he described as a "frightful museum" to André Malraux in the 1930s, "disgusting," like a "Flea Market," with an awful smell"; nonetheless he felt that "something was happening [to him there] . . . that was very important" (in Paudrat, 141). In the 1923 interview with Florent Fels, Picasso described this "something" with words such as "shock," "revelation," "charge," and "force"; he apparently spoke neither of art nor of influence (in Rubin 255).

Art historian William Rubin, in the classic, now deeply controversial essay on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* he wrote for the *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, locates Picasso's primitivism in the painting, which mixes representations of recognizable human women in a pre-Cubist style with women whose faces resemble African masks, simultaneously in a vivid present and an imaginary a-temporal past.^{xxiv} For Rubin, Picasso could create shapes and forms

that share “affinities” with African artists without actually being influenced by them (263). Yet by focusing on “affinities,” Rubin maintains the Western notion of individual genius for Picasso as a vanguard artist, thus differentiating him from the anonymous artists who, anthropologists thought for a long time, recreated the same designs century after century, with no artistic signature (263). Partly because Rubin failed to take into account the political and economic reality of how colonialism had structured the relationship between Western and non-Western artists, his interpretation shuts down any possible step towards reconciliation predicated on recognition and respect for the influence on Picasso of his encounter with African art. Rubin’s views were vigorously contested by critics such as McEvelley, anthropologist Sally Price, cultural critic James Clifford, and Simon Gikandi, who explicitly underscores the parallelism between the denial of influence by Rubin and the pervasive colonialist acts of appropriation whereby works from conquered cultures were absorbed and then reconfigured without attribution.^{xxv}

Dominique de Menil, who opened the Menil Collection to the public in 1987, had, with her husband Jean, long been collecting twentieth-century, surrealist, non-Western, and ancient art. The Menils’s modernist taste had been influenced by surrealist eclecticism and included an array of works from around the world in a modernist version of the Wunderkammer reminiscent of Breton’s study. The Menil celebrates the beauty and histories of all the objects in the collection and the curators pay attention to contexts for the collection’s non-Western works. The Witnesses Room, in particular, with its mixture of works by avant-garde artists from the 1920s and 1930s such as Max Ernst and non-Western objects, mimics Picasso’s studio, or, even more precisely, Breton’s personal

collection as it evolved from the 1920s up to his death in 1966. The room was assembled by Dominique de Menil's son-in-law, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, who wrote in a letter to a curator that the model for the room "should be Matta's bedroom, Breton's apartment,"^{xxvi} referring partly to Breton's extensive collection of non-Western objects. As it happens, Breton was working as an advisor to the couturier-collector Jacques Doucet when he was weighing whether or not to buy Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. In the same year that Breton published the "Manifesto of Surrealism," 1924, he wrote Doucet that this painting was clearly "the primary event of the beginning of the twentieth-century an intense projection of that modern ideal we have only begun to understand in a fragmentary way."^{xxvii}

For Breton, it was necessary to see Western and non-Western art *together*, as in Picasso's painting, in order to achieve that "modern ideal," partly because he perceived a shared aesthetic force in the non-Western objects he collected and in the modern art being created by his contemporaries. Non-Western objects began to be seen as having more beauty and value than before, even if the purpose of those objects and the circumstances surrounding their creation and migration to Europe remained either unnoticed or obscure. The Witnesses Room, inaugurated in August 1999, reflects Breton's appreciation of how dynamically these works function together, the mesmerizing power of the juxtapositions between them, assembled in a more serious, artistic, and organized version of the jumbled mixing they must have all seen at the Trocadéro. An inscription on a corner cabinet claims that everything in the Room was "*either owned by the Surrealists or are in the spirit of those they collected.*" That cabinet features a Mickey Mouse Hopi kachina doll made for the tourist trade of and the type Breton collected in Arizona^{xxviii}; three Oceanic

masks hanging on the wall resemble those in a photograph of Breton in his apartment, including a “conical” Sulka mask from New Britain that Breton reproduced in *Nadja* (1928); a Haida transformation mask and multiple Western objects of the sort that interested the surrealists such as an artist’s mannequin all intermingle.^{xxix} Non-Western objects have an equal status with Western works by Ernst and Salvador Dalí, as well as found objects such as the old toys, marbles, pebbles, and clocks collected in a corner cabinet—the private things that remind the visitor that a study (or a bedroom) ultimately stands as an intensely personal, even intimate, space.

Today, the surrealists’s modernist perspective, infused with universalist idealism, is recognized as colonialist because of the way it appropriated and assimilated work that resonated for them in a modernistic way, domesticating it and using it as a form of household decoration, even when that assimilation ran counter to the original thrust of the work (See McEvelley 85).^{xxx} “Today, our understanding of such contested histories has been reinforced by feminist, post-colonial, and postmodern critiques,” explains Gerard McMaster, “which reveal fields of knowledge as bound up in colonial domination in place where dominant cultures seek to tell the story.”^{xxxi} Even without great understanding of the non-Western works they admired, the surrealists intuitively understood these works to serve a function different from Western art with which they were familiar. They sought to emulate the non-Western objects they admired through the creation of objects of their own, sometimes in pairs or groups according to their embrace of a collective spirit. They invested these objects with quasi-sentient qualities akin to the religious powers they attributed to some of the non-Western objects they had purchased, qualities which they believed could help them understand the world around them.^{xxxii}

Breton writes that the surrealist object could encourage the universe “to relinquish some of its opacity” because desire for it could lead to the revelation of psychological latencies within the self, in synchronic sympathy with the external world.^{xxxiii}

Like Picasso at the Trocadéro in 1907, the surrealists saw power in these non-Western works that led the artists among them to create Western works in new ways.^{xxxiv} This attitude, still contaminated by colonialist attitudes, nonetheless shows a new desire to learn and show respect for how works from different cultures were intended to function and a willingness to be transformed by what they learned. Even as they continued to keep them on view in their studios and residences, the surrealists sought to learn specifics about the individual objects they had found and the cultures that had produced them and began to appreciate the idea that such objects had functions that far surpassed the merely decorative.

The surrealists slowly gained knowledge and understanding of non-Western art through scholarly study—Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Wolfgang Paalen all published essays about works in their collections—and from their interest in ethnography and French sociology.^{xxxv} One member of the group, Michel Leiris, became an ethnographer, participated in the creation of the Trocadéro’s successor, the Museum of Man, in the 1930s, and was active in the short-lived College of Sociology. By 1950, Leiris was advising young French ethnographers to pay attention to what he called “the colonial problem,” calling for them to *understand* the colonized peoples they have chosen to study and to advocate for them in relation to their own, colonizing nation.^{xxxvi} In New York in the 1940s, Breton and the surrealist friends who had fled Nazi-occupied France, including

Ernst, had met Claude Lévi-Strauss, who made the crossing to New York on the same boat as Breton. Lévi-Strauss said in an interview:

I liked Max Ernst right away and he is the one I stayed close to. . . . Max Ernst had a passion for primitive art. On Third Avenue—which was very different from what it is now—he discovered a little German antique dealer who sold him an Indian artefact. At that time you almost never saw such things for sale. . . . We had very little money, and whoever had a few dollars would purchase the coveted object. . . . In fact—I can tell the story now because it has been published—they came from a major museum that was selling them because they were considered duplicates or works in their collection. As if there could be duplicates!^{xxxvii}

Even anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss, however, appreciated these objects partly for the ways in which they accorded with European modernist aesthetics. It was Lévi-Strauss who declared, while standing in the New York Museum of Natural History's Northwest Coast gallery in 1943: "The time is not far away, I believe, when collections from this part of the world will leave the anthropology museums and take their place in museums of fine art."^{xxxviii} His response to these works resembles in intensity that of Picasso to the African masks he saw at the Trocadéro. The recognition of such works as art by these European connoisseurs reflects a changing appreciation of art history as a global phenomenon extending well beyond European borders and a growing ability to respond "to art that is not ours," as Appiah puts it, that was influenced by avant-garde tastes. At the same time, there is no evidence that the surrealists saw themselves as wrongdoers through their alliance with the French state, who might, through their collecting practices, need to strive to make amends for their ownership of goods made

accessible to them through colonialism through a process of reconciliation. Nor does their appreciation of these objects as “art” recognize the categories for creation or reception in these pieces’s cultures of origin. Like the Menils, who were motivated by “the potential to effect social change through the study, placement, and presentation of art” and personally dedicated to civil rights, to the desegregation of schools in Houston, and to making works from their African art collection accessible to Houston’s African American community, as Menil curator Kristina Van Dyke explains, the surrealists supported social justice in their own time, including the Moroccan rebels fighting French authorities in the Rif Valley in the 1920s and their protest against the French government’s International Colonial Exhibition from 1931.^{xxxix} Moral reconciliation as a question, however, has only arisen recently as institutions like the National Gallery of Australia and the Seattle Art Museum begin to lay the ground for conversations that would shift awareness further from individualized transformative experience—such as Picasso and the surrealists sought and the Menils fostered—into more community-based processes that take more fully into account a global stage for each exhibition’s choices.

The Menil’s Witnesses Room offers an important record of this early twentieth-century step by which non-Western objects moved into Western collections as recognized works of art rather than “evidence” or “booty.” These non-Western objects transitioned from museums of ethnography and natural history to Western art museums, which are still in the process of assessing how best to display them. Catalogues such as Van Dyke’s *African Art from the Menil Collection* and Constantin Petridis’s *Art and Power in the Central African Savanna* from the Cleveland Museum of Art, respond to anthropologist Sally Price’s 1989 call for a greater understanding and study of works previously

considered to exist in a suspended “ethnographic present” except for those “willing to tolerate long hours in museum storerooms and colonial archives and to engage in the challenging enterprise of field research.”^{x1}

Only accurate knowledge of the history and context of these objects, including a history of their journey through time and space, as well as practices of display that show knowledge and respect for their original purpose, can begin a process that could lead to the inclusiveness called for by Shelton that could set the stage for reconciliation.

McClusky, for example, has already begun such a process for the Seattle Art Museum. She begins her last case study of beaded ornaments for a Maasai bride in her catalogue on *Art from Africa*, with the statement: “How museums collect, not what they collect, guided the last gathering of African art to enter the Seattle Art Museum’s holdings in the twentieth century” (261). She then explains how a Maasai intern to the museum discovered through a review of existing publications on the Maasai and Maasai art that “the Maasai had been extensively photographed but not interviewed” (261). By telling this story, McClusky initiates a process whereby an attitude might be cultivated that would change what she calls “a pattern of avoidance” of the people who inhabit the landscapes Westerners visit on safari, “that has become a twentieth-century habit” (262).

The Quai Branly Museum

The musical instruments on shelves visible through glass walls in the central well around which the path into the museum winds at the QBM in Paris (for which I have been unable to find an explanation) are displayed in a way that recalls their initial categorization as scientific evidence, documents kept as guides to non-European people

and natural history rather than as records of human ingenuity and artistry. Paradoxically, the entire museum was intended to be among the first to evoke non-Western culture in a truly post-colonial manner. Yet it was conceived as though it were possible for it to exist completely separate from France's colonialist past, as Germain Viatte, one of the museum's early planners, wrote in 2005: this museum was to be "absolutely contemporary, separated from our [French] colonial history and the style of the 1930s."^{xli}

Benoît de L'Estoile, in contrast to Viatte, rails against the willful forgetting, if not outright denial, of France's colonial past that he sees at the QBM.^{xlii} He evokes a diorama in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum of Bristol in England that depicts a Nepalese tiger getting shot by King George V, who is also in the diorama seated on an elephant, thus showing the historical circumstances by which the tiger came to England (91).^{xliii} "There is no tiger at the Quai Branly," writes De L'Estoile. He suggests that the kitsch reminder of King George's role in bringing the rare tiger back to the United Kingdom through his presence in the diorama is what makes the Bristol Museum more sophisticated in its presentation of the past than the Branly.

De L'Estoile makes direct reference to the kind of view expressed by the editor of the newly published catalogue of QBM's *Collection* by Yves Le Fur (2009):

These objects exercised a fascination because they retained a certain distance, a space in which fantasies of the unknown could be played out. This vision was and continues to be at the origin or passions for faraway lands, emotion vying with stereotype, admiration for new forms mingling with exoticism. A group of collectors, all the while reveling in the competition with one [an]other, relentlessly explored every nook and cranny in the hope of

unearthing ‘treasures,’ that would fulfill their passion and entrance them with the idea of coming ever closer to these unknown and savage worlds untouched by civilization. (Le Fur 13)

De L’Estoile argues that the museum creates “a new kind of exoticization. It is only when we [French] are able to confront our colonial heritage under its multiple aspects that it will be possible to learn how to live with it” (99). Such a confrontation would be the only way of laying the groundwork for reconciliation. Only such a confrontation would allow for the acknowledgement of wrongdoing that stands as a prerequisite for permitting a new relationship with those wronged.

Price has explained how the QBM was built to house works retrieved from various museums around Paris, including the Trocadéro. She also reports the negative response of many art critics and anthropologists to the building’s design, created by the celebrated French architect Jean Nouvel, which leads the visitor through a space that evokes a primeval forest. Susan Vogel, founding curator of the Museum for African Art in New York, on the other hand, argues against many critics in favor of Nouvel’s design, which allows visitors to wander freely because of the way the viewer is encouraged to absorb the objects and scattered labels the way many younger museum visitors absorb a lot of information in the present day—in a collage-like cluster of information bits which they are left to interpret on their own.^{xliv} Further, she praises the way Nouvel has avoided the elitist temptation to turn the new art museum into an intimidating palace; this museum space, she argues, levels social classes, partly through the use of materials which emulate the literally pedestrian floors of Paris metro stations or fast-food restaurants; the building design is marked more by respect than reverence, she claims, appearing expensive but not

rich (188). Vogel suggests that Nouvel's egalitarian design impulses might be built upon to promote practices of display that would be more open to the kinds of cultural encounters taking place inside the museum—encounters that would need far more contextualization than currently exists. She wonders why the QBM has not adopted the practice increasingly common in North America, typified by Pamela McCluskey's 2002 exhibition in Seattle, of entering into dialogue with representatives of the cultures who produced the works on display.

The QBM has been called a "Heart of Darkness" by *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman in clear reference to Joseph Conrad's famous novella because of what Price calls its "primitivizing effect" (PP 151).^{xlv} Darkness certainly predominates on a literal level, so that the objects glow under mere pinpoints of light in a way that problematically reflects Conrad's own nineteenth-century understanding of African territory, particularly the Congo, as one of "the last of what he called 'the blank spaces on the earth,'" as Nicholas Mirzoeff explains.^{xlvi} In fact, there had been cultural exchanges between Europe and Congolese royalty starting in the fifteenth century, exchanges that were "forgotten with the rise of Atlantic slavery in the seventeenth century that destroyed the political structures in [what was then known as the] Kongo."^{xlvii} Colonialism engendered its own forgetting, in other words. And it has, in turn, been forgotten or avoided in some contemporary museum displays, due to discomfort with colonialism and slavery's effects. A desire to dispel the mystery evoked by the museum's lighting design was expressed in an interview in 1999 by anthropologist Maurice Godelier, an early advisor to the QBM, when he stated that the museum needed to be "a formidable initiation to the differential history of civilizations and continents," otherwise the viewer

would remain caught in “the object’s mystery.” “The museum is the best place to add depth to our thoughts about such mystery,” he adds.^{xlviii} Making visible the process of discovering and forgetting to which Mirzoeff refers would be one way to do this.

Using the example of a Dahomean “shark king” statue, Price expresses the wish that the colonial past of certain objects acquired through the French conquest of territories like Dahomey should be narrativized more clearly and with greater respect for the wars of resistance to French domination that were involved in acquiring such trophies of victory like this statue. She laments how “the QBM has passed up a unique opportunity to pay homage to one of the last of the great African kings to resist European imperial domination” (PP 164). In fact, Price notes with dismay that “one searches in vain for any mention of (for example) colonialism, collecting, slavery, or tourism” at the QBM (PP 174). She goes on to encourage making “colonial encounters part of the story, focusing on the circumstances in which collections are formed and the history of the production of knowledge about peoples outside of the European cultural orbit,” a perspective already adopted by other national museums like the National Gallery of Australia, as we have seen, and the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand (170-71).^{xlix} She confirms that when the museum opened in 2006 several colleagues expressed disappointment with museum labels that perpetuate the now-discredited idea that the societies whose objects are on display somehow live in a timeless “ethnographic present,” reinforcing the us/them mentality that De L’Estoile describes (PP 175).

Conclusion: Moving Towards Dialogue?

The wish for historicity Price expressed in 1989 has become more specifically a wish for the display of the history of colonialism because only the open acceptance of what Radzik calls wrongdoing can initiate a dialogue between the wrongdoers—including institutions like museums that contain the evidence of the wrongdoings involved in colonialism—and those who were victimized by the wrongdoing, including members of the cultures from which precious things were plundered. It is increasingly clear that the only way to release both the Western museum and the global visitor from the oppressive legacy of the Western colonialist past is to acknowledge it fully through narratives like McClusky's which embrace the complex histories of the objects they possess. It could even be argued that public apologies of the sort made by heads of state admitting past wrongs might be appropriate, since on a practical level, as Derrida argues when he describes "the scene of reconciliation" as the "reconstitution of a health or a normality" which relies on "conditions of all kinds," such apologies pave the way for "a process of reconciliation" by allowing certain entities to renegotiate communication on new ground (44-50).

While curators and recently established museums may argue that they exist in a fully post-colonial era, the institutions with which they are affiliated contain within them works acquired primarily as a result of histories of conquest and domination. For such artifacts to be shown in a way that includes those visitors who descend from the cultures that were conquered, full institutional acknowledgment of the sort McClusky initiated in her exhibition on African art must be made before reconciliation might be envisaged. Respect in the form of modernist admiration lifted many of these objects out of museums of ethnography and repositioned them in museums of art where they have been carefully

researched and catalogued. But that repositioning historically often de-historicized and de-contextualized the objects anew because of their positioning as art. “The two perils of exoticizing and assimilating can be found in the exhibition of virtually every museum that devotes any part of itself to exhibiting culture,” argues Ian Karp.¹

Display of non-Western objects in Western settings from the private homes of the surrealists to the public venues of the Menil and the QBM, have allowed visitors of all sorts to experience transformational encounters with such objects, thus educating new generations about the beauty and sacred value of objects precious to cultures from many distant points on the globe. But practices of display still need to be refined so that there is more consistent understanding of the objects on view and their varied histories, while those objects which were never meant to be seen should be protected appropriately, despite an institution’s educational mission. Mutual respect of the kind that is implicit in the word “at-one-ment,” which remains essential for any possible reconciliation or encounter that moves beyond the old hierarchical power relationships based on political or economic imperialism, can only begin with acknowledgement of the past, including past wrongdoing, in ways that largely still remain to be explored.

Notes

¹ My thanks to Katherine Hart, Richard Stamelman, Juliette Bianco, Brian Kennedy, Kristina Van Dyke, Marian Eide, and Bruce Duthu for their kind advice about this article. Any errors are my own.

ⁱⁱ Anthony Alan Shelton, “Museums in an Age of Cultural Hybridity,” *Folk* 43 (2001): 221-50.

ⁱⁱⁱ In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt writes: “the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.” See *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chiago University Press, 1958) 241.

^{iv} Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 32.

^v Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 5.

^{vi} Radzik’s suggestion is actually more complete since she advocates for wrongdoers working “to reestablish mutual respect for the equal dignity of all parties” and states that “The overarching goal of moral reconciliation is to be pursued through the wrongdoer’s moral improvement, respectful communication with victims and relevant communities, and the reparation of the harms caused by the wrongful actions” (183; 186). Only limited reparations in the shape of return of objects to their original communities have taken place. Aube Breton Ellouët, daughter of André Breton, founder of the surrealist movement, for example, donated some of her father’s non-Western objects to the QBM and also made the ultimate gesture of request for atonement when she “visited Chief Cranmer in Alert Bay to ceremoniously return one of the important lost masks” that Breton had had in his collection. (See Yosef Wosk writes on the “Philosopher’s Café” website of Simon Fraser University.) Human remains have been returned, particularly in

the United States with the passage of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. In another example, the remains of Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, were returned to her native South Africa in August 2002.

^{vii} The National Museum of Australia also has a policy on their website about how the museum “works closely with Indigenous communities to return human remains and secret/sacred objects to their ancestral custodians,” thus indirectly acknowledging that remains and objects had been removed from these communities unjustly. See http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/now_showing/first_australians/.

^{viii} See <http://nga.gov.au/Malangi/Default.cfm>.

^{ix} <http://nga.gov.au/Exhibition/malangi/Default.cfm>. Brian Kennedy, Director of the National Gallery at the time, confirms that curator Susan Jenkins took the catalogue text and images to the Malangi’s family and community to make sure the information presented concerning his work was accurate.

^x Pamela McClusky, *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* (Princeton, NJ: Seattle Art Museum-Princeton University Press, 2002). McClusky also invited Robert Farris Thompson to write an essay about how most of these objects were intended to be seen in motion and not in static displays.

^{xi} Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Whose Culture Is It?” *Whose Culture*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 85. First published in *The New York Review of Books* 53.2 (9 February 2006): 38-41.

^{xii} James Cuno from the Art Institute of Chicago spearheaded the authorship of the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: ‘Museums Serve Every Nation’” in 2002, which was signed by eighteen museum directors and which

justifies the right of museums to keep works acquired through colonialism and to continue to acquire works from less advantaged populations in the name of the “universal museum” principle.

^{xiii} For a successful example of how the salvage paradigm works, see David Levi Strauss, “Between Two Worlds, The Haida Project,” *From Head to Hand, Art and the Manual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 38-53.

^{xiv} “Archaeologists and museums have a special responsibility to broaden public awareness,” anthropologists Deborah Nichols, Anthony Klesert, and Roger Anyon argued in 1989. “We share a commitment to conserve the remains of the past, not for the private use of a few individuals but for current and future generations.” See “Ancestral Sites, Shrines, and Graves: Native American Perspectives on the Ethics of Collecting Cultural Properties,” in Phyllis Mauch Messenger, ed. *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) 37.

^{xv} See Thomas McEvelley, *Art & Otherness* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1992) 87.

^{xvi} Sally Price, *Primitive Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 81. The Quai Branly Museum collection catalogue provides the following list of “French institutions that housed the collections of the musée du quai Branly” (in French, my translation): the National Library, the Museum of Natural History, the Louvre Museum, the Army Museum, the Museum of National Antiquities, the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography, the Museum of Man, the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania, and, the Quai Branly Museum’s own acquisitions. See Yves Le Fur, editor, *Musée du Quai Branly, The Collection* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009) 456.

^{xvii} See Julia Kelly's excellent *Art, Ethnography, and the Life of Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 16. See also Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 98; and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988).

^{xviii} Jean-Louis Paudrat, "From Africa," *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) 142.

^{xix} See Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

^{xx} See Pierre Amrouche in Jean-Michel Gauthier, editor, *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, arts primitifs* (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003) 274. Henceforth this volume of the auction catalogue will be referred to as AB.

^{xxi} Silvia Spitta, *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009) 36. My thanks also to Abigail Susik and her paper at the CAA conference in 2010 on "Recollecting Curiosity," the links between the original Wunderkammer and surrealist collections.

^{xxii} The Dapper Foundation, which opened in 1986, provides detailed contextual information and, since visitors are required by the organization of space to pass through changing displays of contemporary art before reaching rooms filled with traditional works with supporting historical data, no viewer could misunderstand these latter works as existing outside of history after having passed through the contemporary anteroom because of its reminder that none of the works could have been created in a timeless ethnographic present.

^{xxiii} In William Rubin, “Picasso,” *“Primitivism” in 20th-Century Art*, vol 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) 260.

^{xxiv} Rubin argues that although Picasso already had a collection of African masks in his studio at the time, the possible models for the masks in *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* were not yet available in Paris at the time, and that Picasso did not own any examples in 1907.

^{xxv} Simon Gikandi “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10.3 (2003): 474. For a thorough review of the history and controversies tied to the 1984 exhibition see Jack Flam and Miriam Deutsch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art, A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

^{xxvi} This quotation comes from a letter to Paul Winkler from 11 April 1999 kept in the Menil archives. My thanks to Geri Aramanda for giving me generous access to the archival materials.

^{xxvii} This letter was reproduced in the two-volume catalogue published by the Picasso Museum in Paris, *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, volume 2 (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988) 590, my translation.

^{xxviii} It is questionable whether Breton knew, for example, that it was taboo for the kachina dolls he collected in the American Southwest in the 1940s to be seen by children or the uninitiated. See Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *The Educational Role of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1993) 108-09.

^{xxxix} See André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Grove Press, 1994) 129. On loan from the Menil, this mask was shown in the Pompidou exhibition from 1991 devoted to Breton and his collection

^{xxx} For more on the cultural relativism of Breton's personal collection and that relativism's tendency to erase differences in the name of human universality, see Elza Adamowicz's excellent study, *Ceci n'est pas un tableau* (Paris: Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2004).

^{xxxii} Gerald R. McMaster, "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," In *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (London: Routledge, 1999) 82.

^{xxxiii} Viatte, in his introduction to the small *Masterpieces from the Musée du Quai Branly Collections* (2008), invests the objects at the QBM with sentient powers that are closer to the surrealist, psychological understanding of the object's power than to the older anthropological understanding of such objects as invested with predominantly with religious forces when he writes: "Artefacts are becoming more than ever observers who accompany us on our way, and who question us as we go" (11).

^{xxxiiii} André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) 15.

^{xxxv} A wall label for the *Erotic Object: Surrealist Sculpture from the Collections* show, curated by Anne Umland at the Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2009, referred to the power of found materials within surrealist objects as constituting through "a combinatory practice, a revolution in art making," which, I would argue, was partly inspired by the influence on European artists of non-Western objects.

^{xxxv} For more on Paalen see Amy Winter's excellent critical biography: *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Praeger, 2002). For more on Tzara's application of surrealist theory to his African Art collection see Adam Jolles, "The Tactile Turn: Envisioning a Post-Colonial Aesthetic in France." *Yale French Studies* 109 (2006): 17-28. Breton wrote an essay on his Haida transformation mask for the journal *Neuf* in 1950, reproduced in Jean-Michel Gauthier, editor, *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, arts primitifs* (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003) 278.

^{xxxvi} Michel Leiris, "L'ethnographie devant le colonialisme," *Cinq études d'ethnologie* (Paris: Tel-Gallimard, 1988) 85, 88. This talk was first published in *Les Temps Modernes* 6.58 (August 1950): 357-74.

^{xxxvii} Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 31, 33. Amrouche confirms that the shop was owned by "art dealer Jules Carlebach" who had been discovered by Ernst and had "an inexhaustible source of treasures which he obtained by trading with the Heye Foundation" (AB 275). Several pieces purchased from Carlebach by the surrealists, including Breton, are now in the collection of the Quai Branly Museum. The Menils also purchased pieces from Carlebach (Van Dyke 20).

^{xxxviii} Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Art of the Northwest Coast in the Museum of Natural History," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (New York): 175-82.

^{xxxix} Kristina Van Dyke, *African Art at the Menil* (Houston and New Haven: The Menil Collection-Yale University Press, 2008) 30-33. For more on the surrealist's exhibition mounted in protest of the Colonialist Exhibition, see Janine Mileaf, "Body to

Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton” *Res* 40 (Autumn 2001): 239-55.

^{xi} Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; 2001) 67.

^{xii} De L’Estoile cites Viatte’s essay “Le musée du quai Branly: une réalisation en questions” in *Le Spectacle du monde*, hors-série, *Arts premiers*, *Le Musée du quai Branly* 18 (2005): 63-68.

^{xiii} See Benoit de L’Estoile, “L’oubli de l’héritage colonial,” *Le Débat* 147 (November-December 2007): 92. See also, Benoît de L’Estoile, *Le goût des autres* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).

^{xliii} My thanks to Dana Strand, whose talk on the Quai Branly Museum’s exhibition on Tarzan has been helpful to me in shaping this essay.

^{xliv} Susan Vogel, “Des ombres sur la Seine,” trans. Camille Noël, *Le débat* 147 (2007): 191.

^{xliv} Michael Kimmelman, “Heart of Darkness in the City of Light,” *New York Times* (2 July 06).

^{xlvi} Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) 131, 133.

^{xlvii} Mirzoeff specifies that “The Kongo king Afonso I Mvemba Nzinga (1506-43) not only learnt Portuguese but compiled erudite commentaries on religious texts and sent some of his relatives to Portugal, where one became a bishop” (133).

^{xlviii} Interview with Krzysztof Pomian in *Le Débat* 108 (January-February 2000): 88.

^{xlix} The Te Papa website explains how the museum works with other museums and iwi (tribal groups) and that they “are responsible for returning ancestral remains to their communities of origin through the Karanga Aotearo Repatriation Programme.” They list as a “key goal” the desire “to represent and appeal to New Zealand’s diverse society.” See <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/AboutUs/Pages/AboutTePapa.aspx>.

¹ Ivan Karp, “Cultures in Museum Perspective,” eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavind, *Exhibiting Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) 378.