

## Interpolation of « L'Africain »

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Les villages congolais de l'exposition universelle de Bruxelles.

La construction de l'empire colonial belge s'est fait à la fin du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle par un homme : le Roi visionnaire Léopold II. Au Congrès de Berlin de 1884-85, il parvint à faire accepter la création de son Etat Libre du Congo. Des crimes de masse y furent perpétrés. On parle de cinq et même dix millions de morts.

Pour vanter les bienfaits de sa colonie, le roi fit venir 267 Congolais à l'occasion de l'exposition universelle de Bruxelles en 1897. Il voulait montrer un échantillonnage de la population. (Il y avait entre autres un chef Bangala, un chef arabe, deux pygmées, une centaine de soldats de la Force Publique et une vingtaine de femmes et d'enfants.) Ils furent parqués dans trois villages « exotiques » qui furent recréés à Tervuren, dans la banlieue bruxelloise. Ils devaient y jouer leur vie quotidienne de « sauvages primitifs ». L'été étant particulièrement mauvais, sept d'entre eux moururent de maladie. Ils furent enterrés à la va-vite dans une fosse commune avec des prostitués et malades mentaux. Un siècle plus tard, d'autres Congolais ont déterré symboliquement ces sept victimes et ont ramené leurs dépouilles au Congo. Plus d'un million de personnes vinrent visiter ce « zoo humain », véritable attraction pour les Belges qui n'avaient jamais vu de Congolais.

Pour cette communication, je propose d'analyser quelques photos de ces « villages » et de montrer à partir de celles-ci quelle image les organisateurs voulaient transmettre de la colonie et de ses habitants. Ensuite je tenterai de situer l'épisode tragique des sept Congolais dans le cadre plus vaste de l'entreprise coloniale et montrerai les tensions existantes entre le discours royal et les réactions populaires.

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### A Human Zoo in Bronze and Stone: Ethnographic Sculptures in the Paris Menagerie

Outside the reptile pavilion in the zoo of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris stand two bronze sculptures by Charles-Arthur Bourgeois. *Snake Charmer* (1864) depicts a dancing African hypnotizing a snake with a flute, and *Crocodile Hunter* (1883) shows an African about to stab a crocodile with a spear. Representing the African “Other” as magician and hunter, respectively, both these statues fulfilled stereotypical expectations and appealed to the contemporary taste for exoticism. Pairing Africans with reptiles, both those in the sculptures and those on view in the neighboring building, underscored the supposed “primitiveness” of Africans for, at this time, serpents, crocodiles, and contemporary “savages” were all thought to be survivors from prehistory. The placement of the sculptures inside a zoo—in an age when exhibitions of indigenous peoples at a variety of venues, including universal exhibitions, fairgrounds, and the Parisian Zoological Garden of Acclimatization, were common—also encouraged the Africans that Bourgeois had represented to be seen as animalistic. Several decades later, a similar message was conveyed by Anna Quinquaud's bas-reliefs (c. 1937) above the entrance to the nearby

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*fauverie*. Asians hunt tigers in the three stone reliefs over the entrance to this cat house, while lions hunt and are stalked by Africans in those over the building's exit. Again, the sculptures equated African and Asian "natives" with wild beasts, and it was such perceptions that were used to justify both the "civilizing mission" and the exploitation that played such major roles in French colonial expansion.

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### Black Laughter: Minstrel Shows and the Clown Chocolat in the Context of Darwinism

Darwin chose laughter as demonstration of his theory of evolution at the very beginning of his 1872 study of expression and emotions, writing that "certain expressions . . . , as in the movements of the same facial muscles during laughter by man and by various monkeys, is rendered somewhat more intelligible, if we believe in their descent from a common progenitor" (*Expression and Emotion in Man and Animals* 9). This paper will examine ways in which the primitive nature of laughter was further inflected to carry specifically racial connotations. In descriptions of Africans and of black American entertainers, the wide-open mouth laughing is an object of intense curiosity, hilarity, and fear.

The arrival of blackface minstrel shows in France coincides with that of the African villages as popular spectacle, as well as with the spread of Darwinism. The stage was set for the success of minstrels in France by these important cultural-scientific events. Once minstrel shows gained greater popularity in the early 1880s, white performers such as Mlle Abdala, who "poussa le grimace jusqu'au chef-d'oeuvre," were compared to black musicians and comics. By the end of the century, minstrels were so trendy that the word was included among the 45 English words every French person absolutely needed to know in case of a British invasion (along with water-closet, music-hall, and Darwin's baby), according to *Le Rire* on 26 May 1900.

Reviews of minstrels in the 1890s note that they are nightmarish and hilarious, "bizarre and disturbing" with their mind-boggling "savage energy." The violence of a Punch and Judy show is heightened by the grimace of bug eyes and the gaping mouth with its gleaming, white teeth, the physical characteristic that is the most often underlined. "Two gentlemen in Hick's Georgia Minstrels have mouths which, when expanded, present an exhibition well worth the entrance money alone, for every time they open them, they seem as if they were trying to swallow their own heads," wrote a reviewer in 1898. Furthermore, they are "*burlesque comme seuls les nègres savent l'être*." The disconcerting aspect of the white eyes rolling and the enormous open mouth is quickly transformed into a unique form of comedy. To understand the meaning of black laughter and of laughter produced by black entertainers, it is crucial that we understand what is specifically involved in the perception of a particularly black form of burlesque in the eyes of French spectators.

Fears surrounding the threat of the African's wide-open mouth are evident in the number of humoristic drawings of cannibals in satirical journals such as *Le Rire* or on the popular stage where plays set in Africa feature a barbaric, cannibalistic King. Jules Chéret's poster of "Les Terribles Zoulous" in a frenetic war dance performed on the stage of the Folies-Bergère depicts them in convulsive postures with their mouths open. What is fearful (nightmarish, disturbing) and what is hilarious? The former is connected to the image of the wide-open mouth as voracious and devouring, as our citations will show. Is it possible to separate the two reactions?

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Contemporary discussions by anthropologists will guide the interpretation and analysis of the numerous accounts, poems, and reviews of Africans and of black American entertainers, including the clown Chocolat (born Raphael de Leios in Cuba). As we will discover, the cultural influence of Chocolat extends far beyond his circus performances with Footitt.

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### Impression d'Afrique et le roman de 1825

Ce n'est que dans les années 1820 que le roman commence à rendre pleinement compte de la réalité sociale entraînée par la faillite de la Révolution française, particulièrement dans le contexte de l'exclusion des groupes ayant cherché citoyenneté en 1792, dont les noirs des Îles du Vent. La restitution de l'esclavage en 1802 et le maintien de la traite bien au-delà de 1815 fourniraient aux romanciers de nouvelles sources de conflit et donneraient lieu, avant Balzac et Stendhal, à un romanesque du contemporain. Un ouvrage va nous retenir, qui entame cette esthétique nouvelle selon un large canevas de la vie en France, aux Antilles, et surtout en Afrique ; ce sera parmi les premiers ouvrages fictifs à donner une impression – pré-Romantique – de la vie africaine.