



Discourse, Communities, Politics: The Problem with Irony

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A Personal Preliminary Note: My approach to the question of “realizing community” will be through a kind of case study of the controversial exhibit, “Into the Heart of Africa,” mounted in 1989-90 by the Royal Ontario Museum. This marks my third of three very different engagements with this exhibition. The first occurred in the summer of 1990 when I was teaching a course at a semiotics institute at Victoria College in Toronto—where, from across the street at the Royal Ontario Museum, police sirens and the voices of protesting demonstrators interrupted our class discussions of the discursive politics of irony. We were all aware, from press reports, of the fact that irony constituted one of the problematic dimensions of the exhibit, and consequently we decided to study the show—with the approval of the protesters, with whom we talked beforehand. My second engagement with “Into the Heart of Africa” came at the 1991 meeting of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English when I tried to articulate through this first encounter, an argument for dealing with, rather than silencing, the tricky terrain of what had come to be labelled the “politically correct.” In this, my third re-contextualizing and thus re-thinking of the exhibition, it is the *Realizing Community* conference’s concern for the notion of community that has made me focus on two particular areas: one is institutional—the social nature and community responsibility of the museum and the collection—but because I am not a curator or an anthropologist, this will be a limited discussion. But the other is national and thus affects all Canadians, regardless of expertise—that is, the discrepancies between Canada’s

self-positioning as a postcolonial and multicultural nation and the diverse responses to this exhibition in different Canadian communities.

Despite theories of capitalist globalization and homogenization, you'd have to be up very high in a (very) hot air balloon to ignore the ongoing efforts in many fields to define and validate cultural differences today. Within Canada, you can't turn on your television without being made aware of the differences among native and Québécois, between west and east. You can't walk down the street of most Canadian cities without seeing what we officially call our multicultural differences. You can't read a critical journal today without noticing what Cornel West has called the "new cultural politics of difference" whose distinctive characteristics, in his words, include a drive "to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing" (19). Civil rights, feminism, gay liberation, postmodernism—whatever you want to see as contributing to this new cultural politics—it is clear that, in Kate Stimpson's pointed words, "[t]oday the word *difference* has almost as many entries in our dictionary of culture as the middle of the road has cracks and holes, as the pronoun *we* has splits and fissures" (403).

This is clearly not unproblematic territory, most obviously because the very notion of difference posits a defining norm of the "same." There are obvious dangers in privileging what is now called "alteritism"—recently defined as "the construction and celebration of oneself as Other" (Appiah 354)—and those dangers include a desire to self-exoticize and sentimentalize, not to mention essentialize, fetishize (Said 213) and "tokenize," or whatever the word is for when you're invited inside as a "selective [inhabitant] of the margin . . . in order better to exclude" the rest (Spivak 1988, 107). As Gayatri Spivak once put it: "A hundred years ago it was impossible for [her] to speak, for the precise reason that makes it only *too* easy for [her] to speak in certain circles now" (1990, 60). This is one of her many responses to

what Edward Said has called the talismanic, magic, even metaphysical properties associated with the words “difference” and “otherness” (213) and what Trinh Minh-ha has put in terms of “allowing the Other an apparent aura” (186).

I review the obvious and the contentious here as a frame of reference for the specifics of my discussion of the Royal Ontario Museum’s exhibition because this is the necessary and necessarily problematic context in which to address the terms I see as central to the debate about the nature of the nation, the “imagined community,” we call Canada: “postcolonial” and “multicultural.” This latter term—multicultural—has a very vexed history in many countries besides Canada today, from England where it is often a “euphemism for black-white relations” (Gunew 100) to Australia where it is, for some, a code-word for assimilation to an Anglo-Celtic norm or else an excuse for the homogenization of difference into “folkloric spectacle” (Gunew 112). Recently, in the United States, it has been demonized into standing for all that is wrong with the country in the eyes of conservative Americans. A recent advertisement for the *New Criterion* asks: “Are you appalled when leading universities abandon the classics of Western thought for the compulsory study of ‘third world’ propaganda? . . . Are you apprehensive about what the politics of ‘multiculturalism’ is going to mean to the future of our civilization?” (qtd. in Baker 3).

In the Canadian academic community, these debates about canonicity and political correctness also take place, but the cultural and political turf is not quite the same. The history of the Canadian usage of the term multiculturalism goes back to the part of the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism called “The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups.” Out of this came Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s 1971 policy statement and the 1988 Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada. The term has always been accepted as descriptive of the demographic realities of the nation, but it has never been unproblematic. Some have argued that it represents a federal government ploy to divert attention from Québec separatist desires; others have accused it of concealing assimilationist impulses. For some it merely pays

lip service to an undeniable social fact; for still others, it represents a collective historical guilt—or hypocrisy—given earlier Canadian immigration policies. It is not accidental that both the word and the policy should come into being at a time when Canada's unofficial self-image as a northern nation was being challenged from within by the immigration of people from, first, southern European, and then, non-white nations, largely those of the British Commonwealth. It is also not accidental that it should coincide with both Québécois discourses of decolonization—derived from theorists of French colonialism such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon—and First Nations Peoples' continuing articulations of rights and land claims.

This policy aimed at preserving and enhancing multiculturalism in Canada has been called a range of things—custodial, retentive, paternalistic, anachronistic, reductive—and has been accused of creating both enforced inclusiveness and a kind of ethnicity industry. But it has also had its defenders who have seen its potential, if not yet the realization of the potential. As an ideal of civic tolerance, it has liberal and liberating possibilities. If it could avoid the bureaucratic and the overcodified, it has the possibility of being an example of what Gilles Deleuze calls “nomad” thought, that is, decodifying and unsettling, opposing the peripheral and the mobile to the stationary, institutionalized centre—which in this country is, at the moment, a double, bicultural centre—at least until, as Lenore Keeshig-Tobias has recently put it (at the UBC Postcolonial Conference in Vancouver, April 1992), the First Nations Peoples are invited into Confederation—if they wish to come.

Gilles Thérien was once shocked to find a Québec novel being taught on a Third World literature course in the US, but the salutary effect of that shock was to make him rethink Québec—and Canada—from a different perspective. If we get away from institutionalized multiculturalism—from the grant-supported folk dancing and the foodfairs—and consider ethnicity in the late twentieth century as what Michael Fischer calls “a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions” (201), then multiculturalism has the potential to be a future-oriented, not only past-oriented, dynamic concept of community that might

help define, in part at least, a nation in dire need of self-definition. It would never deny historical (as well as geographic, racial, etc.) specificity, but might use exactly such specificity to articulate an oppositional position “suspicious of sovereign powers, universal truths, overly relativized preciousness, local authenticity, moralisms high and low” (Rabinow 258). The last words are those of Paul Rabinow in his controversial definition of a kind of postmodern “cosmopolitanism” and I use them warily, for that reason. But, whatever we call this position, it is not some kind of “pluralistic universalism,” what one anthropologist in the US calls a “textured sense of being American” (Fischer 230). The more appropriate metaphor might well be the one used by two recent films (*Masala* and *Mississippi Masala*) about the multicultural experience in both Canada and the US: the spicy mix called *masala*.

The South Asian context of this image, though, returns me to the other of the contested terms that frame my discussion of community today: postcolonial. A spicy mix might be another way of figuring the complex hybrid and syncretic pluralism that many today offer as the preferred model of the postcolonial (Ashcroft et al. 38-39). But Canada still has a difficult colonial relationship to deal with: that with the United States, a nation whose cultural, political, and economic hegemony and whose relation to multinational capitalism has rendered it one of the new imperial nations of the world (Jara and Spadaccini 10). This is something Canadians have always been more aware of—and for longer—than perhaps other nations. If, as Albert Memmi argued, colonization is a question of “economic and political exploitation” (149), then many see Canada (both before and after free trade) as an American colony today (Morton 150; Lee 162). The obvious conclusion that is usually drawn is that Canada is thus in both a postcolonial position vis-à-vis France and Britain and a neocolonial position vis-à-vis the US. It may simply be a form of (understandable) denial that makes us more willing to position ourselves communally as postcolonial, though the appeal of the term is perhaps obvious: it embodies a dialogue with history at the same time as it acts as a “space-clearing gesture” (Appiah 348), enabling what Stephen Slemon calls “psychic lib-

eration from Old World domination and its cognitive codes” (1988, 14).

If we accept the implied definition of colonialism here as a broad form of structural domination (Stam and Spence 4), we must also make room for the complexity it will entail. In Said’s words: “to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times” (207). Part of the task facing any discussion of the *postcolonial* condition would involve the work of making distinctions between and among those different places and times. The writing of Spivak on the different histories of oppression—based on gender, class, race—within a given community (1990, 49; 62; 103; 163) is part of this work. The extended research of Diana Brydon, Helen Tiffin, and others on the distinctions between settler and subjugated colonies is another part of it. Settler colonies may well share that “specifically anti-colonial counter-discursive energy” that Slemon sees as postcolonial (1990, 3), but each has its own position vis-à-vis its aboriginal peoples to deal with before it can use that term unproblematically. And each settler colony has its own history that cannot be factored out of the equation. It matters whether a nation has fought for political independence or has evolved a form of government out of imperial institutions. As the US example suggests, breaks and ruptures force an articulation of difference and allow the creation of a discourse of identity. Without the oppositional energies of political insurgency against Empire, Canada still lives out its identity crisis.

I have spent such a long time on these terms, postcolonial and multicultural, because they have offered me a “hold” on what happened when a Canadian institution, not inappropriately named the *Royal Ontario Museum*, sought to talk about the history of its collection of objects from Africa. While both Canada and Africa are often discussed in postcolonial terms, it was the many differences between them that came to the fore in the debates over the exhibition, “Into the Heart of Africa.” The difference between the two kinds of postcolonial self-definition certainly involved what Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge call the “unbridgeable [racial] chasm” between white and non-white

colonies (408), but it also had a lot to do with the related cultural and historical chasm between settler and subjugated colonies.

Settler colonies are those in which new arrivals from Europe, motivated by any number of reasons from enforced exile to adventure (and usually after marginalizing or exterminating the indigenous populations, rather than merging with them), transplanted and internalized (while deracinating) Old World culture and traditions, including language (see Brydon 1987, 3). The difference between this kind of colonization and that which characterized places like India or Africa is that, there, cultural and linguistic imposition took place on the homeground of the colonized people (Tiffin 31)—indeed inscribed, in Slemon’s words, on “the body and space” of Empire’s “Others” (1990, 3) through military and bureaucratic power. While I do not want to underestimate the trauma of settler colonies—like Canada—which have had to deal with the psychic and cultural as well as economic dependency of colonization and have struggled to articulate autonomy through constitutional or cultural means, I do think that the problems at the Royal Ontario Museum stem in part from the difference between Canada’s—a settler colony’s—relation to Empire and that of Africa as one of the continents of the world invaded by European powers and subjugated to them by military might or missionary evangelism. To put it bluntly, settler colonies have also often been imperialist—both at home, so to speak, in relation to aboriginal peoples, and abroad. And, as Shirley Neuman once pointed out to me, there is also a difference between being considered or considering yourself “inferior” (by metropolitan standards) because your culture is continuous with and derivative of Empire’s and doing so because your culture is radically different from that of the imperial power.

I know the debates I am entering here are fraught ones. I can never ignore my own responses to the stereotyping and denigrating of Canadian culture suffered, however benignly, at the hands of reviewers in the *TLS*, or even the *New York Review of Books*, but I have to ask myself if this is the same *kind* of impact of colonization as that experienced in India or in parts of Africa? Or is it a matter of degree? I don’t know, but I take to heart Trinh Minh-ha’s words: “The task of inquiring into all the divi-

sions of a culture remains exacting, for the moments when things take on a proper name can only be positional, hence transitional” (2).

The positional importance of the names “postcolonial” and “multicultural” for me is that they allow me at least a partial way to understand what happened during that contentious museum exhibition. The terms are very different ones, but both involve Canada’s politics of identity and sense of community. Multiculturalism is a centripetal term, turning inward toward a definition of a complex cultural and social reality; postcoloniality is a centrifugal term, moving Canada outward in terms of both the past (in relation to Britain and France) and the present (in relation to the US). The exhibition itself and the response of the African Canadians grouped together under the umbrella of the “Coalition for the Truth about Africa” upset more than just the curator and the museum. I think it profoundly upset many others because it came into direct conflict with both the centrifugal and centripetal definitions Canada had been styling for itself as a nation, as what Ben Anderson calls an “imagined community.” From being a postcolonial nation Canada was being forced to confront its historical role *within* Empire; it also had to face new blind spots within its public, multicultural ideology.

To identify with the postcolonial condition today is, by definition, to position oneself in opposition to Empire. What “Into the Heart of Africa” did, however, was to position English Canadians right in the middle of Empire, in Memmi’s strong terms, as “disfigured into an oppressor, a partial, . . . treacherous being, worrying only about . . . privileges and their defense” (89). Canadians were shown their own history as one that wasn’t separable from the European colonizer’s struggle to reconcile “the notions of political freedom cherished by [the] home country with the actual political suppression and disfranchisement of the colonized people” of Africa (JanMohamed 1983, 4-5). Canada was thus represented as having an uncomfortable dual identity as both colony and colonizer. But Homi Bhabha has taught us that the role of colonizer is already a dual one, “‘in double duty bound’, at once a civilizing mission and a violent subjugating force” (1990, 71). How could Canadians today reconcile this with

their community's self-image as multiculturally tolerant and postcolonially oppositional?

The American experience is not of much use in navigating these dangerous waters. While Appiah can argue that "there is, of course, no American culture without African roots" (354), thereby acknowledging the role of slavery in American history and of African Americans' cultural impact in music, art, and literature, Canada's racial history is a different one. Even if one would not want to argue a consensus within the heterogeneous and diverse black population of the US, it still has a different historical and demographic position than that of African Canadians. While slavery did exist in Canada, many slaves came to Canada because of American politics—either accompanying the United Empire Loyalists or escaping through the Underground Railroad. Much later immigration from the West Indies and Africa occurred at a time when multicultural ideology made room—at least in theory—for racial difference. There was therefore no real equivalent to the 1960s Civil Rights movement in Canada because there was no official segregation as such. This is not to say that there was not racism in individual or even institutional practice, of course. All of this is important to understanding the response of white Canadians as well as black to the ROM exhibition which I will take you through in a moment.

Before I do, however, I want to return briefly to that other frame of reference that I mentioned at the start. This is what James Clifford has called a "conceptual shift, 'tectonic' in its implications" in the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology (1986, 2). This change too has not been separable from challenges to imperialism and colonialism. Gone are the days, Clifford claims, when anthropology could speak "with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves" (1986, 10). To see why this is part of the context of the debates, it is about time that I actually address the exhibition directly. I do so, however, as a white Canadian of Italian—not British—descent. But I am also part of the larger Canadian community in which this exhibition and its aftermath took place.

Depending on how you interpret Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the echoing of the novel in the title "Into the Heart of

Africa” is going to suggest either an imperialist perspective or a critique thereof. From the start, then, this ideologically freighted doubleness encodes the terms of the ensuing conflict over the show’s interpretation and evaluation of imperialism. Before this exhibition, the Royal Ontario Museum’s rather modest collection of 375 objects from Central and West Africa had remained in its basement for almost a century, available only to researchers. It had come into being largely because of bequests from the families of Canadian missionaries or soldiers in the British African colonies at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. This is where the problems with the collection’s unrepresentative nature begin: military men often collected weapons (and I suppose it isn’t hard to imagine how some of these must have been obtained), and missionaries tended to bring home hair pins or combs or musical instruments to display when fundraising. In other words, this was not a rich and full collection of African objects; there could be no pretence to its representing the cultural and social complexity or the artistic achievement of the peoples of Central Africa.

For this reason, the decision was made to foreground in the exhibition both the material limitations of the collection and the history and politics of its coming into being in this one, specifically Canadian, cultural institution. The openly stated intent was one shared by much postcolonial theory today: to focus on the imperialist ideology of those who collected the objects, on how those objects came to enter this museum, and thus on the cultural assumptions of museums in general and the disciplines of anthropology and museology. In short, the focus was not to be on Africa itself. In addition, given this meta-museological conception, the target audience was perhaps more academic than general. The catalogue made this even clearer, as I’ll discuss later, constantly calling the reader’s attention to the history of objects, tracing the cultural transformation of each as it moved from being used in African society to being collected by Canadian missionaries or soldiers to being exhibited in the ROM. But, there was yet another transformation to come after the show opened: from museum specimen to political symbol.

A few months after the opening, an umbrella group known as the “Coalition for the Truth about Africa” began picketing the museum, calling this “a clear and concise attempt to mislead the public and to further tarnish the image of Africa and African people.” Its handout also stated that “Into the Heart of Africa” “according to the ROM, is a portrayal of African history.” And, indeed, despite the catalogue, the *brochure* describing the exhibition does invite “you on an historical journey through the world of sub-Saharan Africa The rich cultural heritage of African religious, social and economic life is celebrated through objects brought back by Canadian missionaries and military men over 100 years ago.” But this description seriously misrepresents not so much the *material* but the *focalization* of the exhibit, for the focus was never intended to be on Africa itself, but on the ideology of Empire in Africa.

Why, then, did the brochure mislead? One reason may be that this was the second brochure printed. At a cost of over \$20,000, the first was scrapped when consultations with members of the African Canadian community led to complaints against what was called its “tired, stereotypical language” about Africa, language which “subtly recalled the glory of the Imperial Age” (Da Breo 33). But the fact remains that the second brochure, however much closer it may have been to representing what the community would have liked the exhibit to be, actually proved seriously misleading with respect to the reality. Clearly, the decision as to the focalization of the show was the first and perhaps major point of contention. The first printed message within the first room of the exhibit stated that *Canadians* were to be the focus, that their “experience of Africa, as seen in this exhibition, was very different from the way Africans perceived themselves.” The objects presented, it continued, “remind us of a little-remembered era of Canada’s past.” As we shall see, that first-person plural pronoun is problematic, not only in its implicit exclusions, but because perhaps not all of the community implied by that “us” wanted to be reminded of that past.

The initial, almost empty, imperial blue rooms set up the relation of Canada to the British Empire in the last century. A few objects (both African and imperial) were presented here in a tra-

ditional museum fashion, isolated in their beauty in glass cases, abstracted from their context and function. But visible from the entrance was a wall-size picture of a mounted British soldier thrusting his sword into the breast of an African. If you moved up close, you could read (though with difficulty) these words: "Lord Beresford's Encounter with a Zulu." If you read the text posted nearby, you would learn that this was the cover of the *Illustrated London News* of 1879. As you can imagine, the impact of this kind of picture is going to be different on a small catalogue page than on a large wall. As many commentators subsequently noted, the violence of this representation worked not to produce a response against jingoistic Victorian imperialism (as might well have been intended), but to turn the tables against the exhibit itself for perpetuating precisely such representations. In a culture like ours, where visual images may indeed make more of an impression than printed text, and in an institution visited by schoolchildren of all races who just might not stop to read the contextualizing accompanying texts, the placing and size of this image were, at the very least, signs of semiotic ineptness and curatorial or designer inexperience. While the relationship of text to image is a general problem for all museum exhibits, here it proved critical. Whether you think of book or magazine illustrations, advertising, or even illustrated dictionaries, there is always a complicated verbal/visual tension between the decorative and the didactic, between the descriptive and the prescriptive. I will return to this shortly, but first let me take you rapidly (and only verbally) through the rest of the exhibition, so that those of you who did not see it can get some sense of the other sites of contention.

After the military section, a small area called "The Life History of Objects" constituted the only overtly meta-museological part of the exhibit itself. The reconstituted front hall of a Canadian house revealed the movement of African objects from indigenous usage to being spoils of war to becoming pure decoration—before being donated to the museum. A large white room, labelled "Civilization, Commerce, and Christianity," then presented the artefacts collected by missionaries and displayed photographs of these evangelical Christians with their African con-

verts. The last and largest section of the exhibit was introduced by a reconstruction of a West-Central Angolan village compound, wherein some of the objects seen in cabinets were placed in a simulated context of use. The final large room displayed drums, masks, textiles, headdresses, weapons, and musical instruments. It offered *mbiras* or thumb-pianos to play and headphones with which to listen to African music. A scattered and miscellaneous collection of small photographs of Africans today (on a semiotically inappropriate royal blue wall) led to the exit—where an African “boutique” eased you back into Canadian consumer society.

Now let me return you to those initial rooms. The anger of many, and not only the African Canadian community, was provoked as much by the visual representation of verbal texts as by any actual pictures (see Fulford 24). What I mean is that, from the start, explanatory signs presented certain words framed in quotation marks. An interpretive conflict was set up at once: were these citations (and thus historically authenticated and validated) or were they to be read ironically? Words like “the unknown continent”, “barbarous,” and “primitive” were placed in quotation marks, but the problem was that so too were metaphors, titles, and some object descriptions. In other words, the proliferation of quotation marks made one wonder whether one could or should read those placed around words like “Dark Continent” and “primitive” as intended both to signal ironic distance and also to act as accurate citations—in other words, to represent the colonial perspective that the *postcolonial* exhibition wanted to show it did not share (see Nazareth 11). You may recall from the press how these quotation marks were, in fact, interpreted, for not all agreed with this intent, though some did. For some readers, they were simply disclaimers (Robertson 4); for others they were “sugarcoating” (protester qtd. in *Toronto Star* 13 June 1990: A3). One viewer, whose great uncle was featured as one of the Canadian military, found that they created too subtle an irony, one “lost on those who can’t (or don’t) read the explanatory texts.” She added: “it is also a pretty limp way to examine a subject as grave as racially motivated genocide” (Crean 25). The Curriculum Advisor on Race Relations and Multiculturalism for the Toronto Board of Education agreed, stating: “In dealing with

issues as sensitive as cultural imperialism and racism, the use of irony is a highly inappropriate luxury” (qtd. in “Analyzing Racism” 4). Yet haven’t feminist and postcolonial theorists argued that irony is one of the most effective ways of dealing with precisely such difficult issues—at least, when used oppositionally from *within*? But there’s the rub: this irony was perceived as coming from a colonial source, even if it was largely at the expense of imperialism, and not Africans.

One example of ironic citational signaling came up in almost every public response to this exhibition: it was the relation between a photograph of a white woman watching a number of black women doing washing and its caption: “Taken in Nigeria about 1910, this photograph shows missionary Mrs. Thomas Titcombe giving African women ‘a lesson in how to wash clothes’. African labour was the mainstay of mission economies.” To the Coalition’s interpretation—“Did Africans not know how to wash before the arrival of Europeans?” (handout)—one white Canadian reviewer replied: “An observant reader will note that the words ‘a lesson in how to wash clothes’ are in quotation marks. The description is offered as evidence, not of the actual activity, but of Mrs. Titcombe’s intentions and sense of superiority” (Hume). But, I hasten to add the obvious: the comprehension of irony has never been quite that simple. If, as Homi Bhabha (1984) has argued, colonial discourse contains both colonizer and colonized, caught in a problematic of indeterminacy and ambivalence, does this sort of irony re-enact, even as it critiques, “an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power” (Bhabha 1990, 71)? Does this particular irony embody manichean dualisms or subvert them? Or does it depend on who is doing the interpreting?

Another related and equally problematic part of the exhibition was a small white room where a visitor could sit to watch a slide show, and listen to a male voice give a seven-minute recreation of a magic-lantern illustrated lecture that a missionary *might have given* in 1919 in an Ontario Protestant church when fundraising for his African mission. This fictional context was asserted orally at the start and at the end. Outside the room there was a notice that read: “The sense of cultural superiority and paternalism that you will hear in this fictional narrative was

characteristic of the missionary worldview at the time. So was the genuine spirit of adventure and the sincere belief that missionaries were bringing 'light' to the 'dark continent.'" But, what if you didn't read the sign, or what if you missed the beginning or end of the long seven-minute tape? Well, you certainly heard the "cultural superiority and paternalism," but without the ironizing, contextualizing frame. And, even more unfortunately, the paternalistic voice could be heard as you walked through this part of the exhibit, aurally framing your viewing.

So, however didactic or "heavy-handed" (editorial, *Globe and Mail* 19 October 1990: A16) some people might have found the ironies here, it wasn't by any means a simple matter of their being "too subtle for the protesters." Does the very indirection of the ironies here not presuppose an audience that can—or is willing to—read between the lines, an audience that positions itself as postcolonial and multicultural, and not colonial and racist? Is there not a danger that even this audience might be lulled into thinking that the irony has done its critical work for it, and that it need *only* bother to question those words set apart in quotation marks (Zhao 14)? Do these ironies implicitly rely too much on an audience that can be affectively and politically detached from the pain represented in the exhibition.

The issues of the misreading of irony and of the appropriateness of its very use here are issues which engage in complex ways the exclusionary potential of irony—and therefore of the anger it can cause. But the affective charge of anger can also extend to the target of the ironies, and, indeed, many did protest the portrayal of the Canadian missionaries in the exhibit, arguing the case for their more complex and frequently oppositional relationship with colonial authorities (see letter to editor of A.W. Frank Banfield, the son of one of those missionaries; cf. Mitchell). But this was a muted protest. The Coalition argued that African Canadian children came away from "Into the Heart of Africa" with a negative impression of black history, with the idea that Africans didn't know how to wash their clothes or comb their hair before the whites arrived (*Globe and Mail* 20 June 1990). No one, to my knowledge, however, argued that British Canadian children came away embarrassed or traumatized to learn

that their families had been guilty of everything from paternalism and exploitation to extermination. Yet columnists did note that if the exhibition was hard on any group, “it was the white missionaries and soldiers; their prejudices and ignorance are documented in some detail” (Hume); one black reviewer even suggested that the exhibit promotes racism against whites who are made to look ignorant and dangerous (Da Breo; qtd. in Nazareth 11). As Robert Fulford summed it up: “old-time Christian missionaries are now almost beyond the range of human sympathy” (19).

We are left with many questions, and most of them deal with how we “realize” community today: what do we do with this exhibition, one whose catalogue and verbal texts actually do reveal a certain amount of ideologically careful demystification and condemnation of imperialism—but which relies to a large extent upon the indirection and obliqueness of irony to carry that postcolonial message? Was irony perhaps seen as a way of subverting the ideology of colonialism from within, without openly offending the missionary and military families who had loaned and donated so much to the museum? What do we do with the varied responses to this attempt to deal with the imperialist history of one particular museum collection, a history that, the texts argue, cannot be separated from colonialism, ethnocentrism, exoticism, and even racism?

As a semiotic whole, this exhibition did, it is true, often contradict this textual evidence, and at times even its politics. The “us,” the main implied audience of the anti-imperial message, would seem to have been not only a white and British Canadian community, but also a specialist one—museum officials, curators, anthropologists, art historians. According to many of those I’ve spoken to in these fields, this was a reflective, museological show, even ground-breaking in its exposé of the imperialist origins of a collection (see Nazareth 12). In retrospect, part of the problem was that such a museum show inevitably reaches other audiences, other communities, with other viewing contexts as well. There were also problems, of course, with clashes between verbal texts and the semiotics of visual display, and these raised questions of the relationship between the representation of violence and the

violence done by representation. The very depiction of racism (in the past) was interpreted by some as—not only Eurocentric—but racist (in the present). The problem of embodying that which one is trying to analyse is an issue of crucial importance to postcolonial theory today, and to the discipline of anthropology.

I mentioned earlier that, since I am not an anthropologist, I would not address in much detail this disciplinary issue. Nevertheless, I cannot pass over it in complete silence. There has been much work done lately on the theory of collecting. Feminists have written about the gendered and historically specific way in which the passion to collect, preserve, and display is articulated. James Clifford (1990, 144) has studied the role of collections in the processes of Western identity formation. Others have looked at issues of the representativeness and presentation of collections. In a way, what the ROM exhibit tried to do is in the same line of cultural demystification of an unacknowledged institutional practice described by Clifford in these terms: “The collector discovers, acquires, salvages objects. The objective world is given, not produced, and thus the historical relations of power in the work of acquisition are occulted. The *making* of meaning in museum classifications and display is mystified as adequate *representation*” (1990, 144). The catalogue of “Into the Heart of Africa” is premised on the exposing of this kind of mystification: “A museum collection may be thought of as a cultural text, one that can be read to understand the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions that have influenced its creation, selection, and display. Within such a collection, objects act as an expression not only of the worldviews of those who chose to make and use them, but also of those who chose to collect and exhibit them” (Da Breo and Cannizzo 62). The catalogue directly addresses issues such as the museum as cultural “charnel house,” full of the remains of dead civilizations (80), the decontextualized museum display as “cultural vandalism” (84) and aestheticism (88), and the danger of partial collections promoting stereotypes (86). In other words, this exhibition showed some awareness of problems that many other exhibitions have ignored. I am thinking here of the published attacks on the assumptions underlying the 1987 show at the Centre for African Art in New York, called “Perspectives:

Angles on African Art” or the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 show called “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.”

Clearly museums are being challenged to be reflexive about their practices of collecting and exhibiting. In Clifford’s words, “[t]he relations of power whereby one portion of humanity can select, value, and collect the pure products of others need to be criticized and transformed” (1988, 213). Sadly, perhaps, judging from the catalogue, “Into the Heart of Africa” saw itself in that line of criticism. What went wrong? The catalogue and the exhibition are two different things, of course. With the notoriously fine vision of hindsight it is possible to see a few minor changes that might have made some difference in the exhibit itself—perhaps reducing the size of certain violent visual images, or being more clear and consistent about the function of quotation marks, or perhaps choosing overtly critical statement over ironic indirection. Less of a reliance on text and a more astute sense of the workings of visual images would have helped, no doubt. The African boutique and its white staff might have been moved—or removed. The museum might even have considered inverting the order of the exhibit—in other words, introducing the objects in their African context first, and then tracing how they came to enter the museum’s collection. After all, priority is semiotically signalled by position, and there was no equivalent African community voice—past or present—to balance the white history. As many have argued, museums are different from, for instance, the movies, where representation of imperialist superiority over Africans or native peoples has been common enough (if unpleasant) fare for years. It has been said that museums are places “of special honour and reverence” (Fulford 28), but I’d add that they also have special cultural responsibilities that come with their institutional positions as cultural and educational authorities in the particular communities in which they exist. We are now starting to question the very status of museums as what one anthropologist calls “historical-cultural theatres of memory. Whose memory? For what purposes?” (Clifford 1990, 164).

“Into the Heart of Africa” tried to pose these questions; the responses to it would suggest that it did not succeed in doing so

unproblematically. Other exhibitions have been more successful, perhaps—such as the travelling “Te Maori” show of objects from the Maori people as well as New Zealand museums or, closer to home, The UBC Museum of Anthropology’s exhibit entitled “Fragments: Reflections on Collecting.” As suggested by the First Nations Peoples’ requests for the repatriation of their sacred objects from museum display cabinets, perhaps what needs serious reexamination today is the very existence of museums—as institutions that came into being, historically, as imperialist institutions—and their place in our communities.

In deciding not to focus the Royal Ontario Museum exhibit on Africa itself, but on the emissaries of Empire who journeyed “Into the Heart of Africa,” was the curator being careful to avoid appropriation (see Ngugi wa Thiong’o xii), and to stay within the boundaries of her unavoidably white Canadian point of view? Or, did she manage to perpetuate the situation she sought to critique, offering yet another example of the colonizing “Western gaze” (Clifford 1988, 256)? Would silence about the collection’s imperialist origins have been preferable? Or would that have been an equally dangerous error of omission? Or was it a matter of focalization, rather than material? Should those subjected to the gaze of Empire have been given a voice—or the only voice? The “Epilogue” to the catalogue reads with a certain irony in the aftermath of the initial decision about focalization:

By studying the museum as an artifact, reading collections as cultural texts, and discovering the life histories of objects, it has become possible to understand something of the complexities of cross-cultural encounters. In the same process, the intricacies of different cultural configurations are revealed in objects through which various African peoples have expressed not only their individual artistry but also their deepest communal concerns. Finally, by placing in context the relationships, however, brief, problematic, and painful, that developed as Canadian soldiers and missionaries travelled into the heart of Africa, it has become clear that the past is part of the present. (92)

When a Canadian reviewer (Adele Freedman) began her analysis with the words, “We consider ourselves a former colony, not a colonizing power,” she put her finger on how difficult it is

for some members of the English-Canadian community to see that past as “part of the present.” The discursive formations that constitute the Canadian “public sphere”—in the sense of Sneja Gunew’s rereading of the term after Jürgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton’s “counter public-sphere” (99-100)—are, I think, more *postcolonial* than colonial. The curator said, in an interview, before the protests began: “I can’t believe that most of the people won’t be horrified by the Canadian participation in this history. Remember that until fairly recently, Canada was a part of the British Empire and participated fully in all aspects of it, including the negative ones. But a lot of younger Canadians are unaware of anything other than the modern, contemporary aspects of Canadian history rather than even the very recent past” (Da Breo and Cannizzo 37). But even older Canadians might prefer to think that, historically, it was the “British” who were responsible for the plundering of Africa—or the exiling of First Nations Peoples to reserves. Being forced to face the reality of one’s own complicity is rarely a comfortable or enjoyable experience, especially if you have defined yourself communally in oppositional terms. Perhaps this is one of the unexamined reasons for the negative response to the exhibition, for even white Canadians’ readiness to accept charges of its “celebration” of imperialism (Charles Roach; in Nazareth 11). Certainly, the exhibition and the catalogue are both explicit in placing Canadians in an active role in Africa, citing James Morris’s *Pax Britannica* (about 1897): “Hundreds of thousands of British Canadians regarded the imperial saga as part of their own national heritage. The excitement of the New Imperialism was almost as intense in Toronto as it was in London” (Cannizzo 14).

It may seem superficially easier for me to study this, because behind the marital Scottish name of Hutcheon is the disclaimer of a Bortolotti, but while that Italian background positions me differently vis-à-vis the British Empire, I cannot ignore Italy’s imperial history in Africa. Any attempt to define myself as part of another community would also land me smack in the middle of a conflict regarding my view of Canada as a multicultural society that values its various constituent parts equally—something this exhibition, by its very focalization, has perhaps put into ques-

tion. “Into the Heart of Africa” tried to be demystifying, in Cornel West’s words, to “keep track of the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures” (31). That it did not fully succeed is clear, and the reasons I’ve tried to outline are both internal to its organization and focalization and also external—in how it rubbed against prevailing Canadian communal self-positionings as postcolonial and multicultural.

While we may accept that the ideal of multiculturalism is something that must be negotiated, or renegotiated, daily in the communal dynamic of living with and as difference, it is perhaps harder to conceive of the postcolonial in that way in English Canada. Our primary colonial relation to Britain was in the past, though our relation to the US is ongoing. Yet I think the response, not only of African Canadians, but of other Canadians to this controversial (and admittedly problematic) exhibition suggests that identity, even postcolonial identity, is indeed, something to be seen, in Clifford’s words, “not as an archaic survival but as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished” (1988, 9).

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