Ethnographic Representations of Self and The Other in Museums

Ideas of Identity and Modernity

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Abstract

In the process of pushing forward towards utopian ideals of modernity, western ethnography museums have been collecting and classifying non-western peoples and their cultures thereby creating a shared identity of superiority of western civilization against the ‘primitive others’. Ethnographic displays have been complicit in inventing and reinforcing through its exhibiting clout this desire to be modern that is conceived along modern and post-modern notions of industrialization, urbanization and development. The noble savage myth is thus a necessary evil created in order to provide an inferior ‘Other’ that can be set against a modern, civilized Self. The thesis will look at how ethnography museums represent Self and The Other and the nexus that connects issues of identity, race, difference, as well as heritage, history, and memory, framing the discussion along the following:

- What signifies civilized culture? What constitutes modernity?
- What lays behind the fetish for cultural artefacts and the fascination of The Other?
- How does the power to represent look like?
- How do visitors receive the museums’ messages, and what are these messages?
- And what are the possible alternatives to the western exhibiting approach?

The thesis will use textual analysis and interviews of museum visitors to study the EC project, Fetish Modernity Exhibition, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration in Paris, District Six Museum in Cape Town and the Museum of Immigration in London.

My findings are that it is very difficult for Western ethnography museums to transcend its European colonial ways of exhibiting The Other, in order to fairly and meaningfully present non-western cultures on equal terms. Framed by nationalist and colonialist ethnographic frameworks, curators often have elitist agendas which cause a disconnect with the museum experience of the cultural consumer, and the power to represent creates an uneven relationship with the cultures being exhibited. However, efforts have been made to include more participatory approaches and there is potential for museum education to contribute to lasting social changes in terms of identity politics and cross-cultural communication.
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Museums, ethnography museums in particular, are not often thought of as agents of social change. Perhaps because the images that come to mind are of dusty relics sitting in display cases courtesy of childhood memories from school trips. Naturally then, one might ask what it has to do with the subject of Communication for Development?

“The ethnography museums create fictions that can sustain clichés of the exotic. Most of these museums were born within a colonial context, and served actively to legitimate that context. They developed representations of the world corresponding to their ideological foundations.”

(Excerpt from the panel of Cliché Factory exhibit in the Fetish Modernity Exhibition)

Ethnography museums, in essence, hold the role as the community storyteller, with the power to create myths and characters in the global dominant narrative in which we live. As public cultural institutions with historical roots in Western imperialism, they have long been in the business of exhibiting the cultures of The Other. Ethnography museums of the 18th and 19th centuries and even as recent as 60 years ago depicted non-western peoples in ‘human zoo’ settings, positioning them as exotic savages against the civilized West.

Despite the fact that we are living in an increasingly globalized world, ethnography museums by and large still seem to highlight the theme of ‘origin and naturalness’ in displaying their collections, and non-western cultures are still seen as “more ethnographic than others” (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.157-158). The disparity that exists between peoples and societies can in fact be attributed to an imperialistic cultural dominance continually upheld by prevailing power structures, as Cheryl McEwan contends that “underlying all economic, political and social resistance is the struggle over representation, which occurs in forms of cultural production” (McEwan, 2009, p.254-255).

Ethnography museums are important in the field of development because just like any other non-profit organization, they rely at least in part on public funds and exist to serve the community or a target group. The way a museum frames its exhibition can be compared to an organization’s communication strategy, and the narrative presented by the museum is akin to the central messages promoted by an organization. Museums, just like any other public organization, have to take into account stakeholders wishes and funders’ requests and should also be reviewed in terms of the social and political impact that it makes on its constituency.

As sites where cultures and cultural objects are displayed, ethnography museums are of particular interest in the field of meaning production processes. We derive meanings of our surroundings either ‘from our own experiences, or from cultural definitions put upon experience, especially by those in positions of power, authority and control’ (Pickering, 2008, p.18). Similar to news and events reported in the media that are widely assumed to be objective and trustworthy because it has “secured both the authoritative status and knowledge claims of news” (Cottle, 1998, p.189), museums are considered legitimate sources of knowledge depository by virtue of the ‘epistemological guarantee’ bestowed upon public institutions, of which they are a part.

In the lecture on museum experience at the ComDev seminar held in November 2013 in Berlin, Irit Dekel mentioned that observing together in public sites like memorials and museums serve as the link between media and development because museums are the conduit that bridges audiences who come in search of knowledge or to feel certain emotions and experiences, to an historical event or particular notions/subject matters. Dekel elucidates that when a reciprocal connection is made in the production/consumption relationship between the visitor and the curator, museums become “sites of urban memory as we collectively experience together” and offer “forms of political education and negotiation of understanding of what we are doing here”.

Museums are also disputed terrains of identities, stories and sense of place. Like other public sites, museums are ‘heterotopias’, which Foucault defines as “sites within the culture that are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Bennett, 1995, p.1). Prior to the museum visit exercise in Berlin, Anders Hög Hansen elaborated on
the notion that museums as place have meanings that are defined by people and the interactions between people, in addition to its controlled environment that are infused with spoken and unspoken rules. How we interact and behave in certain places are connected to the meanings we attach to ideas of location (geographic), locale (physical setting) and sense of place (atmospheric, one’s feelings), as our relationships to these concepts affect how we look at ourselves and at the world around us through the lenses of culture and identity (Cresswell, 2007, p.7-12).

The museum exercise in Berlin, in which ComDev students were asked to look at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt’s exhibition After Year Zero to discern “how and if culture is represented as a resource and which futures it points towards” resonated with me and provides the basis for exploration for my degree project.

In looking at ethnography museums, my thoughts revolve around how these western cultural institutions have been collecting and classifying non-western peoples and their cultures thereby creating a shared identity of superiority of western civilization against the ‘primitive others’, in the process of pushing forward towards utopian ideals of modernity. Ethnographic displays have been complicit in inventing and reinforcing through its exhibiting clout this desire to be modern that is conceived along modern and post-modern notions of industrialization, urbanization and development. The noble savage myth is thus a necessary evil created in order to provide an inferior ‘Other’ that can be set against a modern, civilized Self, for such comparative duality is needed in order to discern the workings of human advancement. The goal of modernity as our future is very much based on a chronological and evolutionary timeline that charts the progress of civilization as going from a less desirable, simple, backward existence to an enlightened, advanced and complex society, and in the process has inevitably ranked cultures that are unfamiliar as being non-modern and undesirable.

However, in responding to the changing global socio-political climate over the last 3 decades affecting social categories like national identities and ethnic diasporas, ethnography museums have been seeking to employ more holistic and inclusive approaches in portraying non-western cultures in recognition of its past in having played a part in perpetuating the myth of The Other (Fetish Modernity Exhibition Catalogue, p. 17-37).
But can and do ethnography museums of the new era really move past its colonial shackles? Museums are either “ideological tools which reinforced the held conceptions of order, time and progress or; tools of emancipation, representation of other places and other times which opened people’s eyes to a world other than their own and thus helped them maintain a sense of place, and make connections with those processes which had influenced their current position in the order of things” (Walsh, 1992, p.38). Most people would consider museums as fulfilling both functions above but it is in the latter that makes it important to review the role that ethnography museums have been playing in fostering public knowledge as well as its inclusion/exclusion politics, and to ascertain its potentials to contribute to social change.

The aim of the thesis is to therefore explore if and how ethnography museums in the new era have changed, and how it affects the viewing public. Two main relevant C4D questions regarding ethnographic exhibitions that I encountered while conducting the literature review for this degree project will also be covered in the course of arriving to the conclusion – ‘Who are the exhibitions speaking for, i.e. is it multivocal or does it only represent either the museum or the source community?’ and ‘Who are the exhibitions speaking to, i.e. who is the audience?’

The thesis will also look at how ethnography museums represent Self and The Other and the nexus that connects issues of identity, race, difference, as well as heritage, history, and memory, framing the discussion along the following non-mutually exclusive points:

• What signifies civilized culture? What constitutes modernity?
• What and whom decide when an object is art or ethnographic artefact?
• What lays behind the fetish for cultural artefacts, linking to concepts of ‘fetishism’ like disavowal and the fascination of The Other?
• How does the power to represent look like?
• How do visitors receive the museums’ messages, and what are these messages?
• And what are the possible alternatives to the western exhibiting approach?

Having reviewed an ethnographic exhibition called *Fetish Modernity* at Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm for the ComDev programme’s Research Methodology module the previous term, I have decided to continue with the subject material and expand the
analysis for my ComDev degree project. This EC funded exhibition is part of the European project ‘Ethnography Museums and World Cultures’. Made up of previously hidden artefacts from 11 ethnography museums, the exhibition went on tour for 3 years, March 2011 to March 2014, to 5 ethnography museums in Europe. Kicking off at the Royal Museum of Central Africa, the exhibition’s lead museum in Tervuren, Belgium, it was displayed at Museo de America in Madrid, Naprstek Museum in Prague, Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna, the National Museum of Etnology in Leiden before its final destination in Stockholm at Etnografiska Museet. It aimed to showcase that the West through ethnographic displays, has had a monopoly in creating self-images of being modern against misrepresentations of non-western cultures as primitive, unchanging and espousing essentialist traits\(^2\).

Against the backdrop of *Fetish Modernity*’s discussion on self-reflection issues of ethnography museums, I will endeavor to highlight two museums in Paris as examples, the Musée du Quai Branly (which also happens to be one of the partner museums of *Fetish Modernity*) and the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration as well as a review on heritage and community museums like the District Six Museum in Cape Town and the Museum of Immigration in London.

As such, I have chosen to write the thesis in a combination of the classical and thematic format, weaving the literature review into the methodology and analysis sections along the themes of ‘Representation of The Other’, ‘Self-critical views of Ethnography Museums’, ‘New Museology’ and ‘Reclaiming Identity of Self’.

### Methodology

A comprehensive textual analysis will be provided for the *Fetish Modernity* exhibition, as the basis for discussion while the museums will be used to highlight certain topics, and the interviews as supporting data from the angle of the visitors’ experience. For a hermeneutic interpretation, I also reviewed multiple cultural critiques as well as blog entry posts of these museums and for the Exhibition.

\(^2\) [https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/etnografiskamuseet/exhibitions/previous-exhibitions/fetish-modernity/](https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/etnografiskamuseet/exhibitions/previous-exhibitions/fetish-modernity/)
Visiting such ethnographic venues is not a neutral social process. People visit museums and public memorials with the expectations of the ‘transformative experience’. The museum experience is produced and affected by 3 factors: the narrative the museum wants to put forward, whether it’s about the past, the present or about ourselves; the site where knowledge production occurs and is disseminated through various media forms and experiences; and the agency of these institutions, be they visitors, members of the community, stakeholders, or staff, who all have their own agendas and purpose in interacting with the museums/memorials (Dekel, 2013).

Straddling the gray area between ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of knowing’, experience can be used as a flexible and useful approach in analyzing how subjectivities like identities and stereotypes occur when private and public spheres traverse, by looking at how we share our stories and how those stories are communicated and received (Pickering, 2008 p.18). Michael Pickering’s chapter on ‘Experience and the Social World’ can be used to exemplify how and why we can understand the museum visits as social experiences resulting into ‘transformative potentials’ shaping our identities (ibid).

What is interesting in terms of cultural analysis regarding the above is the tension that arises between what is changing and what is known to us – the process of negotiating knowledge and sorting through the information we have received, discarding some while storing others. What determines the kinds of experiences each one of us chooses to keep, and how do these new experiences configure into existing ones? As is obvious, experience is thus a two-way street, contingent upon interaction, which can happen on equal or unequal footings.

Museum experiences are received and processed based not only on the intentions of the curators or organizers but also on the cultural skills and background of the visitors, not to mention the setting of the venue, framing of the exhibition, as well as the perceived judgment of the museum’s cultural capital capacity, and the visual interest and authenticity of the objects on display (Karp, 1991, p.12-13).

Experience in this case is seen as both process and product - it can be analyzed as the production process of how the meanings of a specific event are created and also as a
social experience that has already happened, namely as the product of the experience (Pickering, 2008, p.27-28).

In addition to the above duality, there are other ‘conceptual properties of experience’ of mutually opposite categories that roughly govern how we experience an event or situation, according to Pickering (2008, p.19-27).

The distance and proximity in relation to the experience dictate whether it’s a first-hand or second-hand experience, a process that juxtaposes ‘agency against ideology’, and helps us interrogate any narrative schemes that can complement or challenge our existing experiences or knowledge base (ibid, p.19-20). Following closely is the use of strategic essentialism, relying on making representative conceptions of random experiences as evidence for authentic experiences. This would likely lead to relativism and works in opposition to truly being open to new experiences (ibid, p.21-22).

We also experience our social world through being situated in circumstances or via mediated channels, and in our increasingly mediatized world; the latter makes up for much of our interactions (ibid, p. 24). It’s true that in order to empathize, we should try and relate to what others have to say, but Pickering warns that there is always the risk that mediated experiences can lead us down the essentialist and relativist road if we are not mindful of the tendencies that could romanticize the struggles of the subalterns.

And finally, social experiences are based on our positions in society and the perspectives we each hold relative to that, meaning that they are always nuanced according to our gender, social background, ethnicity, faiths, age group, etc and the same situation can be experienced very differently by two people (ibid, p.26-27).

This all goes to show that the qualities of experience is ever changing, ‘protean and transactional’, and that as stories get retold, relived and remembered, the experiences and its associated meanings changes over time because as individuals we are continuously affected by the interactions in our social milieu (ibid, p.29-30). Visitors are therefore usually left with either one of the 2 responses after museum visits: they have interpreted their experience of the museum visit so as to fit into the existing mold.
of their ideas and knowledge about the world; or they have reorganized what they already know in ways that would complement the new knowledge gained from the museum visit (Karp, 1991, p.22). There will be some experiences that do not fall neatly into the two categories and some overlapping would occur, but ideally, the goal for cultural producers is to create exhibitions using methods that would induce the latter response (ibid, p.22-23).

The above 2 responses correlate to the 2 types of experiences from visiting exhibitions: that of ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’. Resonance is the experience where the cultural object being viewed makes a powerful connection to the viewer that transcends into an understanding of a larger, more complex set of cultural dynamics associated with the object, while Wonder is evoked when a displayed object captures the attention of the viewer to a point of deep and illustrious sense of appreciation at its exceptionality (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42). Resonance in this case would be the preferable museum experience since it typically signifies that the visitor has broadened his/her cultural horizons from having learned new information from the displayed exhibit, rather than the more superficial feeling of looking at a spectacle (ibid, p.44-45, 52-53).

The exhibitions in the museums I have visited all contain audio, visual and printed texts, providing the ideal case study of a multimodal text in social semiotics, in terms of the role they play in representation, i.e. do the different modes complement each other in communicating an idea or are they merely repetitive (Kress, 2005 p.172)? Therefore, Textual Analysis (Davis, 2008, p.56), will be used to ascertain the intentions of the Cultural Producer (exhibition curator), such as how the exhibition is framed and presented, and if there are subtexts to the texts, intentional and unintentional.

In addition, studying the textuality of museum exhibitions has several advantages. Looking at the narratology of an exhibition would expose the connection between its narratives and its spatial design; and since textual analysis aims to draw the big picture by examining its individual components, textual analysis can also reveal any internal inconsistencies between the museum’s intentions and the effect it produces, thereby shifting the focus onto the visitor’s experience vis-à-vis the curator’s ability to control how the exhibition is to be received (Mason, 2008, p.26-27).
Viewing a museum object involves active conceptual processes that take place in the space between the exhibit’s label and the exhibit, also known as the ‘intellectual space’ (ibid, p.37-38). The intellectual space is where the viewer establishes contact between the object maker and the exhibitor, and if not properly managed can lead to misunderstandings of the messages of the exhibition by the visitors (ibid).

The Textual Analysis method will include Observation/Spatial Analysis as a natural extension because from an experience angle, the exhibition’s onsite ‘materiality’ provides the space with which to understand exchanges in social relations (if any) and where meanings are articulated and identities are communicated (Nightingale, 2008, p.105).

**In-depth Interviewing** will be used as a complementary second method to the observation / textual analysis methods (Nightingale, 2008, p.113-116) and gather information about visitor’s museum experience and for the potential ‘transformative experience’. An unstructured approach allowing for open and variable responses (Meyer, 2008, p.81) will be used for the interview to ascertain the museum experience of the visitor. As Anneke Meyer explains in ‘Investigating Cultural Consumer’, “interviews produce in-depth and complex knowledge of the human world by focusing on meanings and interacting with research participants and their live-worlds” (2008, p.70). The one-on-one interview would provide depth and details and possibly layered comparative differences to a subjective topic requiring critical deliberation (ibid, p.85) and can juxtapose my own analysis against an additional cultural consumer view, acting as a ‘filler’ to create a more wholesome picture and perhaps even serving a counter-reflexive function to my own judgment (Nightingale, 2008, p.113-115).

For the *Fetish Modernity* exhibition³ I interviewed 6 friends who visited the exhibition. 5 of these informants visited *Fetish Modernity* in Stockholm between the end of November 2013 and end of March 2014, with the exception of one informant who visited the exhibition in Tervuren in Spring of 2011 at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), which is currently closed for renovation until 2017⁴.

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³ of which I visited in November 2013.
⁴ The 6 informants are in their mid 30s to early 40s, with professional backgrounds and university education, and consider themselves widely traveled cosmopolites with an international background. One of them is a ComDev
For a comparative analysis, I visited the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) in Paris in May of 2014. I also visited the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration (MHI) during the same trip. I did not visit the District 6 Museum (D6M) in Cape Town\(^5\). I was not able to visit or establish any contact with the Museum of Immigration in Spitalfields, London, also popularly known as 19 Princelet Street\(^6\). However, I was fortunate enough to come in contact with a London-based blogger who has kindly agreed to let me use her blog review of the museum as a stand-in for a visitor experience. I also sent her some questions by email as a complement to her review\(^7\).

I further conducted 4 interviews\(^8\), two of which were joint interviews, for these 3 museums (1 individual interview for MQB, 1 individual interview and 1 joint interview of 2 persons for D6M, and 1 joint interview of 2 persons for MHI). In total, 10 interviews\(^9\) were conducted, 8 in person and 2 via Skype. In order to capture in-depth information, all informants were asked the same broad questions below, but without the exact wording (and often asked additional questions depending on their responses):

- Their general impressions about their museum/exhibition visit,
- If there was any specific exhibit or objects that they liked or didn’t like, and why
- If they had any suggestions for improvement to their experience, and
- How the museum/exhibition made them feel during the visit and if they felt that there was a transformative difference to their knowledge and/or emotions after visiting the exhibition.

All the interviews were audio recorded and are available as paraphrased summary notes in the appendices section of this document. Whenever possible, the original words and ideas of the informants are captured in quotation in the notes, so as to reproduce the informants’ original views as correctly as possible. All the interview notes were made available to the informants for their information and they were subsequently invited to

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\(^5\) Although the D6 museum website offers quite the comprehensive virtual museum experience.

\(^6\) Due to lack of funds, they are only open a few times a year if at all and staffed wholly by volunteers.

\(^7\) Her email response is reproduced in full in the appendix.

\(^8\) Of these 4 interviews, the informants are also friends of mine, except for the D6 museum, where 2 of the informants were approached using the snowballing method.

\(^9\) I also conducted a Skype interview with a friend who visited the National Museum for the American Indian (NMAI) in April, which is a well known ‘contact zone’ museum, but due to space limitation, I could not include this material.
comment or make corrections to anything in the notes that they feel did not accurately represent their responses.

Because I know most of the informants well, interpretation and the conduct of the interviews were relatively easy, but at the same time it also served to remind me that the data might not be objective. However, the depth of the information obtained and their openness to discuss their views and opinions relating to their museum visit yielded far greater benefits than the downside so I did not think there was a significant concern to this informant sample.

**Representation of The Other**

The images above represent polar opposites as objects – one is the renowned cubist oil painting known as Picasso’s *Head of Women* (1907) and the other is an African mask from the Dan tribe of West Africa used in spiritual performances[^10], and yet one was influenced by the other. That Picasso and the cubists were heavily influenced by African art in their works during their ‘African Period’ is obvious, but while the former is linked to modern art, the latter is considered to be a traditional, tribal object. This raises the question not only that cross-cultural influences occur but that they are not progressively linear, one-way affairs, and that an object deemed to be ‘unmodern’ and ‘primitive’ does in fact lend credence to the creation of notions of modernity. However,

in the world of western ethnographic display, museum objects have been and still are arranged according to an evolutionary ranking that places objects of the ‘curiosa’ type lowest on the scale followed by specimens of nature and reserving the prestigious spot for objects d’art (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.392). All too often, this issue goes unaddressed and stereotypical representations of what constitute as modern or ethnographic remain unexplored.

Although Modernity as a concept can be traced to its origins in the Renaissance era, when cabinets of curiosities and private collections of princes and European aristocrats signified cultivated sophistication, it wasn’t until the enlightenment period when notions of progress and self-improvement are embraced that the idea of modernity became popular (Walsh, 1992, p.7-8). With the advent of industrialization and urbanization, people began feeling a distancing process from their organic existence of daily lives, and modernity and progress as a representation of a future were created as goals to strive towards, coinciding with the notion of the imperialistic ‘white man’s burden’ to civilize the colonies’ primitives and savages (ibid, p.9-12). Western national museums were created during the time of newly forming nation states (late 18th to 19th century) to serve the purpose of displaying the wealth of its colonies, to legitimize its colonial might and to cultivate national pride and identity (Macdonald, 2008, p.85).

As colonial conquests and expeditions became rampant, collecting ethnographic artifacts as well as the hosting of world fairs where non-western cultures and peoples were exhibited in Western capitals in ‘human zoos’ gave further rise to the concept of The Other as a barbaric version of the civilized European Self (Lidchi, 2013, p.167-170; Bennett, 1995, p.79). World fairs and colonial expositions of the 19th and 20th centuries turned exhibiting cultures into that of exhibiting people as representative of non-western cultures, creating ‘native villages’ that carried the kind of entertainment value commonly found in ‘carnival side shows’, and demonstrated the non-western people on a ‘sliding scale of humanity’, ranging from savage to almost civilized (Bennett, 1995, p.83-84).

According to Kevin Walsh, it was the progressionism of the 3-Age Classification System (stone-bronze-iron) employed in ethnographic museums in the 19th century (first used in Copenhagen circa 1816) that “established an institutionalized form of
racism, in which historical and archaeological finds have been used as evidence to support white superiority”, seeing that this classification system rested on the belief that civilization (and the tools they use and objects they create) exist on a one directional spectrum that ascends from simple to complex (1992, p.17).

The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is another case of how knowledge is controlled and certain ideas promulgated to the public during the 19th century. Practically the first of its kind, the museum’s collection was displayed based on the evolutionary discourse of comparing the advancement of humankind from ‘lower animals’ to more civilized versions according to the tools used, prompting the conviction that artifacts arranged in a ‘scientific and classified’ manner is likely based on legitimate knowledge, as opposed to the more whimsical display of its predecessors like the cabinets of curiosity (Lidchi, 2013, p.160-163). Incidentally, this form of social training of the public, dubbed ‘evolution time’ by Foucault, which presents temporal constructs in incremental components against a ‘linear path of evolution’, is also the same basis with which museums create a narrative thread to guide the visitor’s route - a practice still widely in use by museums today and often relied upon by modern museum goers to navigate their visits, thereby presenting yet another case of entrenched colonialist practice in art and ethnography museums (Bennett, 1995, p.46-47).

Often employed in ethnographic displays is the ‘panoptic mode’ – a panoramic layout of the exhibition or collection using a ‘big picture’ focus and along an evolutionary plot so that it offers the viewer complete control of what is to be seen but at the same time allows them to be seen by others (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.413). Naturally, the panoptic mode has a surveillance function but also a voyeuristic feature as objects are displayed behind enclosed cabinets to fulfill the desire of optical consumption. The panoptic mode also positions the viewer as a ‘detached observer’, as an external entity outside of the exhibition, with an overall view of the production, inevitably rendering those who look and those being looked at into two distinct and isolated groups (Beier-de Haan, 2008, p.192). Ethnography museums attempting to engage visitors in their displays have sought to change this subject positioning by making them a part of the ensemble through exhibits that challenge the viewer’s ideas and provoke their emotions (ibid, p.193).
Beyond its colonial roots, museums have also served as a governing arm of the State in exercising its power to shape the behaviors of its own populace. From the late 18\textsuperscript{th} to mid 19\textsuperscript{th} century in Great Britain and other European capitals, public access to museums was encouraged among the working class in the belief that public museums, not unlike carceral institutions, provide the site where self-surveillance and self-regulation would lead to more desirable gentrified public behaviors among the lower classes (Bennett, 1995, p.63). As products of society, the human desire to conform either intrinsically or due to external pressure, often leads people to self-regulate their behaviors when they are aware of being watched. This rhetoric of power is personified in the ‘exhibitionary complex’ - following Foucault’s analysis of institutional articulation of power and knowledge relations, in which the power resides in simply ‘allowing’ the target group in a controlled environment to know and see themselves as part of the power paradigm, becoming both the subject and object of that knowledge thereby internalizing the ‘gaze’ (ibid). By ranking people into classes along notions of advancement, museums therefore became a “machinery for producing progressive subjects”, because in civilizing themselves the people also became part of the societal ideals of modernity and progress (ibid, p.46).

The exhibitionary complex were also incorporated into public features such as the ‘colonnades of morality’, which are raised promenades going through main areas of the town to exhibit those walking on them (ibid, p.48). Museums were also laid out in ways that resemble arcades and fairs where the visitors could view each other optimally, and the positioning of museum guards at vantage points throughout the museum completes the exercise of surveillance (ibid, p.52-55).

The exhibitionary complex was a central ideological tool of western imperialism in creating anthropological categories of the West and the Rest. Where once the body (Self) was both subject and object, this former unified component is split into Self and Other in ethnographic displays that separated western and non-western civilizations into the realms of culture and nature (ibid, p.77). The well-known Hottentot Venus (Saartjie Baartman) was a case in point in which a non-western Other was paraded around in 19\textsuperscript{th} century fairs in order to show the peculiarity (and inferiority) of a different race of people, who are much closer to ‘nature’ (Them/Other) than ‘culture’ (Self/Us) (Hall, 2013, p.253-255). What fascinates is the quintessence of ‘difference’,
and the creation of a dissimilar ‘otherness’ fuels the interest and desire to consume The Other. By removing non-western people from the common timeline of civilization that trumpet the achievements of modernization and processes of industrialization and relegating them to a different but primitive existence, “the effects of power were unleashed, not through disciplinary effects but by the rhetorical effects of the representation of otherness” onto the bodies of the non-western people (Bennett, 1995, p.67; Hall, 2013, p.255).

As much as the Hottentot Venus’ popular impact during the 19th century was based on the marking of binary opposition of Self/Civilized and Other/Primitve, so was the ‘reductionism’ of her as a person into body parts, literally. Her physical condition of steatopygia (protruding buttocks) signifying her difference so bedazzled Europeans that upon her death parts of her including her genitalia were preserved as a specimen example of non-western abnormality at the Musée de L’Homme in Paris until 2002 when her remains were finally repatriated back to South Africa (Jolly, 2011, p.111). The ethnographical curiosity in this ‘visibility of difference’ is also evident in the French anthropological trend during the second half of the 19th century of collecting human skulls as anatomical proof of differences in the human race (Dias, 1998, p.38).

Serving as the basis of ‘fetishism’, the fragmentation of the body for the purpose of being gazed at and for examination turns the parts into objects that are decontextualized, isolated, and appraised based on its value as authentic pieces of artefact (Hall, 2013, p.256). Objects are fetishized because they represent the mysterious element of the unknown and forbidden, and when the desire for the unfamiliar and for the taboo cannot be fully satisfied, it is displaced onto other sites or forms known as ‘disavowal’ (ibid, p.256-257). In the case of the Hottentot Venus, it was her supposed, savage sexuality that intrigued the Europeans but it was more socially acceptable to ‘study’ her anatomical differences instead, thus substituting the Self’s sexual preoccupation with the racially different Other’s physical traits. This ‘ethnographic gaze’, especially when applied in cases of live exhibits or performances can be dehumanizing because the objects/subjects are turned into signs of a culture or a people, as parts that represent the whole, thereby contributing to the essentialism of non-western peoples (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.416).
The mutually opposed categories of Self and Other are however not automatically stagnant, as social concepts of difference are in perpetual flux, conceiving the need to naturalize these differences so that notions of The Self and the goal of modernity and progress remain intact (Hall, 2013, p.234, Walsh, 1992, p.36). The ‘auratic display’ technique, which places the medium over the message, relies on the viewer’s acceptance of the museum’s authority to transmit ‘notions of progress, of a theme and time period in isolation’ by exhibiting objects with attached meanings conferred upon only by the curators through labels and other written information (Walsh, 1992, p.35-37).

The much maligned ethnographic gaze and the objectification of non-western cultures stem from the fact that ethnographic objects, which fulfill a variety of other functions in its original context, exist as such only because they have been created by ethnographers as objects for display to represent a culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.387). This is problematic because in essence, what defines an object as an object? Objects can exist singularly but also in tandem with other objects, and each different composition can produce different meanings. Where does an object ‘begin’ or ‘end’, i.e. what comprises a whole object (ibid, p.388)? Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett gives the example of a teacup that is an object in of itself, but its ‘objectness’ can be extended to include a saucer, and also sugar and cream and so on (ibid). The cutoff point is endless therefore the method chosen by ethnographic museums to exhibit cultures is to reproduce representative fragments of the culture, often by displaying stand alone objects as representations. However, most artifacts are meant to be understood in relation to other artifacts to form a broader context of comprehension of a ritual or practice, and not intended to be displayed for individual inspection; and the more singular they stand, the more an ethnographic object will be seen as being art rather than an ethnographic specimen (ibid, p.391). One might naturally think such practice would elevate the status of ‘primitive’ or traditional art, given the exclusivity of art objects, but the fundamental dilemma of the ethnographic gaze remains – ethnographic objects devoid of its original meaning and lauded based only as an object of visual interest objectifies and demeans the culture it represents.

As western ethnographic exhibition often follow a ‘discursive formation’ that presents a grand narrative of a specific worldview (espousing colonial mentality), visitors have
over time been instilled with a particular way of seeing in museum settings that involve looking intently at objects that have been taken out of its context of origin for examination based solely on its visual interest (Alpers, 1991, p.25-26; Lidchi, 2013, p.164). Classified into genres, the ‘museum effect’ is the practice of turning “quotidian objects into the spectacular” just by having it placed in an ethnographic venue that is vested with symbolic power, or when historical sites or an entire town is being toured and looked at (Alpers, 1991, p.26-27; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991,p. 410-413). The museum effect can also cause the viewer to feel more exotic of oneself as the experience of viewing an unknown object could unleash one’s imagining of how others might in turn consider our own culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.410).

The nature of the museum object then hinges on the anthropological purpose it serves, that as it is removed from its original context to become an ethnographic artifact on display, its meanings are subsequently transformed, “rendering that which is visible legible” (Preziosi, 2008, p.50). One can attribute further to the cognitive framework of an exhibition as being simultaneously ‘syncretic’ – one whole made up of plural sources, and ‘mimetic’ – the cultures, rituals and practices are reproduced through displays and objects (Lidchi, 2013, p.145). Transcending time and space, the museum object is both ‘there and not there’, in the sense that it may be physically present as a tangible thing being viewed, but it’s not there based on its original purpose - its past life has been disregarded, whether it was an African ceremonial mask or a Indian musical instrument, its ‘here and now’ meaning at the moment of the ethnographic gaze, is that of a museum object which is offered up for viewing in specific framing techniques (Preziosi, 2008, p.55). Semiotically speaking, the present/absent faces of this same coin are both ‘sense-determinate’ and ‘sense-discriminate’ (ibid). Perhaps this is the reason why museum experiences that involve the displaying of Others’ cultures tell us not just who we are, but more importantly who we are not (Karp, 1991, p.15).

As the displayed artifacts are seen as representations of similar objects but also as one-of-a-kind, distinctive collectibles, they act to ‘mirror’ an image of the viewer themselves – for although we would like to think of ourselves as unique individuals, at the same time we are also aware that we are a part of a larger society (Preziosi, 2008, p.53-54). Highlighting Kantian philosophy, Brian Spooner illustrates the western fetishization for authenticity in Turkmen carpets as a story of the continuous dialectic
struggle of social beings deliberating between the need to belong and feel secure and the desire for self-expression (1986, p.227).

Oriental rugs became collector items signaling refined taste and prized for its authenticity as a mark of exclusive craftsmanship and unique designs from the Turkmen region of Central Asia at the end of the 18th century when trade routes started to expand between the Orient and European capitals like London (ibid, p.214-215). The value of oriental rugs is based partly on it being a commodity but also a symbol, therefore the desire for them as objects has as much to do with the attached social meanings as the carpets’ objective material aspects – owning an authentic item held in high regard by one’s society conveys the owner’s social status and individuality through the choices made on material culture possession (ibid, p.200). Furthermore, as objects so far removed from its original context, the imaginings of its exotic origins adds to its mystification, on par with European elitist collecting habits that began with classicism and romanticism in Greek pottery (ibid, p.201).

It goes with the social logic of fetishism and dichotomy of the construction of Self and Other in the modern period that the more unusual or unfamiliar a thing is to us, the more desirable it becomes. In this case, the concept of authenticity has come to reside in traditional, non-western objects, making them valuable due to its ‘cultural distance’ from Western consumers (ibid, p.223).

The intentions of the Turkmen in producing the carpets are based on a combination of factors relating to local heritage and tradition but the desire of the Western consumers to own authentic Turkmen carpets is based on the Western interest in The Other (ibid). The consumption of cultural products is not a vacumed sealed process, as cross-fertilization influences between the two cultures have undoubtedly occurred. Ironically, the demand for oriental carpets have caused the tribal producers to cater to Western taste by changing their sought after traditional design, pattern and color choices in order to please their clients, which subsequently impacts their own heritage and society, opening up discussions on the ethics and responsibility of the search for authenticity in economically dependent societies (ibid, p.229).
**Self-critical view of ethnography museums – Fetish Modernity Exhibition**

With the exhibition’s self-deprecating stance as the point of departure, the focus will be on the museums’ counter textual analysis of its own collections, role and the respective consequences of having been a part of the ethnographic museum tradition. From the social semiotics viewpoint, this exemplifies the situation in which ‘sign-use’ is being replaced by ‘sign-making’ - that signs aren’t just fixed concepts in representation and communication processes but that they are remade and reconfigured per the interest of the sign-maker(s) involved (Kress, 2005, p.173).

**Observation/Textual Analysis**

At the entrance to the exhibition, a banner giving a short introduction to *Fetish Modernity* welcomes the visitor. It tells the visitor that objects that were once deemed not ‘ethnographic enough’ for display in the original collections of the participating museums, were retrieved from their storages to form said exhibition. It suggests that the consequences of ‘ordering of objects and humans’ in ethnographic museums have led to “putting things in boxes and humans in clichés” and invites the visitor to come along on a journey of ‘self-critical challenge’ to explore notions of modernity and identities through these previously undisplayed artefacts. Laid against the cognition of ethnographic museums’ role in having portrayed cultures as unchanging and intra-homogenous through its long history of invoking reality by displaying a selection of items meant to represent a whole country or culture (Lidchi, 2013, p.145), *Fetish Modernity*’s promised to demonstrate the contrary by showcasing hidden objects that the museums have in their possession all along.

There is a caveat to this invitation as it made the assumption that the visitors have negative ‘second-hand experiences’ of stereotypes and preconceived notions that they could discard in order to obtain new views through the ‘first-hand experience’ of visiting the exhibition. It doesn’t take into account visitors who may not have any such second-hand knowledge - how would they benefit from and experience the exhibition? In fact, this is the catch-22 of the whole exhibition – that while it is presented as a mea culpa on behalf of Western ethnography museums’ responsibility in having exhibited non-western peoples in unflattering light and wants to make good, the exhibition also
obliges the visitor to have advance knowledge of the subject and to view it from a detached standpoint to comprehend the meta-messages. This seems to follow the ‘authoritative dissemination’ model in which museum curators expect visitors to accommodate their theories and ideas (Gurian, 1991, p.176).

The exhibition is not a large one, nevertheless it is densely populated with objects and items arranged around sub-groupings that require some contemplation if one were to unpack its intermingling of core messages and complex ideas. Exhibits are clustered in 6 sub-themes –

1) Cliché Factory: how clichés are formed through artefacts and also the presence of diaspora,
2) Made In…: objects that derived from old trade routes proving that ‘modernity’ has been going on for centuries as part of the inter-cultural contact via trade,
3) Modernity - Between Discourse and Practice: meanings of religion, religious objects and how we view the world,
4) Desire for Modernity: various ways objects have been co-opted and transformed in terms of its utility according to external cultural influences and global flows of ideas,
5) Gluttonous Modernity: the effects of globalization and the concept of modernity and progress, and
6) Chic and Cheap Shops: the West’s desire to ‘consume’ The Others through souvenirs and consumer products.

Photo courtesy of Axel Andersson

Figure 1
The exhibits were shown in display cases but also as freestanding items (Figure 7). There were video installations, photographic exhibits, audio recordings and written text displays. The exhibition hall was dimly lit, almost like a bar or a lounge. The sub-groupings were organized around steel framed glass cubes that were lit white or green. Some of the cubes have solid metal surfaces on which written text explained what each grouping was meant to represent. (Figure 2)

Insightful questions could be read on big banners hung on the walls, and thoughtful quotes are shown on some of the lit cubes. These written texts, displayed in red and designed to provoke critical thinking surrounding the exhibits (Figure 3) functioned as what Barthes called ‘Anchorage’ - to steer the viewer towards a certain ideology while making the connection to the images, and often works in a ‘relay-function’ mode, i.e. helping to solidify comprehension of a sign (Rose, 2007, p.81). However, if one happened to overlook these written texts (which were easily done in an over-stimulated exhibition with multi-modal texts), it could render the signifying process incomplete, compromising the visitor’s experience.

The visual design of the exhibition denoted a ‘modern, urban, big city’ feel with sleek architecture reminiscent of neon lit streets, modern glass and steel buildings, ‘nightclub’ lighting, and green and red colors symbolizing traffic lights. Even the
welcome banner, with its minimal design and black text on white background, gives it a business-like impression of a form letter, a ubiquitous office supply item often associated with big corporations in metropolitan cities. On the connotative level, it hinted at the mainstream notion of modernity as being pegged to urbane excess and existence, providing the canvas to contrast the artefacts that may at first be seen as ‘non-modern’ (Rose, 2007, p.79-82). Despite its ‘location’ in a remote part of a Scandinavian town and its ‘locale’ in an ethnographic museum exhibition hall, the ‘sense of place’ of the exhibition made subjective reference to the idea that modernity is a chaotic and crowded downtown thoroughfare, complete with a cosmopolitan ambience and a diversity of worldviews and cultures (Cresswell, 2004, p.7-8).

Below is my selection of the exhibit pieces that I think outlined the gist of the exhibition’s central messages:

a) Ideas of modernity is a two-way street and the desire to be ‘modern’ is sometimes linked to borrowing from traditional, old world cultures: a trendy sitting stool by Italian designer Matteo Thun is based on a carved wooden Ghanaian version, in use by the Asante people as the seat of leadership since 300 years ago. (Figure 5) Is the contemporary, avant-garde Italian version an inspiration or a case of intellectual property appropriation? (p.138-139, Fetish Modernity Catalogue)
b) Borders, symbolic or otherwise, are porous in actuality, causing layered and complicated intercultural exchanges that have been going on for some time, resulting in our living in a cultural mélange of sorts: the photo collage entitled ‘Xenographic Views’ by Lisl Ponger (Figure 6) displayed photos of people of different ethnicities in their supposed ‘natural habitat’ at first glance, but upon closer examination, the labels revealed that all the photos have been taken within a radius of 100KM from Vienna, Austria and all the people who posed in the photos consider themselves Austrian. (p.40-47, Fetish Modernity Catalogue)

c) Objects derive their meanings from what they represent and also from its functionality, adaptable to the changing times: an indigenous Papua New Guinean man wearing a DVD disc as a nasal ornament (Figure 7), which were traditionally made from
clam or tortoiseshells but contact with the ‘modern’ world has influenced the material substitution. The ‘war rug’ from Central Asia with designs of bombs and helicopters\footnote{http://www.theartblog.org/2011/05/kalashnikov-carpets-at-the-penn-museum/} demonstrate that the designs of traditional object change with contact with the West and major socio-political events like war. (Figure 8)

d) Modernity as a concept has been pawned off as a polar opposite to the idea of essential backwardness, patterned on the western, civilized Self against the quaint, noble primitive: objects brought back as souvenirs by the Stockholm Travelers Club\footnote{Founded in 1911 by well-to-do traveling Swedish gentlemen, such clubs were fashionable in Europe during that era and membership conferred elite social status. (Infosource: museum guided tour)} to show that they are modern adventurers exploring exotic cultures and tribes. Is there a modern parallel to this in the contemporary tourism industry today where souvenirs are bought as representations of a culture? (Figure 9)

Many of the exhibit pieces were also encoded to provide a deeper meaning and the decoding process is contingent upon how much effort or knowledge the visitor puts in/has when viewing those pieces. All the four pieces mentioned above can be analyzed on the levels of ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’ (Rose, 2007, p.83). At face value, they all seemingly represent conventional ethnographic exhibits. However, upon closer review and with the aid of information sources, the ‘aha!’ moment is expected to present itself.

The modern designer furniture begs the question of what constitutes modernity when a new European creation is fashioned on an ancient object from Africa? It signified the ironic twist that being modern in the developed world meant copying something ‘non-modern’. The appropriation of the DVD disc into a facial ornament further asked how ‘modern’ objects are considered as such i.e. using a modern object per its original, intended use or adapted use? The old souvenirs of distant lands raised the question of
the paternalistic desire of the West to possess The Other either through territorial exploration or objects by way of present day tourism and the buying of souvenirs and ethnic trinkets. And in the end, as suggested by the photo collage displaying different ethnicities which are in reality found in one small region – we often desire to travel to faraway lands to acquire new experiences but choose to ignore or deny the world’s cultures that can be found in our own backyard. This exhibit also played on ‘xenophobic views’ in regards to the immigration debate in Europe and elsewhere, and posed several leading questions: What does it mean/how should one look to be considered a citizen of a country? Does cultural citizenship matter more in the increasingly globalized world, and is the old synonymous duality of ethnicity/nationality becoming a thing of the past?

From a holistic point of view, the exhibition design and artefact collection came together to illustrate that the myth of ‘modernity’ have been propagated by Western forces who, through imperialism and entrepreneurial capitalism, have had the exclusive right of setting the modernity agenda based on its core definition that revolves around industrialized progress and mass urbanization; and obscuring the fact that modernity is not only fluid and transcends borders and identities to influence cultural objects, but the quest for modernity also entails the harsh realities of illegal migration and globalization. *Fetish Modernity* endeavored to showcase that cultures are not static and should therefore not be ethnographically presented as such, and following the tide of changing worldviews, it is now the ethnography museums’ turn to be ‘modern’ by adopting a different approach in exhibiting The Other.

*Fetish Modernity’s* exhibits were both ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘paradigmatic’ (Rose, 2007, p.78) in that the former enables the individual pieces to make sense when viewed together within its sub-groupings, and the latter provides a coherent picture of the exhibition by seeing the contrasting but connected sub-themes in relation to each other. For example, within one of the subtheme exhibits called *Desire for Modernity*, 4 different ways of how cross-cultural influences and modernity have affected the utility and aesthetics of objects were shown. They are ‘Stylizing’ (formal reproduction of objects from other cultures), ‘Representing’ (foreign elements are incorporated into the design of the objects), ‘Reinventing’ (styles, things and ideas are assimilated so well into the objects that it’s not easily discernible), and ‘Diverting’ (objects used in ways
that differ from its original intentions and functions). Taken together, these exhibits form a sub-grouping on how modernity marks its presence in objects in various ways, but they also fit into the larger scheme with the other 5 sub-themes to form a whole exhibition. From this perspective, *Fetish Modernity* is in fact an artefact created from existing artefacts.

The ‘poetics of exhibiting’ – “the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition” (Lidchi, 2013, p.135), is the effect that is produced when 3 elements merge in harmony to form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (ibid, p.148). They are:

- ‘presentation’ - overall arrangement and techniques employed,
- ‘presence’ - the type of object and the power it exerts, and
- ‘representation’ - the manner in which the objects work in conjunction with contexts and texts to produce meaning.

Louis Althusser ‘s ‘Appellation’ described this ‘hailing’ as a crucial component of drawing in the viewer and making him/her a part of the sign-making process (Rose, 2007, p.93). Unfortunately, my experience of viewing some of the sub-groupings and some individual exhibit pieces was confusing and/or lacked depth. If I were to grade the exhibition academically, my impression of *Fetish Modernity* would be the following:

- ‘Presence’ gets an A- > some of the objects elicited interest, such as the wooden coffin made in the shape of a giant mobile phone (Figure 8) and there were many exhibits that were visually striking, but
- ‘Presentation’ is a C at best > I found the background information for some of them insufficient, and the portable, multi-lingual museum guides in the shape of laminated plastic sheets (which were heavy and clumsy) did not seem to shed much light. Information could have been conveyed in a more coherent way. Beyond just general ideas of what I could interpret, I could not fully grasp the intended messages some of the exhibits.

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13 I wanted to know more of many of the objects, such as the object maker, or how it came to be in the museum collection. There were entire sub-sections, like that of ‘Diverting’ under the sub-grouping of ‘Representing’ or a whole exhibit, like ‘Beyond Appearances’ which dealt with conflicting roles between religious practice and beliefs, and even an entire sub-grouping like ‘Made In…’ that had little to no information beyond the short text to explain its theme.
• ‘Representation’ is a B- > mainly for the effort to provide a sweeping overview of its central messages through the many subthemes but with so much to decipher in a small space, much of my experience there felt like a barrage of stimulation to my senses. It was very hard to focus and I felt very detached while touring the exhibition.

My general impression of the exhibition was that Fetish Modernity was not as honest of a reflexive ethnographic exhibition as advertised. While there is certainly an obvious will to expose the dark underbelly of its colonial pasts, the exhibition ultimately failed to present that idea in a clear and consistent manner. There is a feeling of half-heartedness of offering up information that is more ‘risk-free’, without major social repercussions. Getting the message across in ethnographic exhibitions is a heftier task than just rearranging a group of objects together around a central idea especially when the idea is one that required significant coding and encoding process between the producer and consumer (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.169). In Fetish Modernity, the impasse is due to the misalignment between the aspirations of the curators to project certain lofty meta messages to its visitors and the non-conducive way of how the exhibits are framed to help the audience to understand these messages - it requested the visitors to wander around (literally) to draw their own conclusions but without sufficient contextualization, resulting in confused and uneven cultural exchanges (ibid).

In addition, given the paradigm of local cooperation and inclusion policies that some ethnographic museums have been adopting (Lidchi, 2013, p.177-180), the non-west, indigenous and diaspora community in Sweden/Stockholm could have been involved as partners or co-authors in the exhibition to make it relevant to local visitors. For example, artworks could have been commissioned to Swedish born artist with part African heritage Makode Linde, known for creating satirical pieces that explore Western conceptions of non-western people and the black/white, Self/Other identity issues¹⁴. Except for a leather artwork on a Sami drum, there was also no mention of these Nordic tribes, which in the recent Swedish context have been beset by the

¹⁴ http://africasacountry.com/africa-is-a-country-interview-with-makode-linde/ He stirred up quite the controversy 2 years ago by dressing himself up as part of a ‘blackface’ cake in a performance artpiece at Moderna Museet. He was present at the opening of the Fetish Modernity exhibition as a musical guest.
country’s own quest for progress and modernity\textsuperscript{15}. By not including ‘the local exhibited’ group and its related issues in the exhibition’s activities, the museum missed an opportunity to serve as a place for debate and dialogue on important socio-political discussions in the community\textsuperscript{16}.

With the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium as the lead museum and some of the other participating museums that had historical pasts in having perpetuated the colonial ethnographic gaze, it was also remiss of the curators to overlook the history of Western colonization and its consequences on non-western cultures. A self-critical view of ethnography museums would and should include a look at its colonial past (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.138). This EC funded exhibition carefully avoided sensitive and controversial issues of the effects of European colonization\textsuperscript{17}, including Belgium’s horrific reign in Congo in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century by King Leopold II, who coincidentally founded the RMCA to display his Congolese exploits. Two exhibit pieces on the Congo in \textit{Fetish Modernity} showcased children’s missionary schooling and the mineral mining work, conveniently sidestepping the horrors of the Congolese genocide and the related brutality of the rubber concession activities\textsuperscript{18}.

While the exhibition has been designed in a way that did not have an evolutionary narrative path so as to avoid ranking cultures or enforcing an authoritative agenda, nevertheless the lack of contextual information on many of the objects give off the impression that all the objects, contemporary and traditional, exist in the same time period, thereby essentializing the traditional pieces belonging to non-western cultures to an unchanging temporal existence. Traditional objects that have been collected in the past are displayed in the ‘ethnographic present’ and when crucial contextual information is missing, it further eliminates the social life of the object beyond its

\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://bigstory.ap.org/article/swedens-indigenous-sami-fight-against-miners} There have been clashes between the indigenous Sami people and a mining company in Sweden in 2013 over what is perceived as a destruction of their traditional way of life due to the opening of a new mine in a reindeer herding area. Ironically enough, the Congo mining exhibit at the FM exhibition also left out the Belgian colonization of the African country.

\textsuperscript{16} During my visit, two activities were offered in conjunction with the exhibition: a seminar about Sweden’s view of sexuality and biblical influences during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, and a ‘fetish-creating workshop’ (that I did not attend).

\textsuperscript{17} It was interesting to note that while all the contemporary works in the exhibition had listed its artist/creator, this is not the case with the more traditional objects, a point that was highlighted during the brief tour I participated, as one of the exhibition’s self-reflective confessions. However, the fact that much of the museums’ collections are colonial bounty is submerged, probably due to sensitivities of repatriation or other political consequences.

\textsuperscript{18} See for example the 2003 documentary by Peter Bate: \textit{White King, Red Rubber, Black Death}
points of origin and destination (the museum) (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.166-167). This not only depicts non-western cultures as unchanging, but as in the case with the Turkmen carpets, viewers would tend to reconstruct information from existing knowledge that further classifies them as mysterious, authentic artefacts of non-western people. As communication takes place in a shared time period, denying non-western cultures of ‘coevalness’ - by subjecting them to a different time frame or creating the temporal distance, is the methodical approach used in anthropology to analyze and create The Other (Fabian, 1983, p.31).

For example, the row of wooden Wahgi war shields from Papua New Guinea, painted with pictures of the comic book hero the 'Phantom' and the car brand 'Isuzu' were displayed with no information other than where they were from and in which sub-grouping they belonged. Upon review of these exhibits in the catalog (Fetish Modernity Catalog, p.140-147), I found out that the shields were obtained between the years 1986 and 1990, collapsing almost 20 years of history of the Papua New Guineans. In addition, the context surrounding the creation of these shields, which exemplified yet another fascinating case of how western advertising and consumerism has affected local tangible culture, was hidden from the visitor.

Similarly, an exhibition that I attended at the other Swedish World Cultures Museum, Bergrummet the week prior to Fetish Modernity where it was showcasing ‘African Masterpieces’ (bronze sculptures) from Ile-Ife in present day Nigeria, detailed photos of contemporary life of the Nigerian town that were dated from at least 20 years ago, between 1987 and 1993, posing the question of what ‘contemporary’ representation is. The ‘African Masterpieces’ exhibition, with its exhibition space decorated by colorfully painted corrugated iron sheets reminiscent of African townships and ghettos, is also a reflective exhibition, though to a lesser degree than Fetish Modernity, by promoting the idea that such exquisite bronze works are in fact African and to implore visitors to come and experience this unusual African artistic heritage and to leave their preconceived notions behind. Although the intentions are good, it implies that traditional African art is usually not refined or that a collection of African wooden masks, which are more commonly associated with African craftsmanship, would be of lesser value or interest. http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/the-government/newsroom/press-releases/african-masterpieces-in-the-skeppsholmen-caverns/
As Dahl & Stade posit, museum goers may not necessarily want to be faced with too much unpleasant information on museum visits but sharing information about ‘lifeworlds’ should be the public role of ethnography museums (2000, p.168). Having said that, the sub-grouping of ‘Gluttonous Modernity’ did deal with human suffering, albeit more for the sake of verisimilitude than for transcultural understanding.

There were the ‘Melilla Ladders’ (Figure 11) that African migrants used to gain illegal entry into Spain and two large photographs depicting the dangers of jumping fences in Mexico. Although visually arresting, lack of contextual information surrounding these exhibits and generally throughout the exhibition produced the effect more along the lines of an optical ‘shock and awe’ rather than a thoughtful contemplation of these heartbreaking situations, creating a gap in the ‘intellectual space’. As one of my informants stated, the realization upon seeing the ladders and knowing what they were used for moved her to a point of tears, but she did not find much more information on the subject despite an accompanying video installation of real life testimonies. The ladders were framed in the dark contrast of the hall with ‘pool boutique lighting’ - an art gallery influenced exhibiting approach to focus the attention on the aesthetic quality of the object by providing minimal information (Greenblatt, 1991, p.49; Vogel, 1991, p. 195-196). It’s not a bad thing when visitors experience a heartfelt emotion while viewing the object, but it is worrying that the experience would be based on ‘mediated’ and ‘strategic essentialism’ experiences that generalize the struggles of the subalterns, i.e. pity of the European Self for all Migrant Others who unequivocally faces the same extreme hardships. Such empathy can create “internalized ideal truths and the loss of critical distance”, which hinders meaningful comprehension of an ethnographic event or situation (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.168).
Even more distressing is one of the ‘fence jumping’ photographs, titled ‘The Rapist’s Trophy’\textsuperscript{20} which depicted a red pair of torn and soiled lace panties hanging on barbed wire fences in an unknown barren landscape somewhere along the Mexican-North American border. I was deeply unsettled not so much because of the horrific event that it implied, but that there was no other information available to explain the photograph apart from the name of the artist, the year it was made and the physical dimensions and material of the photograph\textsuperscript{21}. Did the nameless and faceless victim(s) not deserve a story? Should the photograph not shed light on such a pressing issue so that actions can be taken to address it? Or was the photograph staged to convey some hidden irony or profound ideas? This is all the more vexing when one takes into account the photograph exhibit by Lisl Ponger (Figure 6) in another sub-grouping there that aimed to show how the ethnographic images produced are staged, in order to make a point about what is considered authentic and local in ethnography. Even though I was disturbed by the thought of the tragic fate that must have befallen the former owner of those pair of underwear, I was dismayed at how disrespectful and reckless it was for the curators of the exhibition to use such sensationalist tactics as means to cover as much grounds as possible but without really going into ‘deep waters’, in the representation of the plight of those who live in countries with uneven economies.

The thick and glossy exhibition catalog in my possession did not provide any information to the above item and could in fact be interpreted as a literal representation of the exhibition – while it is full of academic pieces written on the subject of ethnographic self reflections and its intersection with identity and culture (a few that are very interesting reads), the more touchy subjects tend to be handled a little too gingerly and too sparsely. Some sub-sections seem to be fully fleshed out while others appeared to have been thrown together without much connection. It begged the question of why these items were included at all?

Swedish cultural critic Axel Andersson who reviewed the exhibition commented that such broad inclusion of dense topics into one exhibition was almost ‘too much of a

\textsuperscript{20} I have chosen not to display the photograph for this exhibit out of respect for the victim(s).

\textsuperscript{21} As with the other pieces, the only information provided was in the short paragraph listed on the side of the cube for that particular sub-grouping’s theme, pointing in the general direction of the negative outcomes of globalization and capitalistic expansion.
good thing’ (Andersson, 2014). My interpretation of his statement was that the exhibition clearly had limits on how thought provoking it wanted to be and was more concerned in presenting a comprehensive but safe picture of Western ethnography museums’ colonial past, by focusing on the volume of objects displayed. The exhibition could have easily selected a few key artefacts that would have allowed for a deeper intellectual probe and a less cluttered narrative. Instead of seeking to relay the ethnographic thickness that involve local knowledge and concepts, utopias and dystopias, *Fetish Modernity* appeared to have created an ‘ethnographic broadness’ that put forward representations that are “separated from particular views of humanity” (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p. 170-171).

Andersson also suggested that the exhibition could have included a comparative Western angle, providing an insightful analysis of what the West might have given up or gone through in order to achieve its version of their dreams of modernity\(^{22}\) (Andersson, 2014). Nederveen Pieterse goes a step further with alternative angles by citing past exhibitions in the 80s and 90s that aimed to turn the idea of ethnography museums’ western gaze on its head, such as the representations of the West through the eyes of The Other, though he noted that almost none of these reflexive ethnographic exhibitions were held in museums, proving that there are limits as to how far ethnography museums are willing to go in terms of self critique (1997, p.136). He also noted previous attempts of reflexive representations that were inconsistently followed through in terms of a cohesive exhibiting style (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.136-137).

*Fetish Modernity*, held two decades after the start of the reflexive consciousness in museum practices, seemed to still be following in the footsteps of its more conventional ethnographic predecessors. With such a broad area to cover and in its zeal to ‘turn the other side of things’ at face value only, the exhibition ended up creating the non-west as one big victimized Other, erasing much of the differences between the cultures that were exhibited; and effectively serving as an apologetic face of ethnography, subservient to fashionable and superficial post-colonialist discourse (Nightingale, 2008, p.111).

\(^{22}\) He made interesting reference to the changing usage of domestic utilities in Sweden circa 1930s as an example of the West’s chasing of modernity trends, citing the Moka Express Italian coffee machine now practically a ubiquitous kitchen item in Swedish households. One could imagine for example, that Nordiska Museet could have provided enough items for a sub-grouping to highlight this comparative Western angle.
Interviews

Information from the interviews seems to support some of my own analysis and views above, such as in relation to that of the poetics of exhibiting. Although there are differences among the experiences reported, the common key feedbacks of the interviews are:

- The informants expected but did not find an ‘authorized’ narrative path to guide them through the exhibition, and therefore found the exhibition confusing and uncomfortable to be in.
- They also found the exhibition too cluttered (some commented on the objects that were ‘cheap looking’) and overwhelming. Some of the informants noted that the exhibition hall was dark while others would have preferred more space for a better ‘flow’ between the exhibits.
- The objects of resonance have personal connection to issues of identity, such as cultural background, personal interest and/or childhood memories. The topics discussed in relation to objects that captured their attention focused on western tourism and purchasing of souvenirs, appropriate ownership of cultural objects, i.e. who has the right to own objects from another culture, and understanding/empathy towards non-western people and their hardships in facing globalization but also their resourcefulness in adapting to the changing times and to cross-cultural interactions.
- All informants reported being disappointed that the exhibition did not meet their expectations although most of them noted that it was interesting. 3 of them cited an African musical performance offered on-site as the highlight of the visit. However, the expected ‘aha’ moments (appellation) were few and far between, causing a lack of positive transformative experience from the museum visit. One informant reported feeling very frustrated and upset that critical ideas deserving to be taken up in serious debates, such as the stereotypical representations and colonization of non-western people, have been subsumed into more palatable themes of travel, tourism, migration as well as the adventures of early European explorers.
- There is a gap between the intentions of the cultural producers and the cultural consumer, causing distance between the consumer and the exhibited, i.e. some of the ethnographic objects simply failed to evoke any understanding or interest due to the way it was displayed or insufficient information given. Except for one, none of
the other informants reported knowing the aim of the exhibition as a self-reflective exercise on ethnographic representation. This one informant, a ComDev fellow student, thought that the idea was not fully realized in the presentation style, and could lead to a backlash view of the exhibition being about non-western cultures represented by exotic looking objects.

- *Fetish Modernity* required prerequisite cultural literacy from its visitors in order to enjoy the full experience of the exhibition. Interviewees reported that they felt a disconnect between the objects and also what the exhibits were supposed to represent or even what the main objective of the exhibition is. In this sense, the museum objects/exhibits are ‘metonymic’, in that represents a part of something larger but it is also metaphorical as it attempts to connect to other similar things or events to form a wider meaning – but here the exhibition failed to engage the visitors to make the active correlation of the sub-groupings’ themes to the larger ideas of the exhibition (Preziosi, 2008, p.55).

- It is however fair to say that despite the above, all the informants except one, said the exhibition have caused them to think about related issues in terms of culture, identity, history and ethnographic practices, as is evident in the discussions that can be gleaned from the interview summaries.

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<th>New Museology – Ethnography Museums as Contact Zones</th>
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“Misuse of ethnography reveals the differences in cultural power that shape the ethnographic encounter. Any efforts to represent others juxtaposes the privilege standing and the differences in social situations between the speaker and the subjects, and exploitation is inevitable” (Nightingale, 2008, p. 111).

The process between the Exhibition’s intentions and the viewing of artefacts of the cultures of Others is complicated as it involves the ideas, values, and purposes of the culture from which the object originated as well as of the curators who would likely have intentions that do not match the viewers, a group which may in turn bring along cultural baggage and uncategorized ideas and theories of their own (Baxandall, 1991, p.36-37). In most cases, all 3 of these active agents do not operate on equal terms or are even compatibly matched, and often the roles of the cultural producers and cultural
consumers overlap despite the differences in their functions, causing confusion between the two groups, as in the case of the ones being represented vs. the intended audience (ibid, p.37).

With rapid changes in terms of access to knowledge and transglobal cultural flows brought upon by globalization especially in the last few decades (Hopper, 2007, p.37-58), ethnography museums have been pushed to reestablish themselves in a new paradigm in order to adapt to the changing times. Starting from the concept of ‘new museology’ of the late 1980s, ethnography museums as ‘contact zones’ of the 90s and beyond have focused on “participation, public accountability and moral probity”, and have been concentrating on its purpose and role as public institutions responsible for creating social knowledge and visitor interaction rather than on technical methods of display, utilizing Foucauldian thoughts of cultural difference and identity politics to deconstruct the museums’ new conceptual framework (Lidchi, 2013, p.177-178); Macdonald, 2008, p.22-26; Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.124).

In emphasizing the participation of those being exhibited, museums should rather be acting as public facilitators or even negotiators if you will, to transmit socio-cultural messages between the maker of the objects and the viewer/consumer if it truly wants to foster cultural dialogues (Baxandall, 1991, p.39). The analysis in the previous section for Fetish Modernity proposed that “essentialism will prevail” in the new wave of modern ethnography museums, but can the Musée du Quai Branly and the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration transcend the colonial ethnography framework?

**Musée du Quai Branly (MQB)**

Created under the political patronage of former French president Jacques Chirac in his ‘vision’ to present art from non-western cultures on equal footing with its western counterparts, this museum has generated considerable interest since its opening in June 2006. Situated a block from the Eiffel Tower, the vast complex of the Musée Quai Branly boasts an impressive collection of almost 300,000 artefacts (most of which come from the now defunct Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens and the rest from

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23 [http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2006/nov/01/culturaltrips.paris](http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2006/nov/01/culturaltrips.paris)  
Musée de l’Homme and new acquisitions) and an avant-grade architectural design by Jean Nouvel24. It’s interesting to note that this museum along with the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration (which is discussed later in this paper), as national sites of culture endeavoring to represent non-western cultures and histories, were opened against the backdrop of the race riots in France in November 2005 and the anti-immigration policies of Nicholas Sarkozy25.

Despite its publicized motto of ‘Where Cultures Converse’, it can be inferred that the MQB could not really be a post-colonial ethnography museum (if in fact there is such a thing) even from its initial stages. Conceived and realized by powerful French and elitist men as an aesthetics-heavy, hybrid ethnography-arts museum to showcase the civilizations of former European colonies (Blasselle & Guarneri, 2006), it starts from the position of power to represent and in this case as a monument to the past glory days of France and Colonial Europe (Shelton, 2009, p.8; Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.160). MQB is reported to have the largest aboriginal objects in the world outside of Australia and the decision to highlight the commissioned pieces were subject to much fanfare in 200626.

Aware that non-western art was not being treated in the same light as European art, the MQB was created with the aim to provide a special venue to showcase the arts and civilizations of the Americas, Asia Pacific and Africa. The notion of providing a separate place to exhibit non-western art away from Western art as reinforcement of the old world order of West and the Rest seems to have escaped notice. It may be a noble intention to ‘give voice’ to the subalterns but whose voice is really represented27; and by accepting the offer the non-western people have already consented to its position of the colonized, by being spoken about and on behalf of

26 http://aboriginalartandculture.wordpress.com/2011/01/15/re-examining-quai-branly/
27 Authors Blasselle & Guarneri discussed the lack of minority participation and outreach in their critique of MQB, despite the museum’s aspiration to facilitate pride in immigrant communities through prestigious showcasing of non-western art.
There were problems with the naming of the museum as ideas were tossed around, from calling it the Museum of Primitive Arts, Museum of First Arts or Museum of the Arts of the First Civilizations before it was decided that it’s least risky to name it after its physical location at the Quai Branly; because referring the non-western art as primitive would have defeated its purpose and with much of its collection from France’s colonial expositions and exploits from the 18th – 20th century, the objects aren’t first in any context (Blasselle & Guarneri, 2006).

Thus, the essentialism of non-western people of being ‘ethnic’ and ‘temporally backward’ has prevailed from the very beginning and continues to manifest itself in the vast architecture of the complex that resembles tribal huts jutting out amidst a lush garden landscape (Figure 12) (Jolly, 2011, p.109). From the street view along the Seine, the museum could be mistaken for the city zoo (Figure 13). Connotations of ethnic primitivism are also seen in the use of natural tones like brown, deep red, beige and ochre in both the interior and exterior, amplifying its naturalness.

Once inside, visitors enter a long, winding ramp where a light installation titled ‘The River’ projects the names of all the 16,597 places and cultures found in MQB onto the bodies of the visitors as they walk up, to symbolize the cross cultural flow of people and places that traverses our paths. (Figure 14)
The ramp encircles in its middle a big collection of traditional musical instruments encapsulated in a dimly lit, giant glass tube. Along with brief commentaries in French on small screens, occasional sample music of how a few of the selected pieces might sound if played, can be heard in the background as the visitor walks up the ramp. There is no further information about or contact with the musical instruments, although a label publicizing the sponsorship of a bank is prominently displayed. It was confusing to me whether this was an ethnographic exhibit, an art installation or interior decoration. Perhaps it’s all three combined. This ramp exits into a long canyon-like walkway made in beige leather known also as The River, although it has been (cynically) referred to as The Serpent by art critics, (Shelton, 2009, p.4) and it runs through the length of the exhibition hall (Figure 15). Information of the floor plan and regions are offered on touch screens and in Braille on this rampart that functions like the spine of the permanent collections, on which the visitors can use to navigate around the hall.

**Figure 16**

At the entry from the ramp into The River, the sight of a variety of non-western ethnographic objects immediately greets the visitor as one’s eyes adjust from the dark walkway into the glow of hall (Figure 16). Trinh T. Minh-ha have compared the walk along the ramp leading into collections hall as a symbolic rite of passage of the visitors onto the world of primitives, where mysterious and exotic treasures wait to be discovered (Jolly, 2011, p.114). There is no guiding thread as visitors can walk around freely between the exhibits to visit all the respective MQB continents: the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania, on the same floor. The mezzanine floor houses temporary collections and the media library (where the public and scholars alike can use for educational and research purposes).

The floors are red and the walls are dark, and ample boutique lighting is used to showcase the displayed objects. Some are displayed in frameless glass cases while some are free standing, and in the Oceania section, the glazed windows are jungle
foliage themed. The permanent collection floor is dark with pools of light focused on the objects, and gives off a creepy feeling, especially when one wanders off to the wooden masks and statues corner towards the museum’s closing hour (Figure 17).

There also does not seem to be a particular sense to the arrangement of objects apart from its geographical grouping. The objects displayed range from having practical functions to highly decorative, from serving symbolical purposes to outlets of artistic expressions. African ceremonial masks are displayed close to Middle Eastern jewelry that is next to Asian costumes and agricultural tools, all of which are ‘down river’ from contemporary commissioned art pieces of the Aborigines located at the end of the hall. This impression elicits remarks from the now much quoted New York Times’ ‘heart of the darkness’ review of MQB where such vitriolic descriptions seem justified, “If the Marx Brothers designed a museum for dark people, they might have come up with the permanent-collection galleries: devised as a spooky jungle, red and black and murky, the objects in it chosen and arranged with hardly any discernible logic, the place is briefly thrilling, as spectacle, but brow-slappingly wrongheaded. Colonialism of a bygone era is replaced by a whole new French brand of condescension.” (Kimmelmann, 2006).

Similar to the Fetish Modernity exhibition, MQB’s permanent collection gallery, except for excerpts explaining each sub-region around the different continents, also does not offer much in terms of information about the objects displayed. There are multimedia terminals located throughout the hall where visitors can use to learn more about the objects on display but as they exist on a separate spatial plane, the intellectual space (active knowledge area between the label and the viewer) is disconnected, rendering the objects’ primary reason for display as that of aesthetic appreciation, objectifying the cultures they represent and confining them to essentialist elements with no notions of progress or change. With its showcasing of quotidian objects in boutique lighting and with minimal information, the museum effect delivers the impression of
the non-western objects as inherently authentic and valuable, but as defined by Western museography standards rather than being understood on their own terms.

By not ranking the works according to a timeline or a narrative path, MQB avoided the evolution hierarchy dilemma but the result of displaying objects in isolation to its cultural context and with each other make them art objects for viewing pleasure, and not as ethnographic artefacts deserving of meaningful contemplation. This would not be as problematic if the MQB was indeed an art museum where it is accepted that objects displayed there are global masterpieces to be marveled at due to its rare craftsmanship, but this has been categorically denied by MQB (Shelton, 2008, p.76). The permanent collections are physically laid out and framed with a strong curatorial voice in ways that support the voyeuristic power relations of the exhibitionary complex and being viewed with the panoptic mode of a detached observer. In addition, MQB’s physical locale has been made to resemble a primitive enclave in the heart of chic Paris of which the visitor immerses himself/herself, thereby producing the sense of place of an adventurer in a ‘lost world’.

**Figure 18**

The lack of contextual information surrounding the creation and local meanings of the pieces, such as the aboriginal artworks (Figure 18) that revolved around the tribes’ spirituality, rites and rituals as well as hardships endured in their colonization and subsequent displacement by the Australian authorities, have pressed them to become more of visual spectacles, thus denying the aborigines and the other subaltern exhibited there of their stories, sweeping yet another chapter of the history of colonization under the carpets of ethnography museums (Jolly, 2011, p.119-120). As one walks among the permanent collections, it is evident that the objects encompass their different cultural traits, but without the appropriate contextualization for compare and contrast between aesthetics and context, the museum experience encourages the view that the only
similarity between the exhibited cultures and their objects is that they are all different from Western ones (Karp, 1991a, p.18-19).

In his essay, *Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse About The Other in the Age of Globalization*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse likens western ethnography to having the ‘gaze of modernity’, and despite ethnography museums’ reflexive awareness in questioning and problematizing the politics of representation by moving display strategies from ‘Exoticizing’ (displaying differences) to ‘Assimilating’ (displaying similarities), both are however still hegemonic strategies that perpetuate discourses of the Other (1997, p.129). Framed by this dichotomy, Western ethnography’s gaze of modernity moves from ‘in-situ’ techniques of recreating authentic cultural settings (dioramas and simulacra), which gives the non-western culture being exhibited romanticized, essentializing traits, to ‘in-context’ techniques that works with atmosphere and information usually through constructive labeling and object arrangement in order to communicate cultural differences and similarities based on the ‘modernity’ categories (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.129; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p.388-390).

Despite its alleged forward-looking view on representing non-western art and civilizations on an equal platform with the West, the exhibiting style of MQB seems to lean more towards ‘in-situ’ than ‘in-context’. Having said that, there are 3 ways of how in-context exhibiting is relevant to MQB and the *Fetish Modernity* exhibition: the ‘emic’ (internalized frames of reference), the ‘positional’ (positioning of people or objects in temporal, spatial or socio-cultural setting) and ‘grand-narrative’ (macro narrative worldviews) (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.164).

The internal logic of display of the MQB’s permanent collection and the *Fetish Modernity* Exhibition is based on a mixture of aesthetic and ethnographic ‘feel’ creating what I call the colonial chic framing. It wants to be ultramodern with the sleek designs and reflexive outlook, with a dash of ‘authentic flair’, posing the ethnographic pieces as exclusive collector items. In fact, cultural comments made by top French officials have claimed that such desired accolade is thanks to the work MQB and other Western museums have done and continue to do to raise non-western objects to a level of prestige, without which these objects would have languished in its place of origin (Blasselle & Guarneri, 2006).
From this context, the positioning of the exhibited and exhibitors are automatically put on opposing stance and its grand-narrative, just like *Fetish Modernity*, is fashioned on offering a new kind of ethnographic experience reminiscent of exotic themed entertainment venues (restaurants, shopping galleries, holiday resorts) where the public can view the objects according to their whims while using the multimedia tools in stylish settings, attend cultural performances and music concerts at an urban space and rent its inappropriately named terrace restaurant called Les Ombres (Shadows) for private and corporate events; effectively turning the visitors from consumers of culture to consumers of commercialism (Greenblatt, 1991, p.49-50).

Referring to ancient Greek notions of citizenship, Nederveen Pieterse cites ‘ethnos’ and ‘ethnikos’, representing ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’ as parallels to Self and Other (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.135). Seen from this perspective, one can make the argument that the MQB and *Fetish Modernity* romanticize and internalize the idea of non-western people as ethnic ‘diamonds-in-the-rough’, universal underdogs with redeeming qualities and hidden talents, in anticipation for the world/nations to take notice. Particularly for MQB, the distinction of the Exhibitor represents the Nation/European/Self/Master while the Exhibited represents Ethnicity/Non-Western/Other/Colonized. I find this analogy perplexing given that MQB as one of the participating museums of the self-reflexive *Fetish Modernity* exhibition, consciously contributed to a project that (if my analysis of its central messages, p.25-27, stand corrected) promotes cultures as a multifaceted, changing and evolving phenomenon.

The Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration (MHI)

Also owing to Jacques Chirac’s cultural ambitions for the country and Paris, MHI’s creation was part of the whole reorganizing scheme that produced the MQB. It aims to honor the contributions of immigrants to France as well as their history in settling in their adopted homeland and is hosted in the original art deco building of the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition which coincidentally, used to house the former Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens,
previously called Musée des Colonies (whose collection was transferred to the Quai Branly). Following the MQB analysis, the role of Exhibitor as Nation/Self and the Exhibited as Ethnicity/Other can also be applied to MHI. It has been pointed out that firstly its location of Palais de la Porte Dorée which housed the colonial exposition in Paris, with decorative reliefs (Figure 19) and murals celebrating French colonialism, may offer a bitter twist of irony as the location to honor French immigrants, even though the authorities consider its underlying historical past and colonial aesthetic atmosphere to be conducive in deconstructing the meanings of French identity and non-western ethnicities (Labadi, 2013, p.313-316). Spurned by Nicholas Sarkozy and opened in October 2007 two years after the French riots in 2005 (ibid, p.311), its existence in an increasingly anti-immigrant France of today feels slightly neglected and uncertain, and this is reflected in its permanent collection.

The beautiful art deco building and the somber colonial art of the building certainly set the mood for the museum experience. One enters the museum with colonial impressions and is ‘welcomed’ by an exhibition of French Immigration history on the walls of the staircase leading to the museum’s main entrance, (Figure 20) setting the tone that immigrants and foreigners have not been well and fairly treated in the country’s history. The presentation of the history of immigration continues with photos, videos and accounts of how and why different immigrant groups have come to France over the years, displayed on information panels and wall-mounted exhibits (Figure 21). The history section seems comprehensive and educational though available only in French. The predicament however lies in the inability of the curators to set off on a different exhibiting style after laying the groundwork, as the focus seems to be on the history. Personal belongings of immigrants were used to construct exhibits that tell
of their experiences, sacrifices and dreams, chronicling the journey of leaving one’s homeland and surviving in the new one. Despite the use of personal items and intimate stories to convey the voices of the minority, the presence of an authoritative curator viewpoint can be felt throughout the exhibition.

The rest of the collection, which showed how immigrants fit in and adapt, seems to be less well thought out and were carefully framed to avoid colonial brutalities/injustices or race relations of contemporary France. The exhibits also did not offer a great deal in terms of identity deconstruction – as they appear to highlight the differences of immigrants from ‘mainstream French society’, focusing on the theme of displacement and exclusion followed by integration, making it clear who was French and who weren’t, further widening and underlining the Self/Other gap. As if to make up for this glaring conspicuity, contemporary artworks and stand-alone exhibit pieces were displayed throughout without a theme or much information. As a result, there is no sense of cohesion of the exhibition with important historical and social elements whitewashed once more from the annals of ethnography. Those who are immigrants/non French become a metaphor for universal suffering and hardship in the face of European immigration. The grand-narrative seems to be one of assimilation, rather than a celebration of pluralism and diversity, and reflects the “French tradition of universalism and attitudes towards diversity, which stress the need for immigrants to be integrated within the French society” (ibid, p.312).

The interview I conducted with the 2 French informants reveals their discontent with lack of information with both the permanent collection and the temporary exhibition, which is a major shortcoming especially given the multitude and depth of the exhibits and topics they cover. They reported feeling a bit lost as to the central messages of the exhibits, and although the interview responses show that the visit has struck a cord with them in terms of discussions of identity and solidarity with the non-French, nevertheless, the transformative experience that could have been had did not happen.

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28 Ironically, the MHI became the ground zero of conflicts in the face of harsh French immigration policies when it was occupied by migrant workers as a form of protest, from October 2010 to January 2011, the longest, continuous occupation in France’s history, an event that is not reflected in the MHI’s exhibits. (see Labadi, 2013)
29 The category of ‘immigrants’ seem to apply to mostly only dark-skinned people who come from non-Western backgrounds, as there was emphasis on those who come from the former French colonies of Africa.
30 There was for example, a small series of photographs depicting the street art scene in France but without the context of racial politics, housing segregation and even the wider connection to the global graffiti sub-culture as a form of artistic resistance against the establishment, what messages did those photos send to viewers?
From The Other to Othering

The fact that the exhibiting approaches of so-called contact zone museums have not deviated beyond this two-pronged framework of in-situ and in-context to explore new ideas demonstrates that the postcolonial discourse in museum ethnography has shifted only from the ‘Other’ (Self/Other Difference) to ‘Othering’ (similarity between the Intra-Others groups). This twin discourse of The Other will remain in our collective psyche as long as there is uneven development in our societies, for this discourse is a manifestation of difference and inequality in our social realities (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997, p.141). Furthermore, Nederveen Pieterse argues, there should be a middle ground between the two display approaches that can encourage views of cross-cultural mixing and a mélange of cultures with differences ‘within’ rather than ‘between’ each other, as well as forms of hybridity in ethnicity and internationalism in our increasingly globalized world (ibid, p.135).

It would seem that colonialism is all but repressed in ethnography museums as lingering traces often go unaddressed due to the sensitivities in confronting a nation’s colonial past in relation to its notion of citizenship and identity (ibid, p.139). But as the museum sector is largely self-regulating with no formal external body to report to, ethnography museums should branch out from its orthodox framework to put on bold exhibitions that tackle critical debates head-on if it truly aspires to occupy the role of the public forum (Besterman, 2008, p.435-436).

Going back to an earlier observation made by Dahl & Stade, are all efforts to thwart the stalwart gaze of modernity in museology activities futile, given the dominant Western framing as the default setting? The response given was that those working with ethnography must steer between adopting too much of the subject perspective, which gives way to excessive empathy and utilizing an overly critical and factual view as that would inhibit meaningful comprehension (2000, p.168).

Audience Development - A step forward in the right direction?

As part of the new movement of contact zone museums in the last 3 decades, ethnography museums have been putting more emphasis on visitor interaction and
learning as well as museum education (Macdonald, 2008, p.320-322). Seen in this vein, the MQB has made efforts to shed its colonial anchoring, as exemplified in its more contemporaneous temporary exhibitions like the newly opened, extensively documented *Tattooists, Tattooed* exhibition, reportedly the largest tattoo exhibition ever held. MQB also hosts lecture series on subjects like slavery and the creation myth of the noble savage, as well as other types of educational events such as educational workshops, research programme and an open university initiative (as discerned from MQB’s website).

The current *Indians of the Plains* exhibition at the MQB, which showcases the artistic tradition of Native American tribes of the American Plains, spanning centuries and generations, also draws on approaches to educate the museum experience that is based both on ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’ (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42-52). Using a variety of mediums, from interviews and film montages to touch-only displays as well as multimedia tools (Figure 23), the exhibition included how historical events have affected the changes of the Native American artistic heritage, illustrated by beautiful artworks and handicrafts.

The interview of the informant who visited this exhibition at the MQB demonstrated a high degree of resonance and understanding of the topic (as opposed to how she felt with regard to MQB’s permanent collections), citing connections between her own personal aspirations, background and childhood memories and the materials displayed (Figure 22), validating the importance of constructive framing. Naturally, the visitor’s individual traits have a lot to account for in terms of how an exhibition is experienced, stressing all the more the necessity of curators to relinquish their authority and agendas and focus on audience development to ensure a positive transformative experience of the visitor.

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31 http://yatzer.com/tatoueurs-tatoues-pascal-bagot  
32 www.quai Branly.fr
In line with the above, interview data with the informants on MHI also showed that there were exhibits that engaged the visitors into critical thinking and resonance, such as an interactive display on French/non-French words that the visitor can use to guess its origins. The informants also reported a stronger connection relating to personal reflection when stories of The Other are framed in a first person context, as was the case in personal items displayed in the ‘Donors Gallery’ where the items had been donated by families (Figure 24). Those objects, most of them ordinary, everyday things were accompanied by stories that have been told and kept alive in the family for generations.

The impact of the museum experience also go beyond the actual visit, as parts of the experience may make sense and resonate with the visitors only later on down the road (Macdonald, 2008, p.321). This calls attention all the more to the importance to create viewing responses in visitors that rouse meaningful emotions and encourage comprehension. The following parameters should be used as guidelines in staging cultural exhibits: 1) objects that have been created for purposes of visual display (such as art objects) would be less likely to be misunderstood; and more notably 2) installing cross-cultural elements in the exhibit indicate cultural difference but also relevance, and providing information about the object that goes beyond just the descriptive allows room for the viewer to engage their own interpretations and personal reflections (Baxandall, 1991, p.39).

Reclaiming Identity of Self - District Six Museum & the Museum of Immigration

Social movements that gave rise to local or community museums functioning along the lines of ‘identity’ or ‘memory’ museums serving to preserve particular heritage and historical events, and which emphasizes more on the context and emotions of visitors to feel empathy and understanding, have sprung up in the last three decades (Beier-de Haan, 2008, p.186-187).
Kevin Walsh stipulates that a museum of new museology should be actively cultivating its role as community facilitator and a local public service entity to serve those who are interested in understanding the past of a place or culture. In addition to engaging the visitors in interactive displays, the museum should involve them in “the production of their own pasts” (1992, p.160-161). He elaborates, “To move across space and to think, is to move through time. All interpretation is concerned with understanding the past” (ibid, p.156). Deliberating from the point that context is of paramount importance, he adds, “Any interpretation will be, by its very nature, a cross-cultural interpretation before it is anything” (ibid, p.157).

As we have seen throughout the paper, identity formation, the representation of cultures, the definition of nation state and the social responsibility of the museum are interlinked. In working with displays that define a sense of belonging and the creation of social relationships with the community, museums can be used a public policy tool to offer a range of services to the public while moving away from the grand-narratives of national museums to make room for local stories (Cooke, 2008, p.171). Conveying a culture as localized, placed based authentic experience recreates a sense of place of what was, what could have been, and what is to come, thereby offering a much broader and encapsulating, inter-cultural connection. These two community museums below epitomize how ethnography can function to reclaim identity of self through working with the past and collective experiences.

Envisaged as a community project to reclaim the local identity and heritage of the District 6 neighborhood in Cape Town, South Africa, the following excerpt taken from the museum’s website describes “the District Six Museum, established in December 1994, works with the memories of the District Six experience and with that of forced removals more generally”33. Today District Six stands empty as a stark reminder of those events. The museum houses items either salvaged during the destruction of the neighborhood or donated from former residents, and comprise objects from the

33 [www.districtsix.co.za/Content/Museum/About/Info/index.php](http://www.districtsix.co.za/Content/Museum/About/Info/index.php) “District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, it was a vibrant centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the process of removals and marginalisation had begun. Black South Africans were displaced from the District in 1901 and on 11 February 1966 it was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. More than 60 000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers”
seemingly mundane (recipes) to the nearly impossible (dirt from the roads) to reconstruct the memory and experience of life in District Six. The museum serves as a meeting place for former residents to reminisce and reconnect to their past and identities as well as for visitors to connect to this particular historical era and location in ways that promotes healing, remembrance and cross-cultural connecting (ibid, p.175).

Located in the historic area of Spitalfields in London, and housed in an old building dating back to the 16th century on 19 Princelet Street, the Museum of Immigration is run by the Spitalfields Charity Centre. It aims to preserve the building as a space to hold permanent and temporary exhibitions on stories of immigration across generations and cultures, in order “to build the understanding and respect needed to create a truly diverse, fair and equal society”34. London-based blogger Flora Tonking describes below the exhibitions held in the museum as well as her experience35:

“The museum currently hosts two exhibitions; 'Suitcases and Sanctuary' and 'Leave to Remain', which explore themes of migration, home and displacement. Spread over three floors of the building, 'Suitcases and Sanctuary' takes the form of multiple piles of luggage, cases filled with pictures, diary extracts and audio material. Each suitcase, created by local schools, imagines how different nationals that wound up in Spitalfields might have felt about their new neighbourhood and their new country, and all that they left behind. Tucked into a large alcove on the first floor, 'Leave to Remain' explores the flip-side of immigration, asking how a host country perceives those who seek a new life within the UK. A series of vox pop interviews - which appear to have been conducted on a train, given the matching seats all the interviewees are sat on in their polaroid shots - asks Brits what they think about immigration in the UK. Some of the responses are non-committal, uninformed, unconcerned. Others border on xenophobic. On the opposite wall is arranged a miserable bedsit, with further derogatory comments made by an immigrant him or herself pinned to the mirror, the narrow bed, and a hooded sweatshirt. It makes me feel horribly sad, and incredibly lucky to be so sure that I belong here as much as the next person.”

Flora’s response above (including her email interview) and interviews with the informants of D6M, report feelings of empathy but in ways that foster understanding and thinking about the crucial topics at hand, such as displacement, race relations and one’s own place in society. The responses from interviews conducted for this degree

34 www.19princeletstreet.org.uk/charity.html
35 http://www.theaccidentallondoner.com/2013/01/19-princelet-street-secret-museum-of.html
project also show, once again, that objects that visitors resonate with usually relate to the deliberation of one's personal background and contain cross-cultural references, thereby aiding the making of the connection between the exhibitor (and possibly the object maker) and the visitor.

**Conclusion**

The very nature of western ethnographic display, that of framing cultures involving the decontextualization of the object and the complex interpretation process between the intentions of the curators, the reception by the visitors and taking into account the ethical considerations of the culture being exhibited; makes fair representation a failed enterprise from the set-up (Dahl & Stade, 2000, p.159). This includes even contemporary, reflexive exhibitions like *Fetish Modernity*, because its starting point will always be by the default Western standards - such reflexive exercises are usually trapped within the museum discourse that employs common catch-all terms and frameworks that rewrite history and negate unfavorable events (i.e. colonialism did not affect ethnographic collecting and was not brutal to its colonies) and fall short of making critical local analysis and social processes (ibid). Two related concepts worth mentioning (although further discussions would require a separate paper), is that of ‘autoethnography’ – the process where The Other speaks of self but through the colonial framework of Self/Other (Boast, 2011) and the repatriation of ethnographic artefacts (Conley, 2010). I reckon that changing the Western default settings would require the dismantling of the colonial ethnographic framework and cross-cultural/international reconciliation efforts involving addressing the past and rectifying the related unjust consequences.

There are also other forms of exhibiting styles to be explored that go beyond political and organizational frameworks. The Foucauldian idea that modernity should rather be thought of as an attitude than a period of history (*Fetish Modernity* Catalog, p. 17) can perhaps be a tad hard to grasp and fathom, but it does however provide food for thought in how Western ethnographic exhibitions can and should investigate into alternative sources of display. Non-western approaches that are non-visual/object centric offer promising methods in breaking from the conventional mode of translating
and representing the culture of others (Karp, 1991, p.20-21). The Japanese display technique such as ‘mitate’ that relates to Kabuki performances focus on evoking the mythic world rather than appreciation of craftsmanship, and the technique of drawing on the spirit sense of ‘furyu’, which is roughly described as the appreciation of an item by how it feels in relation a larger ‘vision’; thus placing resonance over wonder but also to demonstrate that what is real or can be seen is subjective (Yamaguchi, 1991, p.57-67). The Indian technique of fusing color (bhava) and taste (rasa) where the visitor can combine them to form their own interpretation of a feeling or understanding of an exhibit truly enables the experiencing of an exhibit on first-hand, situated experiences (Goswamy, 1991, p.68-76).

With technology making constant advancement such as augmented reality (AR), there are also many up and coming approaches that could facilitate the representation of cultures in interesting and participatory ways. As far as the museum educational function goes, AR can be used to provide an encompassing multimedia context that can accompany the viewing of static exhibits. Kenneth Hudson also stated, more than 2 decades ago, that ethnography museums should consider abandoning its function for conservation work and “fondness for empire building” and rather focus on making the museum experience more than a 2-senses affair (seeing and listening) since real life is a 5-senses one; he suggested creating ‘climate and region’ museums instead that would allow the visitor to immerse into what a place or culture feels like (1991, p.461-462). As shown in the previous section, representation of cultures as connected to a sense of place provides a more fulfilling and enriching experience, supporting Hudson’s theory above.

What remains to be seen is how and if these non-western and non-conventional approaches in the representation of The Other would gain momentum and contribute to social changes in the field of identity politics and museum education. In the meantime, gradual changes in contemporary ethnographic work seem to suggest a shift towards embracing history and our collective pasts as a path to a shared modernity and future.

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36 The British Museum, one of the biggest museums in Europe with strong ties to colonial ethnographic history has nevertheless launched multimedia, educational programmes such as ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ in which each short segment is a podcast audio story about a selected object from the museum that combines rich storytelling, visual appreciation of the object (viewed on its website) and the linking of each object to other parallel civilizations and world history.


Fetish Modernity Catalogue. Tervuren: Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA)


Hög Hansen, Anders. Place, mapping, observation and exercise for museum visit (November 8, 2013) Berlin: ComDev Seminar


Appendix A – Interview Notes

Fetish Modernity Exhibition

Johanna (17 December 2013)

The informant felt that the exhibition did not provide a comprehensive experience of the theme and central messages - it lacked a guiding ‘red thread’ showing the logical sequence or viewing order, and the labels and basic background information are insufficient. Therefore, she felt that the exhibition gives off a general impression of being disorganized.

She thought that the exhibition is too ‘academically inclined’ and would require some pre-knowledge such as previous cultural experiences or pre-visit reading to fully appreciate the nuances and subtext of the exhibition. While she would recommend the exhibition to colleagues or friends with a similar background to her, she would not to her parents whom she reckons would not be interested.

She thought the exhibition hall was dark, as the exhibition space was not well lit, and felt the guided tour she participated in as part of a seminar package was too brief, although the information provided in the tour was interesting and provided a good overview to the exhibition. If the tour could have been longer and made available to all regular visitors, she believed it would help them understand the exhibition better.

She didn’t think that the mixture of the different media used in the exhibition really added much value to the experience or representation of an artifact/exhibit.

The pieces that became emotionally relevant to her were exhibits tied to real stories of human vicissitudes, such as the ‘Escaleras de Servicio / Service Stairs’ exhibit – these were several tall ladders made from twigs and branches that were used by illegal migrants to jump the fence separating the southern Spanish border and North Africa. The video testimonies of the both the migrants and the border guards provided her with an overall understanding of the tragic situation, of the desperation of those who would risk their lives for the chance of the ‘European dream’ against the current construction of Europe like a ‘fortress’, holding out against invaders.

It was moving to hear of the struggles and courage of those willing to do anything in order to have better lives, and it also made her feel privileged to be European. She noticed that there were no women being featured in the video and wondered what their stories were in this situation. She also said that if she did not know what these ladders were about, they would have reminded her of childhood memories of tree house ladders.

She also liked exhibits that provided a straightforward ‘moral lesson’ like ‘Xenographic Views’ - which was a collection of framed photographs of people of all ethnic backgrounds from faraway places when in fact they are all of Austrian nationality dressed in different cultural costumes in staged set-ups in different locations around Vienna. This sends the message that what is presented isn’t always the truth and that it’s easy to fake a representation of a situation or topic.

She also found the written text displayed at the exhibition such as the ‘quotes or insightful questions’ that were either written on the exhibit or hung on banners on the walls of the exhibition hall to be meaningful. She felt these were interesting and eye opening. (In fact, the insightful questions that were hung on red banners provided the direction for much of the interview responses and discussion below)

Certain pieces resonated with her particular life experiences or interests. She pondered on the random placing of religious objects in the ‘Mystic Village’ exhibit – how does a public ethnographic collection differ from the socio-religious objects tourists buy as souvenirs to display at home? Do the objects take on different meanings depending on where there are located?

On the ‘Chic and Cheap Shops’ exhibit, she spoke of who has more legitimacy to own objects from afar - if one who has visited or lived in the culture having more right than a consumer purchasing cultural objects based purely on aesthetical reasons. She stated that she was inclined towards the former rather
than the latter, and felt somewhat upset that the objects that held personal attachment to her that she obtained from her time abroad are sold in shops in central Stockholm that can easily be bought by anyone as home décor or as a gift.

The documentation she made of the exhibition in the form of photos was shared on social media platforms such as Instagram after the visit, and she said it represented her interest to have a personal presence in social media rather than a recommendation of the exhibition.

Matilda (21 March 2014)

The informant visited the Fetish Modernity Exhibition in the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium in March 2011, during the exhibition’s first port of call.

She found the setting of the RMCA as a colonial museum to have a big effect on her experience of the exhibition, as there was a clash in the ‘language’ between the permanent collection that were displaying the objects in an imperial/colonial conquest fashion and the self-critical analysis of western ethnography museums in Fetish Modernity. (If the museum was aware of its own problematic exhibition style, then why didn’t they just exhibit differently? But perhaps that was the point – to communicate the message by providing the contrast?)

She thought that the Fetish Modernity exhibition was not well thought out, as pieces that were thought provoking were mixed in with other exhibits that seemed to be just thrown together (There was a gap between the display and the message).

She felt confused that there wasn’t a specific path to follow to view the exhibition, but perhaps it was on purpose that the exhibition was arranged in such a way that the visitor could walk around without a specific order?

She remembered one particular exhibit well – a set of luggage lockers (the kind that is common in bus terminals or train stations) that visitors can open and displayed inside each locker is either some tourist trinkets, a bag, clothing items, or other travel essentials. She liked it because the exhibit communicated a clear and important message in an interactive way that makes it memorable – that we are all cosmopolites traveling around and as such are complicit in the whole cultural consumption process.

She found most of the exhibition to be less impressive as the exhibits seemed to be placed together randomly, seemingly without much thought, and they were also displayed in quite a confined space with some exhibits stacked up on each other. She thought that the objects needed to be displayed in their own right so they could be fully understood or appreciated. She remembered that there seemed to be many plastic things and that gave the exhibition a ‘cheap’ look. She was very surprised to find that some of the traditional authentic pieces were not even displayed inside protective glass cabinets, sending out the signal that they are not as prestigious? (But she also questioned on whether that was intentional, to provoke the discussion within the visitors)

She could not find much information about the exhibits or the exhibition and it frustrated her that she couldn’t figure out what the exhibition was really trying to say, beyond its aim of being self reflective. She was concerned that in the situation where there’s lack of information, most visitors would not have the critical thinking skills to properly unpack the ideas behind the exhibition and therefore they would not only miss the central messages of the exhibition but would also fall back on their own stereotypical ideas of non-western cultures being associated with primitive, exotic objects and rituals when viewing the objects on display (They won’t be able to question the text and subtext so the exotic objects are simply viewed as exactly that – exotic objects). It would defeat the purpose of the exhibition, as visitors would walk way with the idea that The Others is just one big mass made of a homogenous, non-western group.

As an example, she quoted the 2012 ‘cake cutting incident’ where the Swedish artist (of part African ethnic background) Makode Linde dressed up in ‘black face’ make-up and made himself a part of an ‘african woman cake’ that the Swedish minister of Culture cut into, with a screaming Linde playing along. The charade supposedly went on for an hour as other attendees were also invited to slice into the cake, and the artist would scream every time someone did so. This was supposed to symbolize the
western consumption of Africa, according to the artist but ironically, none of the overwhelmingly European attendees including the Minister paused to question the message but instead thought of it as a joke, laughing at what seemed to them as comic entertainment.

She found it troubling that there was no mention of the Belgian colonization in either the permanent collection or the exhibition, and she felt that it was a missed opportunity for the museum curators to address the issues of post-colonialism. She commented that she was quite upset to find in its place stories that seemed to glorify the adventures of European explorers amidst the savages.

In response to the ‘mystic village’ and ‘cheap and chic shops’ exhibits, she also discussed her feelings on the ‘right’ to own ‘authentic, ethnic objects’. Given her personal background of having spent a lot of time living on the African continent, she felt that it was more appropriate that someone in a similar situation to hers to own these items because of the emotional bond one possesses to particular cultures and places, as opposed to people just buying those for aesthetic reasons.

She mentioned that she would never buy packaged home décor sets with cultural designs because cultural objects should be bought, owned or displayed in a rather ‘mish-mash’ way, as individual pieces that have personal meanings. Discussion on the difference between western and non-western representations ensued, (i.e. it’s generally considered not politically correct to use non-western cultures as home décor choices but is it OK to use western cultures as design templates?) leading to questions of what is seen as real or representations of normality, and how to differentiate or recognize the cultural production and consumption process?

She realized that tourist souvenir consumption is inevitable and unstoppable as it is part of the wider globalization cause and effect chain, and is part of the multicultural world in which we live. However, it is important that these souvenir items are placed in context. It was then discussed on how tourist trinkets and cultural objects being displayed at home and at the museum both need to be put in context but in different ways? She also thought that it is more acceptable to buy local, authentic handicrafts rather than mass-produced, plastic souvenirs made in countries other than the country they are sold in.

**Morin (25 March 2014)**

The informant thought that the exhibition was both positive and negative. On one hand, it took a while to understand the message of the exhibition because there was no ‘red line’ to guide the visitors, but on the other hand, she liked the exhibition’s message about how cultures continually mix and change, and the objects displayed in the exhibition demonstrated inter-cultural influences.

She felt that the exhibition was too small, and worth a visit only in combination with other activities at the museum, such as the live musical performance on African music she attended when she was there. It was good that the museum had live performances such as this one so that the museum isn’t only showcasing cultures as inanimate objects.

She would have preferred if the exhibition provided some kind of an overview or a map so that the visitors could have an overall idea of the exhibition. There was a kind of ‘flea market’ feeling to the exhibition, with so many things, especially plastic things that seem to be compactly arranged next to each other. She thought that the exhibition was very dark and almost scary for small children (she brought along her toddler son and she said he seemed scared at various points especially around some of the masks and sculptures).

There was a particular exhibit that caught her attention – the skateboards with paintings of Apache drawings - due to her personal interest in skateboards and snowboards and Native American design. She liked the message of the old world meeting new, modern lifestyle that is conveyed by these ‘Apache skateboards’ with traditional motifs.

She was confused about the ‘mystic village’ exhibit where random religious objects were placed together as she didn’t quite understand what the Buddha statues and other traditional relics that didn’t seem like they had anything ‘modern’ added to them, were supposed to signify.
She mentioned that it was difficult to know how to ‘see’ the exhibits with no known paths or routes that the visitor is supposed to take to lead the visitors on how to visit the exhibition.

She said that she is an avid museumgoer and appreciates the use of interactive tools in museum exhibition in order to understand the objects on display. She mentioned the Egyptian mummy exhibition at the Medelhavsmuseet in Stockholm (Mediterranean Museum) that she visited recently where computer programmed displays enabled the visitors to ‘dissect’ the mummy to learn about it, as an example of how multimedia guides can facilitate visitor learning of displayed objects. In this light, she felt that the Fetish Modernity exhibition had not been designed with younger visitors in mind.

She visited the exhibition and the African concert with her in-laws and thought that it was a good experience for them to have had the cultural exposure to non-Swedish cultures, as they are of an older generation hailing from a small town in southern Sweden. They seemed to have enjoyed their visit and they commented to her that they learned from the exhibition about how people in different parts of the world can be resourceful in surviving and adapting to changes.

She mentioned that the majority of her time spent at the museum was with her family at the museum café and the cultural performance. She also regretted not having more time, as she would have like to have had the chance to peruse the items at the museum’s gift shop.

Eva-Lotta (1 April 2014)

The informant didn’t like the exhibition, as there were too many things/objects in the exhibition. She would have preferred fewer objects with more explanation about them, with more in-depth background information of the objects that were displayed.

Due to the above, she felt that the message of the exhibition was not well conveyed, as she was unclear what the exhibition really was about.

She did not experienced any ‘aha’ moment when she felt like she understood the exhibition nor found any of the objects particularly fascinating. She had expected to see exotic, eye-opening objects from non-western cultures and was disappointed to find the objects displayed at the exhibition to be fairly unspectacular.

The object she liked the most from the exhibition was of a small, handcrafted motorcycle made out of recycled aluminum cans, in what appears to be one of the common types of souvenir items from South Africa or Zimbabwe. She said she liked it because it reminded her of a TV show she’d watched as a child about African children making toys for themselves from discarded things and recycled materials, and remember an overwhelming feeling of joy that other children from different parts of the world could be so creative in finding ways to produce their own play things and finding ways to entertain themselves. To her, it was also an example of cross-cultural influences making its way into practical everyday living. She elaborated that the aluminum cans represented materials from Western, modern cultures brought on by forces of globalization to Africa and were subsequently used by African children to make toys for themselves. She said that to her, Africa conjure ideas more of the natural environment, i.e. it would have been more expected that the material of the homemade toys the African children would use is wood.

She also said that the object caught her attention because it was familiar to her from her having seen them in ‘African’ shops in Stockholm that sell handicrafts and trinkets. However, she said she would not buy something like this for display in her own home as it would not suit her home décor but would probably buy it as a gift for someone else. She said she is interested in learning about other cultures, as she likes the feel of the ‘multi-kulti’ inter-cultural music and arts events and atmosphere, and mentions that her home décor is partly inspired by the colorful aesthetics and designs of Indiska, the Swedish shopping chain stores selling home décor items and clothing that are from India.

Henrik (18 April 2014)

The informant found the exhibition hard to follow and had disconnected themes, and he had expected it to be better. But he commented that he didn’t really know what it was about beforehand and he had to
mind his toddler son (who loses interest quickly with an object on display) whom he had with him during the visit.

He said he did not see the ‘welcome banner’ at the entrance of the exhibition that explained the aim of the exhibition, but didn’t think it would have made much difference as he prefers exhibits that provided a kind of visual impression and information upon first viewing in order to create a deeper interest, otherwise he would move on to the next exhibit, and that this was the problem with the exhibits in Fetish Modernity. He remembered noticing that there were plastic folders at the exhibition that one could pull out to read more about the exhibits but didn’t have the time to do so.

His attention was captured by the exhibit of the strange and exotic things, like a stuffed elephant leg or a zebra lamp, showing the objects that people brought home from faraway trips back in the day. He noted the connection to figurine souvenirs that was on display there too, and thought it is actually a strange thing for ‘people to collect people’. He was confused as to the intention of those displays – if it was meant to show the odd practices of western travelers or to show how strange non-western objects were, which he finds to be stereotypical.

He also found a couple of the exhibits that showed how cultures are resourceful in adapting to changing times and cross-cultural influences interesting, like the indigenous headdress made out of plastic straws rather than feathers and the Apache skateboards, because those objects provided the visual interest that illustrated the points above. It was always easier to view these objects with his son because the objects captivated his attention as well.

In general, he wouldn’t say he found Fetish Modernity to be a good exhibition because there was no clear guide to follow and it was unclear how different parts of the exhibition related to each other or as a whole. For example, he didn’t see the connection between how one part that showcased recycled materials used to make objects of various use had to do with seemingly exotic, non-western objects. There also seemed to be a big mix of objects on display.

He also commented that the information provided in the exhibition and the labeling of the objects was not comprehensive so it could be the reason why it made it hard to understand the exhibits and exhibition. He could not say what the central messages of the exhibition were beyond that it showcased the difference in objects being brought back by travelers in Europe in the old days and today, and that cultures are good at being inventive and creative in terms of material culture production and consumption.

He discussed the strange objects travelers in the old days would bring back as an unfathomable practice as he didn’t see the reason behind such an action, but it did make him think of today’s tourists buying souvenirs to bring home, as a contemporary comparison. As an example, he thought the zebra lamp was probably produced to satisfy the rich, white traveler but it wasn’t something that the locals would buy or use. Therefore, comparatively speaking, it is acceptable to buy souvenirs from other cultures so long as the objects are authentic and used by the locals in the same way. However, he thought that it should be a criterion that the objects are made from local materials to count as being authentic. For example, in his recent trips to Hawaii and South Africa, he did not find many objects to purchase that represented those countries/cultures because in the former, objects were made in China/Taiwan and in the latter, the stone sculptures and such were made from materials from neighboring countries. Having said that, he said that if the local handicraft tradition would be to use non-local materials, it would be acceptable.

He commented that possessing cultural objects from countries that he has visited and had a memorable time or have some personal attachment to served to create a lasting fond memory of that experience or as a visual representation of that emotional connection, but noted that it’s not a necessity to own a memento from every country he has visited as some kind of token. He also noted that at various times, the decision to procure local artifacts is a way of helping out the local economy, as in the case of buying handicrafts directly from the local artists.

Elena (18 May 2014)

The informant visited the exhibition towards the end of its run at Etnografiska Museet, and was interested to visit because she had heard about it from friends. Her first impression upon entering was
that it was interesting, as there was a display cabinet right by the entrance of the exhibition that contained various small objects/cultural artefacts.

In general, she found the exhibition difficult to understand – it was full of materials, but she couldn’t find any clear message regarding the exhibition as a whole or the individual exhibits, especially why certain objects were displayed and what their connection was to each other. She said she really made an effort to discern the reasons and meanings behind the objects being exhibited but couldn’t fully grasp the ideas. For example, she found it interesting that there were exhibits that showed how Western civilizations have affected other civilizations as well as the interaction between the cultures. She also thought that there was an intention of the exhibition to demonstrate a parallel between ethnography museums and western civilizations in terms of what both these groups have been doing/done to other cultures, but she would have liked to know more about the full context.

She said that the exhibits that showed how modern cultures have left traces on other cultures that seemed to living in a ‘different dimension’ captured her attention. For example, how traditional designs are used in practical objects, like the helicopter designs on the Afghani carpets and on a Sami leather drum, and how modern objects are represented as something else entirely such as the large, wooden coffin from Ghana made in the shape of a mobile phone. She liked this object in particular because the accompanying video that tells the story about the desire to be buried in such a coffin was interesting, a completely different notion to how Westerners think of death and also maybe how those who would procure such a coffin saw the coffin as more than just a burial container, but as some kind of celestial transport vessel too.

She mentioned that she found many of the pieces interesting and they made her think about cross-cultural issues, but she could not see any ‘connecting thread’ throughout the exhibition. She said that she was much more comfortable visiting the permanent collection of the museum from which she learned a few things.

She couldn’t really remember any of the exhibits being grouped in subthemes, although she remembered the group of exhibits that were made out of items Western travelers brought back from their faraway travels such as elephant legs or rhino horns.

She said the exhibition and the museum visit made her think about what an ethnography museum is, to which she is not sure, and in fact not a subject that she has thought of before. She found some of the permanent collections at the museum very interesting but it showed that the practice of collecting ethnographic objects had been done without any kind of scheme, that the objects had been mostly collected from trips and expeditions out of curiosity and to acquire as many unknown objects from as many unfamiliar cultures or countries as possible.

She said she expected to learn something from the exhibition and also to be provoked but she went away with only the first aim having been partly accomplished. She felt that there was too much text in the exhibition that the visitor is required to read in order to understand the exhibition, and it would have been better if the objects have been presented in a less passive way that would draw in the visitor. More focus on fewer objects that could have presented a clearer message would have been beneficial, as she was not sure she understood all the messages of all the various sections of the exhibition.

She said that this museum and exhibition visit has definitely provided her some food for thought for her next ethnography museum visit of which she believes that she will be more critical.

**Musée du Quai Branly**

**Ophélie (6 May 2014)**

The informant had never been to Quai Branly so the two ongoing temporary exhibitions (Indians of the Plains and the Tattooists, Tattooed exhibitions which were of interest) were a good opportunity for her to finally do so.
Generally, she found it a bit disorientating upon entering the museum because the objects from the permanent collection on display were not arranged in a way that made sense, like the musical instruments that were kept out of sight behind glass.

She specifically liked the Indian of the Plains exhibition – impressed with the craftsmanship of the objects displayed. She liked the colors and designs, both the contemporary and older artifacts – they were close to the kinds of objects in commercial culture that she is familiar with.

She is aware of the cultural appropriation of American Indian culture in fashion (using feathers and leather fringes) and don’t buy into the idea of using that culture as a fashion statement so she really appreciated the chance to see the ‘real stuff’ at the exhibition. It is also reminiscent of her personal memories of a family trip in 1993 in the American Southwest and anthropology courses from university. Most of all, it was the beauty of the objects that really moved her.

She found the objects from the Oceania region from the Museum’s permanent collections that were made from wood (sculptures, carvings) to be much rougher and less aesthetically pleasing in comparison and stated that she seems to have a preference for certain cultural objects based on how visually interesting they were, in particular the beadwork and textiles. The exhibition showcased the link between older and traditional artifacts (some that were a few hundred years old) and contemporary objects (modern, oil paintings for example), which enhanced the respect she had for the skills and handicraft of the objects as it portrayed the American Indian artistic heritage. She quotes the statement from the video testimonies in the exhibition in which 2 women artists said that people don’t seem to spend the time these days, in modern living to make art, and these women artists wanted to keep their tradition alive by investing time and effort into their artistic craft. She relates this to an exhibition called ‘Slow Art’ that she is working on at the Swedish Institute in Paris that focuses on immersive and time consuming artistic handicraft. In short, she reiterated that the ‘Indian of the Plains’ exhibition resonated with her due to several of these personal reasons above, and in fact knew that she would like them in advance of the visit.

In addition to the self-professed affinity for Native American artistic tradition, she discussed the popularity of Native American artistic influences in fashion and finds the superficial trend a shame as it takes away the real appreciation of the art and heritage of the North American indigenous cultures and tribes.

The objects that she found very striking and moved her from the exhibition were a pair blue, beaded high-heel shoes and a colorful quilt with geometrical, starburst design. She took a photo of the quilt and said that she would look back at the photo to remember how it made her feel when she was looking at it at the museum. She strongly resonated with this object as she found the quilt to be radiating positive energy and felt that she experienced in the object a kind of straightforward beauty in a tangible object. She felt compelled to share the photo with a friend who also appreciate similar designs and mentioned that the quilt was the highlight of the museum visit for her in terms of object appreciation.

She also liked the exhibit called ‘Stereotypes’ at the ‘Indian of the Plains’ exhibition which was a compilation of short video clips of old Hollywood movies portraying the classic ‘Indian and Cowboys’ stereotypes. Although she is aware that the films (and the exhibit aimed to) portray prejudiced images of Native Americans in films, for her the films provided different meanings, as it evoked a sense of nostalgia, of fond childhood memories - of time spent with her grandfather who loved that genre of films, as well as the ‘Indian’ dress she remembered having as a child which was her favorite. There was a comic book series on American Indians called ‘Yakari’ that further contributed to her positive feelings to the Native American culture. There was something lovable, she said about remembering as a child that she thought the native people in those films were beautiful, free and wise people living in beautiful, far-off places, and that the Western people were the ‘messed up’ ones.

She once again mentioned that she enjoyed the exhibition very much and that there were many contact points that caused that conclusion, and she did feel that she learned more about the Native American culture and art after visiting the exhibition. Video testimonies of the artists provided personal insights which she appreciated and could apply to her own outlook in life such as a comment by one of the artists on the Native American ancient wisdom on living and finding one’s purpose in life by trying out everything possible.
She felt that by comparison, other than objects that use needlework and textile, the artifacts that were part of the permanent exhibition at the museum didn’t appeal to her (looking at them was like flipping through a magazine or catalog), as it didn’t feel like it was her ‘cultural taste’, and commented that the expression she used may come off as sounding a bit strange. That said, she did mention that the long hours spent at the museum might have contributed to lack of focus for contemplating additional pieces.

She attributed her interest and admiration for skills and expertise involving sewing craftwork to her own aspirations of wanting to be an artisan herself. Therefore, the Indian artistic heritage exhibited had an existential resonance with her.

It was important to her when visiting a museum or exhibition that she could connect to the larger narrative of a story. It also validates the choice she made for choosing to spend the time at this particular venue. A good museum visit should be meaningful and one should walk away with a feeling of time well spent, like a feeling of ‘zooming in with your physical presence’ and taking the time to be in a room where there is total immersion in the story being told.

She thought the space of the exhibition could be used better, to enhance the context of the interpretation of the objects with the use of certain lighting and display techniques (here she mentioned her own professional background of having worked with staged and choreographed productions), and that in general museums do not seem very good with maximizing the use of different ways to captivate the attention of the audience and make them feel a part of the staged production. In the end, that is what exhibited objects are - staged productions. The exception to this is ‘The River’ installation that was at the entrance of the museum, which is the walkway leading from the foyer of the museum up to the collection galleries, which used the space that was shaped as a path to project the artwork onto the physical bodies of the visitor as they walked along the path. She thought that the space should be made into a ‘place’ that creates a feeling of the ‘here and now’ that provides meanings to the visitor, that somehow brings them back to places that are meaningful to them, for example, the ‘Indian in the Plain’ exhibition that she mentioned reminded her of her grandfather’s house and the feelings associated with those memories. Different people would obviously relate to the exhibition differently depending on their backgrounds and experiences, but if the museum could find ways to enable personal evocations to visitors, then exhibiting the culture of The Other would take on less voyeuristic forms. Quai Branly would always be Quai Branly but the exhibition should transport the visitor out of its physical venue to a ‘place’ that is closer to the real context of the culture being exhibited, although reconstructions of material structures that felt fake should be avoided, like the teepees that were part of the exhibition.

The ‘Tattooists Tattooed’ exhibition didn’t resonate with her very much, even though she was not unfamiliar with the tattoo subculture. She did not find the designs as aesthetically pleasing as those from the ‘Indian from the Plains’ exhibition and perhaps also because she doesn’t personally have any tattoos. She did however feel that she had learned more about the history of tattoos from the exhibition, about how the cross cultural influences between different countries have contributed to the development of modern tattoo art, from its early inception in the 19th century to the new styles of contemporary tattooing. One of the reasons why she thought she didn’t like this exhibition as much is that she felt the exhibition comes off showcasing the tattoo world as being such a men’s world, a boy’s club for the most part, and women occupy only a small fraction of the artists, and are seen mostly as a spectacle, while the ‘Indian of the Plains’ exhibition demonstrated the expertise of women artists much more. She felt that the tattoo exhibition was instructive but not very interesting or moving, as it felt a bit flat.

Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration

Ophélie & Alex (16 May 2014)

Alex’s general impression was that he felt the museum was like an excuse that France as a country is making for its colonial past and also its history in its treatment of immigrants'. As someone who is a native French, he said the museum visit made him feel first and foremost ashamed and guilty for what his ancestors/country have done towards the non-French.

Ophélie had been to the museum before so she was less interested this time around in seeing the permanent collection, and that her first impression was better. Even though her mother was born in Algeria, Ophélie herself as a native French who was born and bred in France, said that she has never felt
her French identity questioned (either by herself or by others), as opposed to those with immigrant backgrounds in France. Seeing the permanent collection gave her an unpleasant feeling about the mistreatment of immigrants by French authorities and their struggles to fit in, and it made her think about how simply being born in different parts of the world can have such an impact on one's life.

They visited the exhibition ‘Comics and Immigration, 1913 – 2013’ first and both liked it. Alex found the exhibition interesting but there was insufficient information provided on the exhibits regarding the pieces, the artists and the chronology. He said that it lacked a ‘connecting rope’ that gives a ‘sense of reading’ of the exhibition message. The exhibition that dealt with the subject of immigration in French comics also showcased an American parallel as background – Winsor McCay’s work from the early 20th century, which depicted images of immigrants from that time period (Irish and non-Western European characters) in unflattering, stereotypical ways.

Ophélie also thought the comic exhibition was a bit messy and had a lot of material that were not presented well. Even though the central message was about how immigrants in general have been used to provide entertaining story arcs in comic strips, it was hard to make sense of the exhibition. Rather than a timeline, the exhibition presented exhibits focused around different non-French ethnic groups. Alex commented that he didn’t really see Asians represented in the exhibition, but of mostly Africans.

Ophélie commented that the stories/comics that were written by immigrant comic artists all have personal point of views, often told as artistic, existential accounts of their own tales of trials and tribulations in leaving home and adapting to their homelands, which she found clever and touching. Alex added that he noticed the stories are largely about difficulties and painful situations that he believes do reflect reality, like police brutality against immigrants. He said the exhibition made him think about issues that never occurred to him before, about how difficult it must be to be paperless and to live in constant fear of the authorities. Ophélie mentioned that there were also stories that were more hopeful and funny, and from the perspective of the child, like a special feature on Marjane Satrapi’s comic animation work.

They both commented that the exhibition took most of their time and they were a bit tired by the time they visited the permanent collection. Alex’s impression of it was that it was a bit poor, and there were not much labeling on the exhibit pieces. The integration between the exhibits was not done well, for example he didn’t understand how the art pieces related to the other more ethnographic exhibits there, which he felt could have been solved by better labeling or information.

They mentioned however that they really liked the way the chronology of France’s immigration was presented - as a series of illustrated events on the side of the walls of the staircase that leads from the ground floor entrance of the building to the museum on the second floor. It was a good use of space and by the time the visitor reached the museum, he/she has the background overview of the country’s immigration history.

Ophélie said the staircase exhibit also served to remind her that the same injustices are repeated over and over again in the country’s history from the 19th century onwards – there’s always an immigrant group that is seemingly welcomed at first, but subsequent change of national policies or discourse would then cause them to be unwelcomed. She found it cruel and upsetting because while the ‘face’ changes, the hostility towards ‘the immigrant’ remains. It also begs the question of who in fact is French and how far in history should one look back for the proper definition?

The Gallery of the Donors, which exhibits personal belongings of immigrants donated to the museum by family members, was another feature that they both liked. Alex commented that seeing those personal objects and accompanying stories caused him to feel closer to the story and feelings of the immigrants as he could feel a direct reference.

Ophélie commented that strangely enough, even though there are also personal belongings being exhibited as part of the permanent collection, she related much more to those in the Gallery. Somehow those exhibits in the permanent collection felt ‘colder’ in comparison to the Gallery exhibits that were much more personable. The personal belongings in the Gallery exhibits seem to tell a more cohesive story rather than the ones in the permanent collection that seemed more ‘thrown together’ and served the voyeuristic ‘onlooker’ feel.
Alex commented that it could be a ‘space’ issue – that the permanent collection is located in the vast space of the stone halls with high ceilings and bad lighting while the Gallery exhibits are displayed within the cozier confines of the wood paneled corridors with ‘warmer’ lighting.

Ophélie commented that it’s also the ‘voice’ of the exhibits that made a difference for her. The personal belongings in the permanent collection have an institutional voice that she felt addressed her. In comparison, those in the Gallery were stories told by family members who had heard or inherited them. She remembered those objects and stories from the Gallery much more, such as the iron-cast milling machine that an immigrant had brought with them as a tool to earn a new livelihood in the new country. Alex said the Gallery exhibits facilitated the visitor’s identification with being either French or an immigrant.

There were a couple of exhibits in the permanent collection that did catch their attention, such as the display monitors where the visitor could guess which words out of the ones available were French in origin and which weren’t. Ophélie liked it, as it was an interactive way of learning about how cultural processes change and adapt, like words that she didn’t know were not French that had been adapted from other languages. She wished there were more exhibits of this nature, and also that it hadn’t been placed at the far end of the hall. Alex commented that it was actually a nice touch to have the ‘word’ exhibit towards the end, as it was less serious than the other pieces and more fun, acting as a nice rounding off to the museum visit.

He thought it was a shame that apart from the short introduction in the beginning of the permanent collection, there was no English translation throughout the permanent collection, the Gallery or the comic exhibition. He thought that not only did that impede non-French speaking visitors from understanding France’s immigration history but also it’s symbolic of the country’s shame and guilt in terms of dealing with the treatment of immigrants. Ophélie said she was glad she visited the museum and would definitely return to visit any new exhibitions.

Both mentioned that they appreciated the beautiful and historic building the museum is housed in. From the exhibit information located on the outside of the building as well as on the first floor, they also learned about the history of world fairs and colonial expositions as well as the history of Palais de Porte Doré – of the building itself.

Regarding the world fairs and colonial expositions, Alex marveled that there was a time when it was acceptable to display non-western peoples as savages because the French wanted to see exotic images that were in their minds rather than to know reality.

Ophélie found the political development of gradual changes in colonial and post-colonial discourse interesting and hopeful. She said that there’s a lot of information presented at the museum to take in and digest, and felt that it would take a couple of more visits to fully grasp what the museum is about, to really catch the spirit of the times, of what the ideological and political situation was like back then. She also said she found it strange that there was a time when concepts such as colonization was seen as a good thing, that foreign lands were being presented with awe and mystery, as was demonstrated in the mural paintings and the façade reliefs of the building. She commented that despite the criticisms made against the museum as being a derogatory and offensive display of colonial conquest and should be closed down, the museum is an important reminder of a phase of history that should be kept alive so people don’t forget the suffering and wrongdoing that have been committed in the name of colonialism.

Both also felt that the space of the museum could be used better. Ophélie said that the museum felt like an ‘empty shoebox’ that the curators are trying to fill and reeks of discomfort despite its beautiful interiors and exteriors. She then added that perhaps creating a discomforting atmosphere for the exhibition was done on purpose. Alex agreed on the museum hall’s ‘empty feeling’ and said that there were not enough objects on display for its size, as if the museum was still waiting for new objects to display.

Both commented that the museum and exhibits felt ‘young’, like they had just opened to visitors not too long ago, and could be why the exhibition felt a bit ‘clumsy’, ‘temporary’ and ‘not finished’. Alex said it gave a feeling that the museum might not last as an immigration history museum, and its venue could easily be used to house a different national museum of another subject sometime down the road.
At the time of the finalization of this thesis, the 2014 May European Parliament Elections has just taken place. With the gains made by far-right parties in certain countries, especially in France. Alex requested to add the following comment to these interview notes – he said that he feels even more ashamed now of his fellow countrymen for having voted in a party and a politician (Front National and Marine Le Pen) known for anti-immigration policies, and that perhaps such results should be added to the immigration history exhibit that is framed along the staircase of the museum, to complete the story of French immigration.

District Six Museum

Inger (11 April 2014)

The informant said she liked the museum. It was small, cozy and cluttered, and remembered being greeted very warmly by the reception staff upon arrival. She said that the museum was located in the undeveloped area of District 6 and was a bit hard to find.

She doesn’t consider herself the ‘regular’ museum visitor for the District 6 museum due to her personal background as a former activist in the anti-apartheid movement during the apartheid years. Therefore, she was familiar with the apartheid history and she thought of the museum visit as an extension of her personal interest in the subject.

She mentioned that she had forgotten to bring her reading glasses with her so she could not really read some of the texts and labels on the exhibits. Nevertheless, she was able to view the exhibits that created some kind of historical atmosphere. Due to the small size of the museum and specific focus on the heritage of District 6, she commented that the whole museum in fact felt like one large exhibition. Two exhibits stood out for her.

One was a comparison of District 6 to a Swedish neighborhood called ‘Lugnet’ in Malmö in which the residents were also evicted in the 1960s. She said she was very surprised to see the connection being made, as she didn’t think it was fair to South Africans and did not understand the link, because the South African apartheid regime’s treatment of its non-white citizens was very much harsher than the Swedish social welfare state’s gentrification of neighborhoods for ‘sanitary reasons’, and that such comparison seem to downplay the severity of apartheid effects on the rights of Black and colored people of South Africa.

The other exhibit was of old photographs of District 6 families and residents photographed in everyday situations - at home or at work as well as in leisure or recreational settings. She said she was surprised that the photos evoked personal childhood memories and feelings. The things, background and the way the people dressed in the photos looked similar to those in Sweden from her childhood and to the old photos that she has from her own childhood of the same time period. She said this reminded her that it wasn’t so long ago that Sweden was not a modern, prosperous country. It was also insightful to see township images from the apartheid years that are not only of misery and oppression but also of residents carrying on with ‘normal’ lives while enduring the hardships of apartheid.

Susanna & Johanna (14 April 2014)

Susanna said that the museum felt very accessible, as it was not too big and that the design and aesthetics of the museum were very touching. The self-contained exhibits are arranged in smaller rooms of the building (which was previously a church and had beautiful wooden paneling and turn of the century architecture) so they in fact feel like small museums inside a bigger one - the overall atmosphere provided by the museum therefore sets of the tone for the smaller exhibitions.

Original items or parts of District 6, from old street signs to a whole hairdressing salon to personal belongings and parts of someone’s real home to even piles of the earth from a road combined with videos of archived footage were displayed as exhibits, and she felt that these helped transport the visitors back in time, to feel like they were present in the old District 6. She felt that these ‘real life’ objects gave off the authentic and interactive feeling that became the base of the museum experience. There were also
exhibits that showcased the music and other recreational activities that took place there so the visitor could really feel the ‘aliveness’ of the neighborhood as it had once been.

Johanna concurred with the above sentiments and also said she remembered feeling very sad when viewing the exhibits, because of what the residents were forced to give up due to their eviction from the district.

Susanna was struck by how the area of District 6 today has not been developed and has been deliberately left as an empty space to serve as a reminder of its history, despite it being very central and in a prime estate location. It really caught her attention, and the contrast between the prosperity of the adjacent areas and the ‘dead space’ of District 6 was all the more striking.

She also noticed that there was an exhibit that compared a Swedish neighborhood in Malmö called ‘Lugnet’ to District 6 and was surprised to see the parallel being made (she was not aware of it before) and commented on how strange it was to find out one’s own country’s history in Cape Town (and made a comment on how sometimes people tend to know more about far away places than the history or situation in their own country). Both informants commented that they did not see the reason or justifications behind making that Swedish connection to a completely different political regime like the Apartheid and wondered what the curators’ intentions were. They also wondered how visitors who have no knowledge of Sweden would react to seeing that and also what those former residents in Lugnet or even from Malmö would feel if they knew that such a comparison was being made.

Susanna said that the exhibits that she liked the most were the artistic pieces with hidden messages that the visitor had to think about and decipher, like the wall with old personal items such as a shoe or hat sticking out and sentences written on all over its surface. She also liked the personal quotes that were also displayed as those conveyed the thoughts and feelings of the people who struggled against the regime. She said these exhibits were more thought provoking than the more straightforward pieces and subsequently made her feel more emotionally affected. It also made her think further to the kinds of conclusions one could and should draw from these in terms of one’s own behaviors and possible contemporary similarities happening.

Johanna commented that museums that document brutal events and conflicts such as this one is not always a pleasant visit experience because one has to make a conscious choice to spend time and resources to be confronted with the knowledge of the harsh injustices against humankind that have taken place. She referred to her own work that had brought her to Sarajevo a few times where she visited exhibitions on the massacre of Srebrenica.

Susanna responded to the above by saying that exhibitions on war crimes should exhibit more than just the ‘spoils of war’ to also include messages of hope or prevention solutions, otherwise it would be a pointless exercise if it only served to make the visitors feel bad and nothing else.

Johanna commented that she felt enlightened having learned from the museum visit that those who were discriminated against during the Apartheid weren’t just Black people, but a whole range of non-white groups that included Asians and any colored persons, which until then had always been presented to her as a (literally) ‘black and white’ issue. She also said it moved her as it made her think of her own privileged position of being white and having had a fairly comfortable life when there are so many people who have had to suffer such injustices.

Susanna said for her it was an emotional visit because the exhibitions and the museum really recreated what it was like to be in District 6 and that it was the most educational experience she had during her visit to Cape Town, because it gave her an opportunity to learn about the city’s and country’s history. She said visits like these often made her feel more connected to other parts of the world, like she is a part of something larger because visits such as this one was so immersive that she felt like she had left a part of herself in the place of visit as well as taken a piece of it with her.

Both informants mentioned that they would have liked to buy some souvenirs of District 6 as a memento of the museum visit but that the museum gift shop was very small and didn’t really offer a wide variety of products.
Susanna mentioned that the museum café could be promoted better to non-museum visitors to add to an even livelier atmosphere of the museum. She also thought that much of the permanent exhibits seem like they haven’t been changed or renovated in a while and could benefit from some upgrading and general sprucing up, like better lighting for example.

**Museum of Immigration – 19 Princelet Street**

Flora (by email 15 May)

Can you tell me more about why you liked [your visit]? For example, is it the historic building or the sense of place or feeling of history that made the trip so worthwhile?

For me the visit to 19 Princelet Street was enjoyable for two reasons: 1) I had managed to gain entry to a museum that so rarely opens, yet which I had heard great things about. It was the thrill of finally making it behind the door I’d walked past several times! And 2) The building is indeed unique and extremely special - I felt privileged to get to explore it. I had heard about the entire synagogue within the building so was especially keen to see that, and it didn’t disappoint. Despite its damage and terrible structural state the building is very beautiful. It also holds a strong energy of all those people who have moved through it over the years. There is also a strong sense of history (supported by the exhibitions continually examining this history and how similar themes may be observed today), within an area of the city which is extremely old and iconic.

The second related question is that you mentioned feeling very sad after seeing one of the exhibits, 'Leave to Remain' which was about opinions in the UK about immigrants/foreigners, and how you felt very lucky to know you belong. Can you elaborate more on that? What did you also think about the ‘Suitcases and Sanctuary’ exhibit?

I should lay my cards on the table and say now that I am someone who often feels emotions created by art / creative ideas very deeply. I think this is why the exhibition affected me quite so strongly - Leave to Remain made it all too easy to empathise and envisage myself in the situation of an immigrant, and I imagined the fear and isolation and hatred that many immigrants here in London face. I am fortunate to live in the country I have always known and was born in. I am fortunate not to have to deal with those kinds of emotional challenges, and Leave to Remain showed me what those who are not so fortunate have experienced. The staging of the exhibition - in a crumbling, drafty house (the museum itself) - also added a gloomy backdrop to a sad subject.

The Suitcases and Sanctuary exhibit affected me less, as it was a school project, created by children imagining what it must be like to emigrate and leave your home. These imagined scenarios (drawn in crayons sometimes) were, for me, less powerful than the real experiences and deep artistic reflections in the Leave to Remain exhibit. It might well have been due to the age of the creators of the exhibits. Leave to Remain was also more contained, which created a more immersive experience. Suitcases and Sanctuary was displayed over a wider area, with more people moving in and out of it - I was therefore less inclined (and sometimes able) to take in all the exhibits.
Appendix B – Additional Photographs

Musée du Quai Branly

Musée de l’ Histoire de l’ Immigration
District Six Museum  (District Six Museum photos courtesy of Susanna Rudehill)

A photoblog with more photos on this degree project is available at http://yeeyinyap.wordpress.com/about/
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