
Phyllis Clarck-Taoua

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In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*

Michel Leiris set sail for Africa in 1931 a frustrated man who was suffering from sexual phobias, writerly inhibitions and a penchant towards alcohol abuse (Roudinesco 1992: 45-48). Following the advice of his friend Georges Bataille, Leiris began psychoanalysis in 1929 for these interrelated problems, which he had to interrupt in order to undertake his journey across the African continent. With the consent of his analyst, Leiris accepted the invitation to join the Dakar-Djibouti Mission as archivist and secretary, which would take him away from his life in Paris for the better part of two years. It is thus not surprising that the young author's field notes reflect his fragile mental health where personal obsessions, self-reproach, and agonizing soul searching accompany him from village to village and even onto the boat back home. This biographical information, when considered in its historical and cultural contexts, sheds valuable light on Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* because of his remarkably subjective filter as an observer of Africa (Leiris 1981)¹. In fact, the reader learns as much, if not more, about Leiris's inner world in *L'Afrique fantôme* than about the peoples and cultures of Africa that he encountered along the way. Even in ordinary circumstances locating the writer as subject in this way is useful to the study of travel literature and ethnography as a discipline, but such an approach takes on increased importance with *L'Afrique fantôme*, given the author's troubled state of mind and personal mission: Leiris went to Africa in search of new skin. His cultural expectations of Africa held out hope for his own personal transformation by reconnecting with the wild child within.

Although no longer officially a member of the Surrealist group when he left for Africa, traces of Leiris's involvement with that revolutionary experiment are present throughout his travel journal. Of all those who participated in French Surrealism, Michel Leiris provides the best example of the way in which his avant-garde intellectual milieu in Paris combined an Africanist fascination with notions of political protest². With this in mind,

1. All further references to the most recent 1981 edition.

2. For a review of Leiris's engagement with the Surrealist group, see RABOURDIN (1992: 40-45).

I will explore both the epistemological and institutional limits of Leiris's engagement with Africa in *L'Afrique fantôme*. Attention to Leiris's epistemology will focus on his perception of himself, Africa, and the other ethnographers on the team with him in relation to prevailing constructions of "Africa" with such categories as "primitive" and "civilized"—the opposition structuring vanguard primitivism. Leiris's description of their work as ethnographers (i.e., collection of objects, use of translators) and the rationale for their actions provides disturbing evidence of his generation's problematic relationship to Africa. The author's role as archivist and secretary of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, the first French ethnographic expedition in Africa, placed him in a privileged position to record both the areas where he and his cohort were breaking new ground as well as the shortcomings of their practices.

As a result of the collective nature of this ethnographic mission, it will be helpful to consider the institutional dimension of these Frenchmen's engagement with Africa in addition to the concepts and categories organizing the author's discourse. Leiris was one of a team of ethnographers, headed by Marcel Griaule, that crossed the African continent from west to east, beginning in Dakar in the fall of 1931 and ending in Djibouti in the spring of 1933. Although the inspiration for the expedition was multifaceted, the undertaking was primarily a museum collecting enterprise financed in part by the French government. Over the course of the year and a half the group spent in Africa, they collected more than 3,500 works of art and artifacts that are now housed in the Musée de l'Homme. The way in which the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, as a state-sponsored institutional initiative, both structured and circumscribed the participants' actions will be considered as part of a collective process of incorporating information about the colonies as a means of coming to terms with imperial expansion. These two dimensions of *L'Afrique fantôme*—the epistemological and the institutional—bring most clearly into focus the paradoxical nature of Leiris's rejection of bourgeois French culture by fleeing to Africa in search of a new self while remaining beholden to his nation and class, and the preservation of their interests.

There is a long tradition of French writers setting sail for Africa to escape from the fatigue of their intellectual pursuits in Paris; two predecessors mentioned by Leiris are Arthur Rimbaud and André Gide. Rimbaud's case is the more extreme of the two: he gave up writing poetry entirely and set sail for Africa, only to come back years later on a stretcher with wild stories to tell (Nicholl 1997). For Gide, it was just after finishing *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925) that he undertook an extended journey through French Equatorial Africa. Upon his return, Gide published his travel journals *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and *Retour du Tchad* (1928), which immediately sold thousands of copies³. Not only did Leiris's impressions of

3. Gide decided to travel to Central Africa after finishing his novel *Les Faux-monnayeurs* in search of rest and relaxation but instead he found himself

Gide's African expedition accompany him on the road, Leiris nourished hopes of actually meeting up with Rimbaud in Africa—the quintessential rebel-turned-native⁴. The beginning of *L'Afrique fantôme* reveals Leiris's initial frame of mind and how the journey was undertaken with the desire to escape the monotony of metropolitan life:

“En somme, très peu de différence entre la vie du fonctionnaire à Paris et sa vie à la colonie (j'entends : dans les grands centres) ; il a chaud et il vit au soleil au lieu d'être enfermé ; en dehors de cela, même existence mesquine, même vulgarité, même monotonie, et même destruction systématique de la beauté. J'ai grand'hâte d'être en brousse. Cafard” (Leiris 1981 : 28).

Travelers do tend to set off with preconceptions and Leiris was no exception. The coexistence of this disdain for “la vie du fonctionnaire à Paris” and his “grand'hâte d'être en brousse” expresses Leiris's belief that he would leave Europe behind once in the bush. “Cafard” (from the Arabic *kafir*, renegade) resonates ironically with this Surrealist-turned-ethnographer's predicament: failure in flight. Leiris's apparently glib choice of words here proves to be increasingly self-descriptive as he makes his way into the long-awaited African bush.

Leiris's quest was not only to discover the Other but to find himself *as Other*⁵. Far from his conjugal duties, French society and the bickering at the Surrealist Centrale, he finds his way not to a wild, untamed self but to writing⁶. The distance in this equation was decisive, liberating; it created a feeling of both safety and stimulation. He was confronted with a continual abundance of information to interpret and his official task was to take notes. This was a perfect recipe to cure writer's block but not necessarily one that would make a writer's career. Leiris wrote *L'Afrique fantôme*,

confronted with some of the worst colonial abuses committed under French colonial rule. The effects of travel are significant here because it was only once Gide found himself literally confronted with the reality of colonial methods in the present-day Congo-Brazzaville that he became politically involved in contesting French colonialism. In his case, the terms with which Gide contested the social injustices he encountered in Africa still did not take into account the culture or ethnicity of the populations colonized by France even after his to the region. For more discussion, see CLARK (1997).

4. Guy POITRY (1992: 29) notes: “l'Afrique 'fantôme' est le continent rêvé dont on sait désormais qu'il ne correspond pas à la réalité; et le journal est le compte rendu de cette désillusion progressive qui s'achève avec une Éthiopie où Leiris s'était d'abord imaginé pouvoir rejoindre Rimbaud, mais dont les possédés même témoignent, dans leurs cérémonies, du dérisoire, de pathétique de leur volonté d'échapper à leur condition.”
5. Jean JAMIN (1992: 22) notes this disposition as typical of Leiris's writing in general: “C'est là une attitude fréquente chez Leiris : en être sans en être tout à fait. Dans son journal ne conçoit-il pas ethnographe comme un snob : vouloir (ou devoir) être dans la peau de l'indigène, tout en sachant qu'on ne pourra jamais s'y glisser ou qu'on se verra refuser de l'endosser.”
6. Vincent KAUFMANN (1989) provides an insightful reading of how Leiris finds himself as writer rather than as child or primitive during his trek across Africa.

the work that made him famous, without any idea that it would become a classic, whereas his subsequent publications—often the fruit of arduous labor—never gained the same recognition. The combination of ethnography and autobiography—a search for the self in the Other—that he found during his first trip to Africa became an enduring aspect of his life as a writer. From the outset, the young poet makes keen observations about his surroundings, which lends a writerly quality to the troubled ethnographer's field notes. He spares neither the Europeans nor the natives his ironic humor rendered with an adroit use of descriptive detail:

“Allé le soir avec les B... et Griaule à *L'Oasis*, dancing nègre de Dakar. On y voit : des négresses — femmes ou amies de sous-officiers de tirailleurs — habillées à l'européenne ; des putains noires, métisses ou arabes ; quelques grosses négresses en costume local ; des pédérastes nègres qui dansent ensemble en petit veston cintré ; un pédéraste blanc à l'allure d'employé de bureau dansant, une fleur à la bouche, avec un marin nègre à pompon rouge ; deux sous-offs de la coloniale dansant en couple ; trois types de la marine marchande ou de la marine de transport, dont l'un (à casquette blanche à visière, petite moustache en fil, et cigare) a aussi merveilleuse allure que les plus beaux aventuriers des films américains“ (*ibid.*: 33).

This passage exemplifies the tone in much of *L'Afrique fantôme*: its hybrid quality combines the note-taking practice of the archivist-secretary (“On y voit :...”), a literary sensitivity to the amorous in search of strong sensations, as well as an ethnographer's eye for documenting the Other. Leiris's self-conscious style, the liberal use of dates and place names allows the reader to situate the narrating subject in time, space, and culture throughout. In broader terms, the intersection between autobiography, ethnography, and a Surrealist vision of culture makes *L'Afrique fantôme* a particularly valuable document of the author's engagement with the cultural trends that shaped his generation's values and perspectives, most notably vanguard primitivism.

Given his age and state of mind—Michel Leiris was only thirty years old when he left for Africa in 1931—he demonstrates, at times, admirable skepticism and self-control in his perceptions. He expresses doubts about the credibility of his sources of information and even suspects that some of the performances he and Griaule witnessed were inauthentic. Early on, the local guide hired by Griaule tells a story about a wedding ritual among the Dyola:

“Mamadou Vad, très lancé, raconte de belles histoires sur les Dyola de Casamance et sur les Bobo, qu'il qualifie de 'sauvages'. Le mariage bobo, selon lui, s'accomplit de la manière suivante : durant le tamtam, quand tout le monde est bien excité, le jeune homme qui brigue la main d'une jeune fille se jette sur elle, devant tout le monde. S'il ne la pénètre pas d'un seul coup, il est considéré comme inapte et le mariage n'a pas lieu” (*ibid.*: 74).

The way in which Leiris reports this story as apocryphal and brackets his informant's qualification of “sauvage” positions Leiris and defines his

perspective as both distanced and personal. The fact that this apparently far-fetched tale caught his attention and made its way into the journal reflects the writer's own sexual preoccupations and subjective filter and is evidence of how the narrating subject implicitly selects and orders information. Throughout the text one notices a strong erotic element, which stems from the author's frustrated libido: he sees sanctuaries in the form of vulvas (*ibid.*: 159), a proliferation of erotic altars and objects such as wood carvings of erect penises just as the expedition starts to head south (*ibid.*: 170-173), which he mingles with observations about his own private sexual fantasies of insulting a proper woman to sexually excite her (*ibid.*: 367). Leiris openly expresses reservations about the ethnographer's claim to objectivity and allows himself instead to communicate his own personal contradictions—joys, sorrows and frustrations—in both the selection and the commentary of scenes, which gives a unique touch of humanity to *L'Afrique fantôme*.

Leiris starts off with a visceral rejection of all things European and passes up opportunities to deride the natives he encounters—for being savage, illiterate, prelogical—in contrast to other witnesses such as Gide. But Leiris's French perspective is, nonetheless, operative and nowhere more evident than in his paradoxical relationship to bourgeois metropolitan culture, so typical of vanguard primitivism. He remarks, for example: "Voici enfin que j'aime l'Afrique. Les enfants donnent une impression de gaîté et de vie que je n'ai rencontrée nulle part ailleurs. Cela me touche infiniment" (*ibid.*: 34). This idealization of Africa as a kingdom of children, free from the constraints of the civilized world, represented an unattainable wonderland for Leiris. Although this primitivist myth persisted for the better part of his journey, he eventually recognized the impossibility of becoming the child or the native of which he dreamt⁷. After seven months on the road, Leiris regrets that his life in Africa did not deliver the childhood paradise he had hoped for and notes: "Avec mon casque, ma chemise kaki, ma culotte de trappeur, je reste le même homme d'angoisse que certains considèrent comme un bon type, à la fois tranquille et pittoresque (?), une sorte de bourgeois artiste" (*ibid.*: 162). This frustration as a result of his failed quest for self-transformation followed him all the way back to Paris. Rather than the average *tabula rasa* of colonial discourse, "Africa" becomes a vast expanse of territory that allows the writer self-exploration as he traversed the continent and his fantasies about it, which he describes in libidinal terms that resemble a man's desire for a woman (*ibid.*: 182)⁸. Many elements

7. Jean JAMIN (1992: 23) writes: "Leiris sait trop bien, comme il l'écrit dans *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia*, que je n'est pas un autre, qu'on ne peut être son propre enfant. C'est à mon sens cette tension entre le présent et le passé, entre l'ici et l'ailleurs, entre l'exotisme, l'archaïsme et le modernisme — disons 'entre soi et soi' — qui fait la force dramatique et la beauté de l'œuvre de Leiris, aussi bien ethnographique qu'autobiographique, et de son journal où cette tension est livrée à nu."

8. Leiris's desire for self-discovery was directly related to his interest in an exploration of the unconscious and the practice of ethnography, which involved description of himself as well as the experiences of others foreign to him. In an interview

of vanguard primitivism structure Leiris's representation of his experience of Africa: an idealization of the primitive bush in contrast to a civilized metropolitan way of life, the persistent desire to reconnect with a wild, untamed self, a penchant for the exotic and tropical at the expense of more accurate and realistic assessments, and so on.

Leiris regularly notes their acquisitions and the circumstances surrounding these activities, including the use of translators, prolonged negotiations, and intermittent scandals. Thus, the process of collecting objects emerges as a constant theme of the journal. Leiris's initial remarks on this subject reflect his willing participation in the group, his acknowledgment of an incomprehension between the Frenchmen and the villagers as well as evidence of what the author later referred to as his European arrogance:

“L'enquête et la collecte d'objets commencent, et se poursuivent dans une ambiance parfaitement idyllique. Les gens s'amuse beaucoup de nos questions, qui leur semblent invraisemblables de futilité. Il en est de même de nos achats, puisque tous les ustensiles qu'ils possèdent sont très frustrés — ils le savent — et très peu faits apparemment pour tenter les étrangers” (*ibid.* : 41).

His reactions, here that of detached amusement mixed with a sense of self-satisfaction, undergo many transformations along the way ranging from deep frustration to wonderment as Leiris relates the group's interactions with the native populations. However, this off-handed dismissal of the native populations' values, perspectives, and cultural integrity does characterize Leiris's descriptions.

In addition to collecting objects for display in Parisian museums, the team of ethnographers under Griaule's leadership documented and studied various aspects of the African cultures they encountered including traditional arts, ritual, religion, language, and history. The field notes they acquired, however, reflect brief encounters since the team spent very little time in each place. They also relied on translators and were not able to get to know the people or their practices, so in this sense the object-collecting dimension of the enterprise and the subsequent documentation they inspired made a longer lasting contribution to the ethnographic study of African cultures in France⁹. Griaule (1933: 7-12) describes their ethnographic

with Aliette Armel, Jean JAMIN (1992) states: “En réalité, [Leiris] cherchait plutôt à projeter, d'une manière absolument concrète, son propre reflet. Devenir son propre témoin, fournir des pièces à conviction, dresser un inventaire de soi. En somme, *L'Afrique fantôme* comme son journal sont essentiellement des *journaux d'enquête* mais dont lui-même serait devenu l'objet d'étude privilégié.”

9. Jean JAMIN (1992: 22) notes: “Dans une certaine mesure c'était inévitable, parce que la mission n'a séjourné que fort peu de temps dans chaque société rencontrée (sauf en Éthiopie). N'oublions pas qu'un des buts de cette mission était d'enrichir les collections ethnographiques africaines du Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro : elle était, au sens propre, une entreprise de collecte. Et je dois dire que, compte tenu de ces objectifs et du travail d'enquête qui ne pouvait qu'être extensif, les matériaux recueillis par cette mission au cours de ces deux années demeurent d'une qualité documentaire remarquable. Les fiches que Leiris a lui-même rédi-

approach as methodologically experimental; forging an original combination of aesthetics, sociology, and psychology¹⁰. A group around former Surrealists began to develop an ethnographic interest in the non-Western cultures of France's overseas colonies; intellectuals such as Bataille and Leiris went one step beyond the Surrealists and took so-called "primitive" cultures as an object of ethnographic study¹¹. This interdisciplinary synthesis from which French ethnography emerged reflects the mood and prevailing wisdom of the interwar period, marking the first step in an ongoing process that would give rise to postwar existentialism's combination of anthropology and Marxism by writers who contributed to *Les Temps modernes* as they in turn refined their analytical tools in keeping with their own era and its imperatives. The point here is that French engagements with colonial culture are dynamic, updated as each new generation redefines its methods, and cannot be homogenized into a *single* colonialist epistemology.

Leiris claims that he wrote *L'Afrique fantôme* "sans idées préconçues"¹². I take this to mean that the author was not yet consciously committed to a set of ethnographic principles, which critics may attribute to him retrospectively in their attempt to map out a conceptual terrain. The author's unassuming sincerity and general skepticism about scientific observations of culture have helped create the work's appeal to readers beyond the field of ethnography. As the group progressed across the continent, Leiris's narration demonstrates the confrontation between the Parisian primitivism they brought with them and the humid, tiring reality on the ground. He takes a particular interest in their dreams:

"L'autre nuit, ayant la fièvre, Griaule avait rêvé de son côté qu'il devrait faire rentrer des lions dans un musée.

À part cela, pluie, et 99 % d'humidité à l'hygromètre. Larget — avec qui nous allons à la recherche d'autres auvents et d'autres grottes et qui, une fois encore, découvre des graffiti — me parle géologie et paléontologie. L'éternel marteau qu'il tient en main et son allure dégingandée évoquent toujours en moi le vieux mineur de Goethe, Zacharias Werner ou bien Wilhelm Oken, la théorie neptunienne et les *Naturphilosophen* de romantisme allemand" (Leiris 1981 : 73).

gées, pour la plupart conservées au Musée de l'Homme, sont des modèles du genre."

10. For more discussion of Griaule's role in developing the field of ethnography in France in terms of its methods and rationale, see CLIFFORD (1988: 55-91).
11. After their break with the Surrealists, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris collaborated together on the journal *Documents* (1929-1930); Leiris also contributed to the special issue of *Minotaure* devoted to the Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1933). For a review of these activities from Leiris's perspective, see interview with Olivier CORPET, "Documents, Minotaure et Cie", *Magazine littéraire*, 1992, 302: 32-36.
12. LEIRIS claims: "Que ce livre a été vilipendé Dieu sait comme, soit devenu presque un classique, cela m'amuse beaucoup, soyez-en sûr ! Vous savez, ce livre a été écrit sans idées préconçues. Au départ, il ne s'agissait pas du tout de faire un récit de voyage mais un authentique journal, en somme un journal intime tenu en voyage, dans lequel je ne parlerais pas simplement de ce que j'avais vu ou fait, mais aussi de ce que je ressentais" (interview with Olivier CORPET, *op. cit.*: 38).

The notation of dreams constitutes another significant topos of the journal that reflects the lingering effects of the Surrealist experiment on the author. Griaule's dream about trying to get lions into a museum is a telling indicator of the way his unconscious mind was registering the violence inherent in their domestication of such culturally vital artifacts as they collected them—and these objects did, indeed, end up in Parisian museums. The scenario is emblematic of the enterprise from Griaule's perspective: the ethnographer is figured as a frontiersmen faced with the daunting task of taming the wild beasts that cross his path. The anxiety captured in the symbolic dream image indicates conflicting emotions that have to do not only with the arduous collection of objects and information, but also with the more unsettling process of their incorporation into a French institutional framework. During the interwar period, one of the most challenging aspects of an ethnographer's work was to articulate conceptual adjustments that would facilitate the integration of new cultural information. Leiris's mention of humidity alongside references to Goethe and German romanticism suggests both a secret longing for cooler climes and the thrill of rational man's encounter with a mysterious, untamed nature. Here and elsewhere, European references haunt Leiris like a ghost.

If his intention was to tap into the wild, untamed side of the self of which Breton and the Surrealists wrote, Leiris's experience in Africa produced very nearly the opposite effect. In his quest to leave himself and his culture—to become Other—his few moments of fulfillment come from performing his bureaucratic duties as archivist and secretary¹³. The reader witnesses a double flight in *L'Afrique fantôme*: unable to lose his European self in the much awaited African bush, Leiris flees his anguished self in writing. Note taking becomes his ultimate refuge:

13. Directly in my line of thinking KAUFMANN (1989: 146) writes: "Surréaliste (mais relativement peu convaincu, et peu convaincant), Leiris rêvait, comme un peu tout le monde, de Rimbaud, de l'Afrique, ou de l'Orient, pour briser le carcan de la civilisation occidentale, pour se faire autre. Arrivé chez les Dogons, c'est Breton qui revient ; Breton, dont le voyage n'est assurément pas le fort, et qui préférera toujours, avec quelques indispensables complices, faire le paysan à Paris. Leiris, lui, semble pourtant plus doué pour le voyage, puisqu'à Paris, il fait de préférence le sauvage, et en particulier le nègre dans les boîtes à jazz fraîchement écloses de Montmartre (sans le dire à Breton, qui réprouvait), par 'abandon à la joie animale de subir l'influence du rythme moderne' ou 'par aspiration sous-jacente à une vie neuve où place plus large serait faite à toutes les candeurs sauvages'. À Paris, il prend des airs de nègre candide, pour 'changer la vie' (Rimbaud). Mais lorsqu'il part enfin pour changer de peau, 'indéfectiblement le blanc revient' (Mallarmé). Nulle part on ne se sent aussi proprement blanc que sous le bronzage et la crasse de l'arpenteur des savanes. Il y a là de quoi rendre mélancolique le plus enthousiaste des héritiers de Rimbaud. Leiris a beau y faire, 'Je' n'est pas un autre. S'il lui faudra encore près d'un demi-siècle pour le reconnaître et en sourire (dans *Le ruban au cou d'Olympe*), l'évidence en est d'ores et déjà partout présente dans son journal..."

“Au dîner, je reçois plusieurs lettres. Comme toujours, elles me comblent de joie d’abord puis me plongent dans un abîme de tristesse, en me faisant sentir plus durement ma séparation. Je me couche et je dors à peine, réveillé d’abord par une petite pluie qui me force à regagner mon compartiment, puis par les moustiques, car n’ayant pas de lampe électrique je n’ai pas pu installer ma moustiquaire dans le wagon.

12 juillet.

Cafard terrible le matin, à en pleurer. Puis salut, en me plongeant dans des travaux bureaucratiques et dans la rédaction de ce journal, depuis quelques jours abandonné” (*ibid.* : 62).

Another *coup de cafard!* Clearly, the reality of this expedition was not as adventure filled as the former Surrealist had hoped. When emotions became overwhelming and the reasons he left France crowd in on him, he turned to writing, which became the real process of discovery.

Almost six months into his journey, Leiris still shows signs of being preoccupied with the people and activities he left behind. Rather than taking an interest in the situations of injustice with which he is confronted the way Gide did, Leiris expresses intermittent guilt about abandoning his political engagements in Europe¹⁴. In the middle of Dogon country, Leiris comments on news about the status of Surrealist dissidence:

“4 novembre.

Perte de ma pince à épiler. Je suis plus agacé qu’il ne s’erait par ce minime accident. Il fait figure de mauvais présage car : pas de lettre de Zette au courrier. Lettre de K., m’apprenant que le Congrès de Kharkov a formellement condamné la dissidence surréaliste” (*ibid.* : 151).

This kind of lamentation is typical of the tone of Leiris’s field notes. He finds himself inordinately attached to objects, however trivial, and memories of home. After remarking that the African women he encounters are not exciting because their nudity and promiscuity do not promise the same thrill of transgression that sexual relations with a well-dressed bourgeois lady does, he finds himself dreaming of Breton:

“14 novembre.

Nouvelle pollution nocturne. Rêvé d’ailleurs que je me réconciliais avec André Breton. Au diable la psychanalyse : je ne chercherai pas à savoir s’il a pu exister momentanément un rapport entre ces deux événements. [...] Les raptus continuent en dehors de cela, et les informations. Sanctuaires et trous où l’on jette les vieux masques sont systématiquement explorés” (*ibid.* : 157).

14. Jamin claims that one of the ethical objectives of the mission was to combat colonial racism. If this were indeed the case, it is remarkable the extent to which Leiris passes up this kind of commentary in his journal. Jean JAMIN (1992: 22) notes: “Chez Paul Rivet et Georges Henri Rivière, comme chez les membres de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti, existent une volonté d’éducation populaire, un désir de lutte contre le racisme et contre l’exclusion, contre les façons dont on traitait les sociétés colonisées à l’époque. L’ethnographie, le musée ethnographique devaient en être l’expression.”

There is an interesting juxtaposition in these observations: his reports of a lack of sexual stimulation and related feelings of frustration and impotence are set alongside the systematic accumulation of sacred ritual objects. These objects are metonymically associated with rhythm, dancing, sacrifice, and blood and thus bring with them erotic and pseudo-erotic overtones. The parallel suggests that “les raptés” and the systematic explorations of mysterious holes constitute an alternative form of satisfaction and transgression.

I will return to the erotics of their object collecting, but first a word about the institutional destinations of these artifacts. The impression Leiris creates of systematic pillaging was not misleading. The quantity of material obtained by the Dakar-Djibouti mission prompted the director of the Trocadéro, where they were to be housed, to refurbish the dilapidated space that resembled more of a flea market than museum¹⁵. The transition from an informal, haphazard atmosphere at the Troca, which was Surrealist in sensibility, to the grandiose, institutional display of objects at the Musée de l’Homme marked a profound shift in French attitudes toward non-Western cultures that was eventually consolidated after the Second World War¹⁶. Leiris’s own trajectory exemplifies the changing nature of French intellectuals’ engagement with the colonized as he evolved with the times: during the 1920s, he was taken by the magical power of Surrealist word games for which Robert Desnos was famous; by the 1930s, Leiris had become interested in the secret languages of the Dogon (Poitry 1992: 28-31). After returning from Africa, Leiris worked as an ethnographer, documenting many of the objects collected on this mission in his office in the Musée de l’Homme. These developments mark the beginning of an ongoing process of incorporating elements from France’s overseas territories into French cultural practices and institutions. All of this was part of a deeper reorganization and rationalization of French national identity within the context of the nation’s imperial legacy.

One of the most influential interpretations of this process of conceptual adjustment among the French intelligentsia as a result of the new terms of their involvement with the cultures and peoples colonized by France has been the argument James Clifford advanced in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988). As a means of accounting for conceptual affinities between Surrealism and ethnography Clifford proposes that both activities involve a process

15. Eventually, the objects collected during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission found their way to the Musée de l’Homme, which opened its doors in 1938. For a more detailed account of the transition from the Trocadero to the Musée de l’Homme, see CLIFFORD (1988: 117-151).

16. It was not until after the Second World War that ethnography developed into the social science of anthropology. The combination of postwar humanism, anthropology and Marxism was an important source of intellectual inspiration for the editors of *Les Temps modernes*, for example. For more, see chapter five. See also Howard DAVIES (1987).

of cultural defamiliarization. He compares Surrealism's effort to make familiar aspects of French culture strange with ethnographers whose purpose is to make strange cultures familiar. The elementary process of rethinking cultural values and pushing conceptual limits is captured in the way Clifford has linked the avant-garde dimensions of early ethnography and Surrealism. He associates the assault on conventional perceptions of cultural values that had been leveled against the bourgeois establishment by Dada and Surrealism with a relativization of European cultural superiority in relation to the colonies. He plays up the similarities between avant-garde art and ethnography and argues that they both served to decenter European cultural authority during the 1930s.

To illustrate his comparison of Surrealism and ethnography, Clifford cites the Collège de Sociologie as his unique example of ethnographic Surrealism and Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* as his one example of Surrealist ethnography but he admits that both are utopic constructs (Clifford 1988: 142-147). The limited scope of his examples is less a problem than their *utopic* status; this raises questions about what it is in this period of French intellectual history that Clifford seeks to appropriate for the purposes of advancing contemporary criticism of European cultural practices. If ethnography helped make the distant cultures of the populations colonized by France more visible to a metropolitan public, the nature of the process still preserved the centrality of a French perspective. Although Clifford views the collection and display of African art objects in Parisian museums as redemptive and fueled by a nostalgic idealization of African art as something "pure" to be recuperated by the West, he fails to recognize the implications of how this French idealization of Africa is embedded in a colonialist epistemology.

While it is true that Leiris offers a self-consciously subjective account of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission's journey across the continent, this does not ultimately decenter his European cultural assumptions and initiatives. There are multiple episodes that reveal how *L'Afrique fantôme* remains anchored in a French cultural perspective. Leiris' repeated accounts of the interactions he and Griaule had with the natives with whom they did business rather explicitly establishes the fact that they were sent in the pocket of the colonial administration. They visit one colonial administrator after the next. The financial transactions between the Frenchmen who pay almost nothing for sacred objects and the villagers who hand over their possession—often under coercion—is illustrated in the following passage where Leiris tells about the arrival of some objects he and Griaule had purchased:

"29 août.

Pendant que Lutten visite le village, je travaille dans le bureau de l'administrateur avec les interprètes. Les objets arrivés, paiement. Le petit sac noir qui contient la monnaie — le sac à malice — est plusieurs fois dénoué et renoué. Le carnet d'inventaire s'emplit. Il ne nous est pas encore arrivé d'acheter à un homme ou une femme tous ses vêtements et de le laisser nu sur la route, mais cela viendra certainement" (Leiris 1981 : 96-97).

Griaule opposed the publication of *L'Afrique fantôme* because of passages like this one. Leiris put his friendship on the line with his decision to publish, since Griaule felt the book would compromise the future development of ethnography. Leiris admits: "Ce livre, inopportunist-on, [est] de nature à desservir les ethnographes auprès des Européens établis dans les territoires coloniaux" (*ibid.* : 7). Even if Leiris recounts with irony how they pillaged one African village after the next for every interesting object that counted as art in Paris, his tongue-in-cheek humor does not remove their actions from the colonial framework which made them possible.

Several days later, Leiris relates another episode—perhaps the most often-quoted passage in all of *L'Afrique fantôme*—about their aggressive means of acquiring artifacts with bribery and threats. This time, Leiris tells of how he and Griaule confiscated a sacred mask from the Kono in the Sudan. Upon arriving in the village of Kéméni, Leiris and Griaule noticed a spectacular hut and requested permission to go inside:

"6 septembre.

À Kéméni (24 km de Bla) repérage d'une magnifique case non plus de *nya* mais de *Kono*. J'ai déjà vu celle de Mpésoba (je suis même entré la nuit dans la cour) mais celle-ci est bien plus belle avec ses niches remplies de crânes et d'os d'animaux sacrifiés, sous les ornements pointus de terre séchée en style soudanais. Nous brûlons d'envie de voir le *Kono*. Griaule fait dire qu'il faut le sortir. Le chef du *Kono* fait répondre que nous pouvons offrir un sacrifice" (*ibid.* : 102-103).

When Griaule and Leiris expressed an interest in seeing the Kono mask, the chief explains that it is kept in a sacred place and that they will have to offer a sacrifice of two chickens per person. They did not appreciate the complications; thus, Griaule decided to blackmail the elders with ten francs and a threat of legal punishment by the colonial administration if they were not allowed to enter:

"On nous raconte maintenant encore une autre histoire : le chef du *Kono* a dit que nous devions choisir nous-mêmes notre sacrificateur. Mais, naturellement, lorsque nous voulons faire ce choix, tout le monde se récusait. Nous demandons à nos propres boys s'ils ne peuvent faire eux-mêmes le sacrifice ; ils se récusent aussi, visiblement affolés. Griaule décrète alors, et fait dire au chef de village par Mamadou Vad que, puisqu'on se moque décidément de nous, il faut, en représailles, nous livrer le *Kono* en échange de 10 francs, sous peine que la police soi-disant cachée dans le camion prenne le chef et les notables du village pour les conduire à San où ils expliqueront devant l'administration. Affreux chantage !" (*ibid.* : 103-104).

Leiris's commentary of this event is complicated: alternating between signs of cynical disapproval of the blackmail and wonderment at the knife-carrying European's power. By this point, neither Griaule nor Leiris actually wanted to go inside, so they tried to send in someone else. Left with no choice, they went in and removed the sacred mask:

“Devant la maison du *Kono*, nous attendons. Le chef de village est écrasé. Le chef du *Kono* a déclaré que, dans de telles conditions, nous pourrions emporter le fétiche. Mais quelques hommes restés avec nous ont l’air à tel point horrifiés que la vapeur du sacrilège commence à nous monter réellement à la tête et que, d’un bond, nous nous trouvons jetés sur un plan de beaucoup supérieur à nous-mêmes. D’un geste théâtral, j’ai rendu le poulet au chef et maintenant, comme Makan vient de revenir avec sa bâche, Griaule et moi demandons que les hommes aillent chercher le *Kono*. Tout le monde refusant, nous y allons nous-mêmes, emballons l’objet saint dans la bâche et sortons comme des voleurs, cependant que le chef affolé s’enfuit et, à quelque distance, fait rentrer dans une case sa femme et ses enfants en les frappant à grands coups de bâton. Nous traversons le village devenu complètement désert et, dans un silence de mort, nous arrivons aux véhicules. Les hommes sont rassemblés à distance. Lorsque nous débouchons sur la place, l’un d’eux part en courant vers les champs et fait filer en toute hâte un groupe de garçons et de filles qui arrivent à ce moment. Ils disparaissent dans les maïs, plus vite encore que cette fillette aperçue tout à l’heure dans le dédale des ruelles à mur pisé et qui a fait demi-tour, maintenant sa calebasse sur sa tête et pleurant” (*ibid.* : 104).

The author’s lingering attention to detail here is remarkable. The way in which he observes his own theatrical gestures suggests a perverse delight in their demonstration of will and power. Similarly, the careful reporting of such details as the villagers’ flight, the young woman’s tears, and the deserted village square exhibits an utter lack of compassion for their disruption of the community’s well-being. The way in which the pink-eared men came and violated the spiritual integrity of this community was no doubt lamented for years to come. What is more, Leiris seems to relish the status of demon, thief, and culprit. He describes their departure:

“Les 10 francs sont donnés au chef et nous partons en hâte, au milieu de l’ébahissement général et parés d’une auréole de démons ou de salauds particulièrement puissants ou osés. À peine arrivés à l’étape (Dyabougou), nous déballons notre butin : c’est un énorme masque à forme vaguement animale, malheureusement détérioré, mais entièrement recouvert d’une croûte de sang coagulé qui lui confère la majesté que le sang confère à toutes choses” (*ibid.* : 104).

The following day, they take another mask before leaving the region. Leiris describes this scene with the same sense of amazement but adds that his heart was beating harder the second time: “Mon cœur bat très fort car, depuis le scandale d’hier, je perçois avec plus d’acuité l’énormité de ce que nous commettons” (*ibid.* : 105). A bit later, he admits a sense of disgust: “...je constate avec une stupeur qui, un certain temps après seulement, se transforme en dégoût, qu’on se sent tout de même joliment sûr de soi lorsqu’on est un blanc et qu’on tient un couteau dans sa main...” (*ibid.*). It is only *after the fact* that the excitement this form of violent transgression and violation generates turns to disgust and self-reproach for Leiris. It would seem that this kind of object collecting replaced the stimulation of sexual relations with a well-dressed lady no longer possible in the African

bush. He juxtaposes these activities a bit later; after describing the regrettable nudity of African women, he writes:

“Faire l’amour avec une femme blanche, c’est la dépouiller d’un grand nombre de conventions, la mettre nue aussi bien au point de vue matériel qu’au point de vue des institutions. Rien de tel n’est possible avec une femme [noire] dont les institutions sont si différentes des nôtres. A certains égards, ce n’est plus une ‘femme’ à proprement parler.

Sortie de masques complètement ratée : une de ces lamentables reconstitutions auxquelles nous avons bien fait de ne pas nous livrer” (*ibid.* : 148).

Whereas the titillation of institutional transgression is not possible with the women he meets on the road, it is with the masks they steal—as long as they are authentic, sacred, and acquired as a result of much effort. He notes that blood-stained objects add a magical dimension to these scenarios.

The sacred Kono mask they “bought” for ten francs, with the more than 3,500 objects collected on this mission, became what Hal Foster (1985) calls “aestheticized commodities” on display in Parisian museums. But more important than the commodification of aesthetics is the way in which the collection of these objects violently disrupts their cultural vitality by removing them from their original context in order for them to figure in a French narrative of anthropological humanism. Given the political implications of the form of cultural exploitation described, the moments of self-reflexive humor in *L’Afrique fantôme* do not liberate this ethnographic enterprise and its methods from the colonial institutions sponsoring them. If anything, Leiris’ comical remove in the narrative further inculcates these men who apparently recognized the contradictions between their ostensibly enlightened ideas and the exploitation of their actions. What is important to note here, because often overlooked in criticism, is how the cultural idiom of vanguard primitivism, a colonialist epistemology, and the social institutions of empire were inextricably linked during the interwar period.

As noted at the outset, Leiris’s foibles endow *L’Afrique fantôme* with a distinct humanity, but, he, ultimately, does not transcend the institutions in which he operated. As they make their way past Niamey, in present-day Niger, where they are taken captive by Tuaregs, the brevity of Leiris’s tone suggests fatigue: “27 décembre. Captifs de Touareg voilés, ânes, chameaux, bœufs porteurs, caravanes” (Leiris 1981 : 186). A week later when traveling on the road from Niamey to Cameroon, he writes: “Griaule et moi avons les lèvres gercées, à cause de l’air si sec. Les yeux fatigués par le sable, le soleil, le vent de la marche, je me résigne à mettre mes lunettes noires, dont l’opacité me sépare du monde et m’endort” (*ibid.* : 190). In the end, Leiris tells a story of a disenchantment analogous to the one Gide relates in his travel journals, except that Gide became directly involved in the documentation and rectification of specific instances of colonial abuses which Leiris did not. In both cases, similar traces of the authors’ European, bourgeois sensibility remain, which, for Leiris, was a source of

surprise and dismay. Leiris recalls his previous frustration with Gide's discussion of European literature in his African travel journals:

"15 février.

Nous avons tous plus ou moins fait des rêves érotiques, à cause du froid, peut-être, ou de la dureté des couches. Curieuse mécanique des organes de l'amour... Lutten et Mouchet n'étant toujours pas là, Griaule, Schaeffner et moi repartons vers Ngaoundéré.

Autrefois je reprochais à Gide de parler fréquemment, dans le récit de son voyage en Afrique, de ses lectures, par exemple Milton ou Bossuet. Je m'aperçois maintenant que c'est très naturel. Le voyage ne nous change que par moments. La plupart du temps vous restez tristement pareil à ce que vous aviez toujours été. Je me rends compte en constatant que très souvent Schaeffner et moi avons des conversations sur des sujets littéraires ou esthétiques" (*ibid.* : 225).

Curiously, Leiris views discussions about literature and aesthetics as *discontinuous* with their ethnographic enterprise in Africa. This avowal reveals both Leiris's previous expectations about travel in Africa and the eventual demise of those illusions after several months on the road. This admission further clarifies how the information collected during their trek across Africa was filtered through the minds of intellectuals who found conversation about the great works of the European literary tradition irresistible, even once they arrived in the long-awaited African bush. But the fact that an aesthetic filter should be present was not at all incongruous; on the contrary, aesthetics were at the origin of French intellectuals' engagement with non-Western cultures in ethnographic terms¹⁷. What this statement belies is how their center of gravity remained European and that his was cause for dismay.

Clifford's proposition that Parisian intellectuals' growing interest in the cultures of France's colonial territories set in motion a decentering of Western European cultural authority problematic and inaccurate. Such a view may be ethically and conceptually appealing, but it obscures what had to be overcome on the other end of the equation by the colonized. Clifford's discussion of these cultural developments creates the illusion that French intellectuals initiated a critical discourse which brought about the decentering of their own cultural authority. But vanguard primitivism was a Eurocentric idiom that had to be revised and expanded to accommodate a colonized point of view, and thus an accurate assessment of this European discourse's liberating potential must take into account these pitfalls inherent in colonial culture. It is very evident that cross-cultural dialogue has taken place and that it led to cultural change, aesthetic innovation, and a dynamic

17. In an essay on the development of ethnographic methods, published in a special number of *Minotaure* devoted to the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, Griaule acknowledges "l'engouement pour l'art nègre" as one of the primary sources of inspiration for the development of French ethnography. See GRIAULE (1933: 7-12).

that transformed actors on both sides of the colonial divide. However, the cultural adjustments that have come as a result should not be overestimated as they have been partial, incremental and are still incomplete. The beginning of a partial away from Europe as the center of gravity among the French intelligentsia—which was a limited phenomenon in any case—came as a result not of initiatives generated in France but of a growing awareness of the anti-colonial protest of such figures as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon.

Another influential explanation of French engagements with Africa is a recycled version of Edward Said's original hypothesis that the European gesture of reaching out toward foreign cultures brings the intellectual face to face with his or her own desire¹⁸. This, too, is a powerful and persuasive idea but it forecloses the possibility of dynamic processes and incremental change over time, in contrast to Clifford's approach, which claims too much forward-looking optimism for European avant-gardes. Although Leiris's perceptive filter was clouded by personal preoccupations and vanguard primitivism while in Africa during the 1930s, seeds were planted that allowed subsequent experiences—his friendship with Aimé Césaire, more travel in Africa and the Caribbean—to refine his views of non-Western cultures. With regard to European epistemologies and perceptions of Otherness, Marc Augé has provocatively observed that ethnographers of the kind described in *L'Afrique fantôme* were principally engaged in dialogue with themselves and that this generally tends to be the case (Augé 1992: 36-40).

But how, then, can one account for the fact that Leiris did remain in dialogue with himself at each step of the way *and* made revisions to his perceptions of non-Western cultures in the course of his life? Whereas I find Augé's warning salutary for explaining any given moment or instance of apprehension, more information is needed to unravel the paradox Leiris's trajectory exemplifies. What is of crucial importance and too often neglected by models of cultural solipsism is the degree to which French ideas were changed by input from the colonies. These models of cultural interpretation are useful for foregrounding dynamics of self-interest, desire, and projection, but their focus on one-way agency cannot account for cross-cultural innovation and change over time. If taken too far, such a line of reasoning can, in fact, wind up supporting the colonial master's dream of omnipotence in which the colonized pupil is reduced to soft putty in the colonial master's hands.

It seems hard to dispute the Eurocentric view of African art and its sponsorship by the art establishment in France during the interwar years. The Dakar-Djibouti Mission, for example, was financed in part by the French

18. The idea of European intellectuals reaching out towards Africa and bringing back impressions which have more to do with their own preoccupations and desires is also in line with the argument Christopher MILLER (1985) makes.

government and by black-tie *soirées* held as fund-raisers, which were attended by well-to-do white men in shiny shoes. The trendiness of “l’art nègre” as it was called, during the interwar years attracted both the establishment and its dissidents; it appealed to wealthy art dealers as well as to avant-garde artists and ethnographers¹⁹. The diverse sponsorship and interest in the Dakar-Djibouti mission shows how French primitivism was a cultural phenomenon that had less to do with decentering French cultural authority than in adjusting certain aspects of French identity in response to the consolidation of France’s colonial empire. As an event, the Dakar-Djibouti mission suggests an elaborate process of interpreting and sorting out cultural differences. Early French ethnography took shape thus as part of an attempt to derive a conceptual vocabulary with which to articulate internal mutations in French culture that resulted from an unprecedented engagement with the cultures and populations of France’s overseas territories. It took time, however, for the cultural practices that were inspired by vanguard primitivism to develop into more thoughtful forms of cultural inquiry. At this point, vanguard primitivism shared by Surrealists and dissident Surrealists-turned-ethnographers stemmed from their own disillusionment with European society as French intellectuals. During the interwar period, the French avant-garde’s conceptual appropriation of this distant otherness was motivated by a Western desire for an idealized “primitive” existence, as that which came before decadent cosmopolitan life.

The practice of reaching out to Africa and bringing back cultural artifacts in the manner Leiris describes ineluctably reinscribes the fundamental power relations of colonialism, which allows these “raw materials” to be fashioned into products for metropolitan consumption. The power relations that define this form of cultural “exchange” are most clear to those who are disempowered by the transaction. In fact, the position of unavowed privilege that avant-garde artists and intellectuals enjoyed during the interwar years created a critical blindness in their perception of all aspects of the “primitive” cultures in question. In Western fantasies, “primitive” art tends to be located in the past, in association with an idealized former existence, and this vision proved to be incompatible with a view of African artists as active contributors in the redefinition of contemporary culture.

With time, Leiris acknowledged the limits of his subjective filter in the preface he wrote to the second edition of *L’Afrique fantôme* in 1950:

“Je ne puis nier, toutefois, que l’Afrique du début de l’avant-dernière décennie était elle aussi bien réelle et que ce n’est donc pas à elle mais à moi qu’il faut que je m’en prenne si les problèmes humains qui s’y posaient déjà ne m’ont frappé que

19. André Breton, who had his own personal art collection, was attracted to art from Oceania very early on and actually became involved in buying and selling art as a means of supporting himself.

lorsqu'ils revêtaient l'aspect d'abus absolument criants, sans m'arracher pour autant à mon subjectivisme de rêveur" (Leiris 1981 : 12).

Leiris's "subjectivisme de rêveur" did not allow him to engage in a meaningful way with the social and political realities he encountered, although he acknowledges with retrospect that they were there for him to see²⁰. The vocabulary he uses to describe the limits of his perspective in 1931 explicitly evoke Surrealism and its concept of the subject²¹. As Leiris describes his change in perspective he, like Breton, refers to his experience of the Second World War:

"C'est un livre bien dépassé par la situation — et pour moi bien vieilli — que cette *Afrique fantôme* réimprimée aujourd'hui quelques années après la mise au pilon, durant l'occupation allemande, de presque tout le reliquat de sa première édition" (*ibid.* : 11).

Leiris discusses the censorship of *L'Afrique fantôme* under Vichy France, as well as a change in attitudes with respect to the questions of race, nation, and forms of political protest. This preface parallels the conceptual shift Breton describes in his essay (1983) about Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Both the spirit and tone of Leiris's preface echo Breton's essay about *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, where Breton admits the limits of his political vision before his West Indian epiphany. The Second World War helped the left-wing intelligentsia in France see colonial exploitation and Negritude's reaction to it in a new light. In the end, Leiris went farther than Breton did in updating his ideas and values with the times. During the postwar period, Leiris went on to become the poetry editor for Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes*, where he introduced Aimé Césaire's poetry.

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20. Jean JAMIN (1992: 24) describes the same phenomenon: "Non, car *L'Afrique fantôme* n'est pas un livre anticolonialiste. Il est encore marqué par cette sorte d'ironie romantique, par cette déception, ce désenchantement qui ont caractérisé les années 1930. En dépit du mot d'ordre surréaliste emprunté à la fois à Rimbaud et à Marx 'changer la vie — transformer le monde' on cherche plus à détourner en dérision la vie et le monde présents qu'à les changer ou les transformer."

21. After his involvement with the Dakar-Djibouti mission, Leiris remained interested in France's colonies and, following the Second World War, was more involved with anti-colonial politics influenced by his friendship with Aimé Césaire. After the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, Leiris traveled in the French West Indies and the Ivory Coast on assignments similarly related to French colonialism in these regions. In his preface and *préambule* to *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris discusses the evolution of his thinking and engagement with political issues related to France's colonies over time. Marc AUGÉ (1992: 36-40) makes the point that whether Leiris's deception with and in Africa involved disappointed Surrealist notions or disillusionment with revolutionary decolonization, Leiris was in both cases trapped in an ethnographer's dialogue with himself.

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ABSTRACT

Michel Leiris set sail for Africa a disillusioned Surrealist, in search of new skin. He fled his metropolitan worries, bringing with him a vanguard primitivism that clouded his perception of Africa, its peoples and cultures. Unable to shake his dreams of Breton and longing for well-dressed women, he turned to self-examination and writing. As archivist and secretary of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, his journal *L'Afrique fantôme* offers a window on to the developing field of ethnography, its methods and institutions, as well as the ethics of object collecting. Plundering villages for items to display in Parisian museums became a pseudo-erotic enterprise for the frustrated Leiris, who delighted in the thrill of his knife-wielding power. What he finds in the African bush, to his dismay, is the persistence of his Frenchness rather than himself as primitive Other. Leiris's participation in this historical fieldwork expedition was, however, just the beginning of a life-long engagement with Africa and a process of incorporating elements from the colonies into French cultural practices and institutions.

RÉSUMÉ

À la recherche d'une nouvelle personnalité : *L'Afrique fantôme de Michel Leiris*. — Michel Leiris s'embarqua pour l'Afrique en surréaliste déçu, à la recherche d'une nouvelle personnalité. Il fuyait ses ennuis métropolitains, emportant avec lui un primitivisme d'avant-garde qui obscurcissait sa perception de l'Afrique, de ses peuples et de ses cultures. Incapable de se débarrasser de son obsession pour Breton et éprouvant le manque de femmes bien vêtues, il se tourna vers l'introspection et l'écriture. En tant qu'archiviste et secrétaire de la mission Dakar-Djibouti, son journal *L'Afrique fantôme* offre un éclairage sur l'ethnographie naissante, ses méthodes et ses institutions, de même que sur l'éthique de la collecte des objets. Le pillage dans les villages d'objets destinés à être exposés dans les musées parisiens prend la forme d'un fantasme pseudo-érotique qui répond à la frustration de Leiris et qui accroît la jouissance de ce dernier tout armé qu'il est de son statut de Blanc. Ce qu'il découvre dans la brousse, à sa grande déception, c'est la persistance de sa qualité de Français plutôt que son existence en tant qu'Autre primitif. La participation de Leiris à cette expédition historique fut néanmoins l'amorce d'un engagement de toute une vie aux côtés de l'Afrique ainsi que le début d'un processus d'incorporation, dans les institutions et les pratiques culturelles françaises, d'éléments en provenance des colonies.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, primitivism, avant-garde, museums, ethnography, surrealism, colonialism, Dakar-Djibouti Mission/*Michel Leiris*, *L'Afrique fantôme*, *primitivisme*, *avant-garde*, *musées*, *ethnographie*, *surréalisme*, *colonialisme*, *Mission Dakar-Djibouti*.