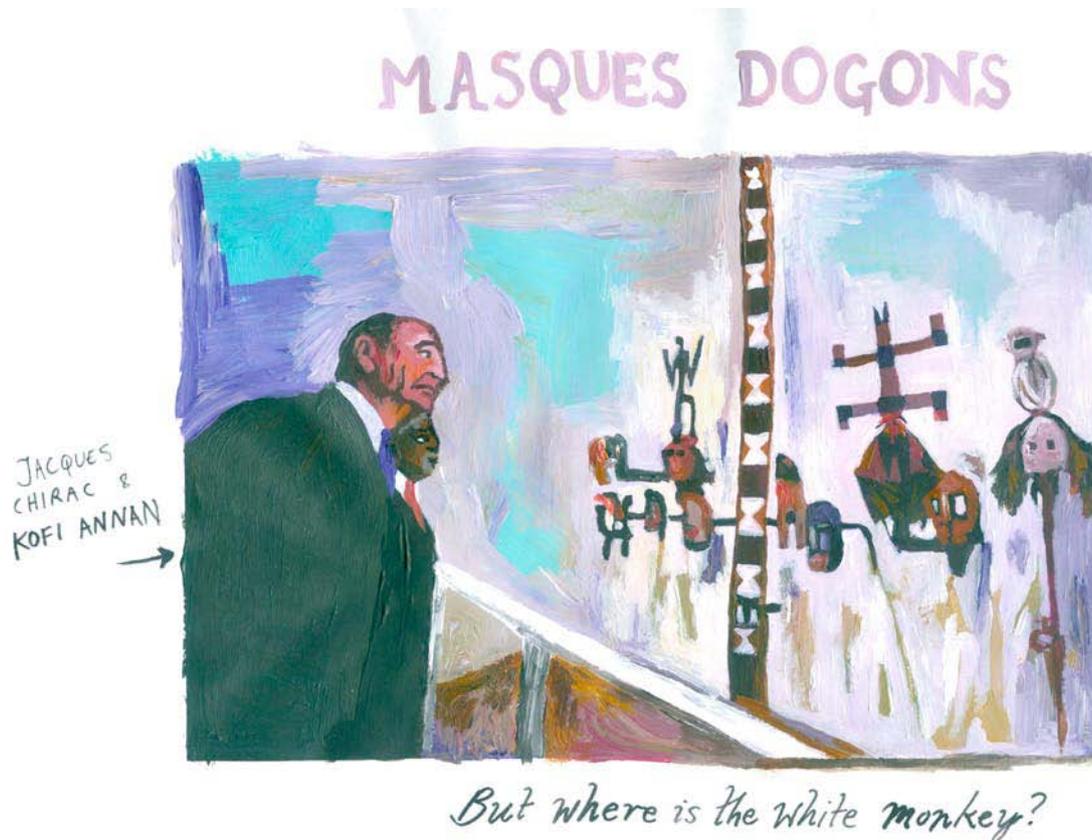


But where is the white monkey?



But where is the white monkey?

On the 20th June, 2006, Jacques Chirac, President of the Republic of France, opened the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) in Paris. Designed by architect Jean Nouvel, the museum was built to house the African, Oceanian, American and Asian collections of the Louvre and the Musée de l'Homme, as well as millions of euros worth of newly purchased artefacts. Chirac, apparently a big fan of African art, saw this as his opportunity to make his mark on Parisian cultural life, as his predecessor François Mitterrand had inaugurated many significant cultural sites in the city.

Chirac's deference to difference was undoubtedly also inspired by the racial riots that rocked Paris last year. One of the museum's missions was "Dissipating the fogs of ignorance" and promoting the "fragile flowers of difference"¹ evoked by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, somewhat incredibly, was present at the launch of the Theatre that bears his name, at 98 very ripe years of age.

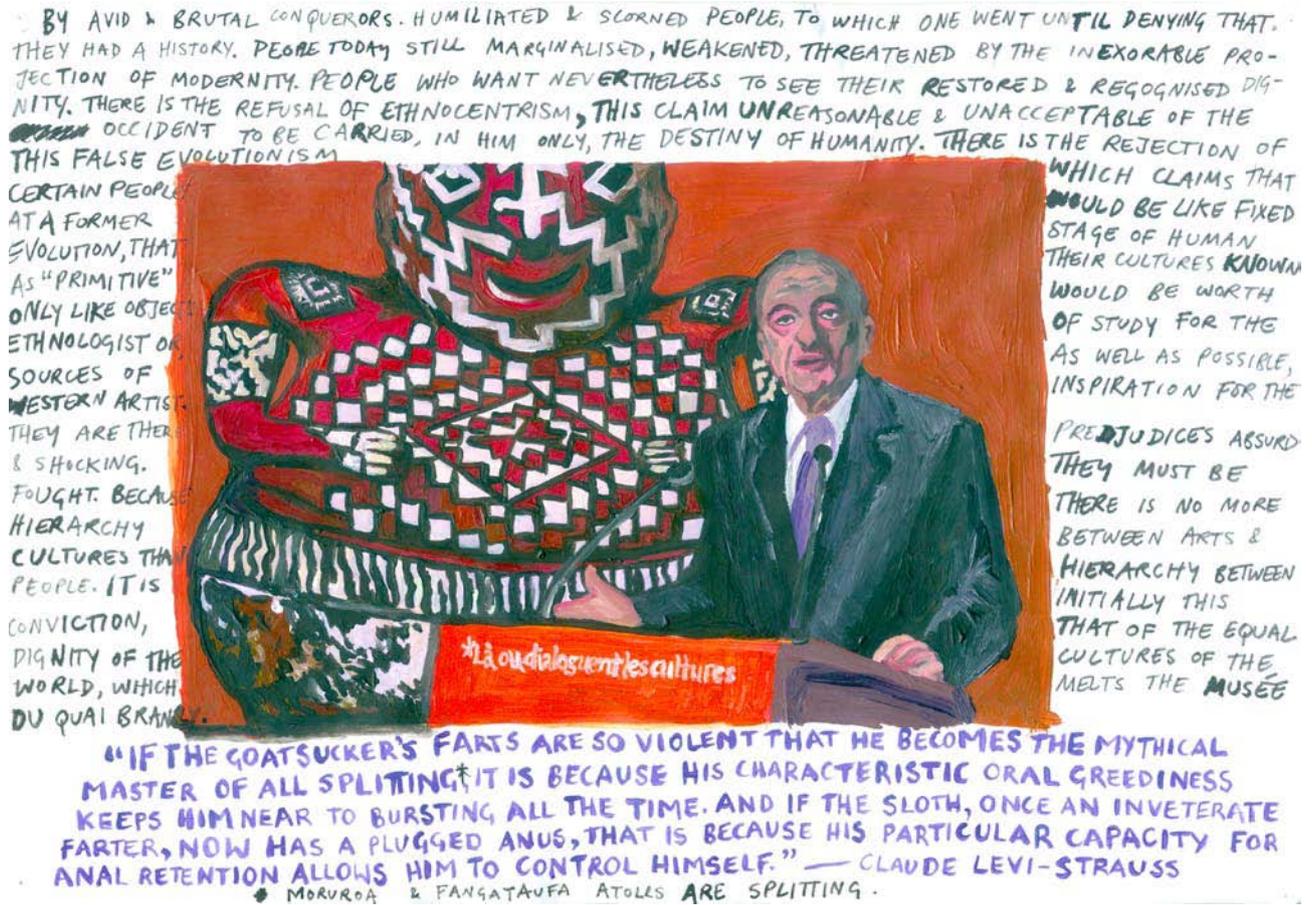
Chirac declared, "There is no hierarchy among the arts, just as there is no hierarchy among peoples." Added to this, the

Tessa Laird, *But where is the white monkey?* Detail of *Another Museum of the Other presents: Te Tari Pekapeka/Department of Bats*, Curated by Rascar Capac, Principal Sponsor: The Zongge Tribe, Ceramics and acrylic paintings, dimensions variable, 2006

museum pays homage to those who have suffered conquest, violence and humiliation.² One can only ponder if Chirac extends this soothing cultural balm to the victims of French nuclear testing in the Pacific, given that Chirac himself reinstated these tests after their long hiatus on his 1995 election into power.

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Seven days after Chirac's inauguration of Paris's newest museum, I'm standing in the very long queue in the still partially uncompleted courtyard, reeling from 24 hours of flying, the Parisian summer heat, and the buzz of voices I barely understand. The new museum seems to be the talk of the town, eclipsed only by the World Cup. I saw banners for



Musée du Quai Branly at the airport, with the subtitle "Where cultures are in dialogue". Elsewhere, such as the cover of *Télérama* magazine, the subtitle is the almost unbelievably embarrassing "The Museum of the Other."²³ I can just catch a glimpse of the photographs by Michael Parekowhai and Fiona Pardington donated by the New Zealand government. They're over by the restaurant, but much of that area is still under construction, and is cordoned off. It's the only contemporary work I'll be seeing today, except for that of Australian Aboriginal painters, and the Trin T. Minh Ha video work which does little more than slightly confuse visitors with a spray of barely visible (in the light) images and texts about self and other as they walk up the ramp on the way to the galleries.

The galleries themselves are beautifully constructed – promoting a seamless perambulation that's supposed to echo the sinuous curves of the Seine. The long hall is subdivided by a snaking partition which doubles as a place to sit, and there are countless little coves with information kiosks embedded into the walls, featuring texts and videos in which numerous indigenous folk talk of their lifeways. Still, I couldn't see any evidence of the conquest, violence and humiliation that Chirac had mentioned. There was no effort to contextualise these works in a history of colonial plundering, no attempt to explain the trajectory of the objects from their sources to their current resting places.

Tessa Laird, *The mythical master of all splitting* Detail of *Another Museum of the Other presents: Te Tari Pekapeka/Department of Bats*, Curated by Rascar Capac, Principal Sponsor: The Zongge Tribe, Ceramics and acrylic paintings, dimensions variable, 2006

Fred Wilson, the American artist who made his name from the astute rearranging of museum set pieces, kicked off his career with *Colonial Collection* in 1990, a selection of African masks which were blindfolded with either the Tricolore or the Union Jack, depending on which colonial power (French Vanilla or Plain Vanilla) had asserted its dominance in the region. The wall tags next to these works, rather than tracing a lineage of white collectors, as most museums do, said very simply "Stolen from the Zongge Tribe"²⁴ if that was the tribe in question. Yet the MQB remains quite silent on this issue.

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I was in Paris to participate in a conference called *New Zealand, France and the Pacific*. Organised by the UK-based New Zealand Studies Association, it seemed, like most conferences, an excuse to junket. Papers on just about any aspect that connected the three designated topic zones were accepted, and, apart from the keynotes, they were each 20 minutes long, and ran in multiple streams. Many deliveries were hurried and plagued with mispronunciations and possibly, misapprehensions. After three days of hearing

Europeans pontificate about Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, *Whale Rider*, and the haka, I realised how it felt to be “the other”. I was frustrated by my marginal status – both grateful to be receiving attention from the global “centre”, and suspicious of that attention’s intentions.

Not since Paul Gauguin left Paris for Tahiti has Oceania been so hip. Within the last couple of years, shows in London, Paris, New York and Cambridge have profiled New Zealand Pasifika artists, with attendant programmes, seminars, and performances. And while it’s exciting that our artists are gaining an international audience, I wonder if it’s not still a case of exoticisation of “the other”. A friend told me a story of how a Maori man with moko was recently using the Paris metro. A local was heard to exclaim, “Oh la la, le nouveau sauvage!”

More evidence of such novelty from the periphery was to be found in the location of our conference dinner, at a restaurant in a chi-chi quarter of Paris, called Kiwi Corner. Run by enterprising young antipodeans, the menu is a mash-up of New Zealand, Australian, and Pacific flavours. The décor, however, is pure Kiwiana: Maori carvings mingle with scenic photographs. Listening to Fat Freddy’s Drop, and sipping 42 Below vodka, I felt simultaneously soothed and irked by the all-too-neat packaging of my homeland. But my main course was anything but soothing – the vegetarian option was a pastry package filled with kiwifruit and cheese, which looked, and tasted, like a stomach stuffed with waring savours. It was a reminder that *métissage*, or cultural fusion, can be a fraught and difficult process.

In the Musée du Quai Branly, I walk up the long hall of Oceanian art. There are amazing pieces from Papua New Guinea. There’s a Sepik beam floating from the ceiling, covered in heads with round ears and sharp teeth. Having spent the last few years engaged in studying pan-cultural imagery of bats, I’m pretty positive that these are bat spirits, though the signage doesn’t identify them as such. Photography is forbidden – I’ve just asked one of the guards in my halting French, so I make a hasty sketch of the bat beam in my notebook instead.

Almost all the guards are African, and almost all the visitors are white. I keep wondering what the guards really think of this situation, and about the designation of the art of their homelands as “the other”. Do they see themselves as “the other” or are they French or both? Do they feel connected to this art, or is it just a job? Are they bemused by the fascination these artefacts have for those who have little time or respect for real live Africans?

The skin colour of the guards puts me in mind of another Fred Wilson work, *Guarded View* (1991), in which the artist displayed dark-skinned shop dummies in museum guard uniforms. When giving an artist’s talk about the work, Wilson, who is African-American, played a trick on his public. Excusing himself for a minute, he put on a guard’s uniform and came back into the room. No one noticed him, and several complaints were made about his disappearance.

Of course, Michael Parekowhai has explored similar territory with *Poorman, Beggarman and Thief* (1994), in which three dummies modelled on Parekowhai’s father stood sentinel in galleries, looking like the clean cut Maori “entertainers” of the 1950s; and *Kapa Haka* (2003), in which fibreglass models of Parekowhai’s security guard brother stanchioned out gallery visitors, underlining the ethnic divide operating in such low-paid, but dangerous work.⁵

I wonder about the morality of using the designs I’ve sketched in my notebook for future artworks. I’ve just been reading Anne D’Alleva’s *Art of the Pacific* where she says that in Papua New Guinea, many of these kinds of ritualistic objects would only be visible to the male initiates of the tribe. And here they are for all the world, or at least the Parisian bourgeoisie, to see.

It becomes increasingly difficult to look at the funerary reliquaries. There are human skulls on show from PNG, hard to regard as “art objects” when even reproductions of moko mokai are now jealously guarded in Aotearoa. There’s a section where Papuan fetishes, made with human hair and other highly charged ritual ingredients, look too dangerous to even approach. I don’t believe these objects have lost their power. They were built to terrify, and they still terrify. I hurry on. There’s a giant globe with an interactive map showing the origins of the collections. New Zealand emerges from a soupy water of pixels. I want to lay my hand on it and say “home.” But I don’t want these Europeans to “other” me, either. For as long as I can, I’ll blend in.

There’s not much Maori work here, and what there is has no tribal affiliation indicated by the signage. But I do enjoy the juxtaposition of a Maori canoe prow with a Moluccan prow known as *kora ulu*. Somehow, this simple visual comparison helps to bridge the yawning gaps of Oceania, and categories of Polynesian, Melanesian, and Asian seem arbitrary and permeable.

There are a couple of other moments like this – the Siberian Shaman costume looks so much like North American Indian Shaman costumes, that it’s almost as though the Bering Land Bridge happened only yesterday, while California Indians wore grass skirts that looked not unlike piupiu. I salivated over a 19th century padded green jacket from the Shan of Myanmar. So very Princess Leia! I saw the white monkey mask of the eminently cool Dogon.⁶ And I thought I smelt a faint whiff of incense, as if these objects had had some kind of sacred inauguration.

I experienced moments of elation and moments of a kind of dread and even nausea (perhaps it was the jetlag). I felt giddy at the enormity and weirdness of it all. Because, no matter the architecture, the multimedia, the MONEY, it was still white people looking at the sacred artefacts of non-white people for a frisson, a tingling of the nerves, a form of entertainment like any other. And while it’s an enormous privilege to be able to view such works, it’s one I’d gladly relinquish for the far greater privilege of witnessing the return of these objects, masterpieces, taonga, to their original people and contexts.

In the end, I think that the only truly “modern” museum is one that repatriates its collections. Just imagine all the “going home” stories! If each one could be as detailed and magnificent as the one elucidated by Paul Tapsell in *Pukaki: A Comet Returns*, we would be culturally richer, not poorer, for the process. These are the stories I want to hear.

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I once heard a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a Mexican man who repatriated an ancient codex from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.⁷ And a story about Native American elders, who, as they were performing a ritualistic dance to entertain the whitefolk at a museum, were secretly squirreling their sacred artefacts into a truck out the back. Then there’s Barry Barclay’s fictional feature *Te Rua*, about the repatriation of Maori carvings from a German museum. Watching the film today, there are some cringey moments of big shoulder pads and earrings, white women lusting after warriors and German curators professing themselves to be experts on things they can’t even pronounce. Well, perhaps very little but the shoulder pads have changed, for certainly, *Te Rua* is worth watching today. There are some magical moments – the gypsy who cleans the museum’s cabinets hears our Maori hero greeting his ancestors – she is moved to sing a traditional song of her people, for perhaps the first time in years. I love *Te Rua* for opening up this cross-cultural korero, for recognising that longing and loss is not the prerogative of one people.

I got particularly hot under the collar about the issue of repatriation of the Benin bronzes after watching *Artist Unknown*, an Omnibus documentary from 1995, made for British TV.⁸ In it, a Londoner of Trinidadian extraction falls in love with a bronze African mask in an antique shop, and tries to trace its lineage by interviewing a series of experts, and visiting the British Museum, before travelling to Benin City, Nigeria. The inside politics of tribal art collection that this documentary only hints at, are wickedly critiqued in Yambo Ouloguem’s 1968 novel *Bound to Violence*, where the real German anthropologist and collector Leo Frobenius is thinly disguised as the ultimate exploiter, Shrobenius:

“Thus drooling, Shrobenius derived a twofold benefit on his return home: on the one hand, he mystified the people of his own country who in their enthusiasm raised him to a lofty Sorbonnic chair, while on the other hand he exploited the sentimentality of the coons, only too pleased to hear from the mouth of a white man that Africa was ‘the womb of the world and the cradle of civilization.’

(...)

And, shrewd anthropologist that he was, he sold more than thirteen hundred pieces, deriving from the collection he had purchased from Saif and the carloads his disciples had obtained in Nakem free of charge, to the following purveyors of funds: the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, the museums of London, Basel, Munich, Hamburg, and New York. And on hundreds of other pieces he collected rental, reproduction,

and exhibition fees.

(...)

Already it had become more than difficult to procure old masks, for Shrobenius and the missionaries had had the good fortune to snap them all up. And so Saif – and the practice is still current – had slapdash copies buried by the hundredweight, or sunk into ponds, lakes, marshes, and mud holes, to be exhumed later on and sold at exorbitant prices to unsuspecting curio hunters. These three-year-old masks were said to be *charged with the weight of four centuries of civilization*. To the credulous customer, the seller pointed out the ravages of time, the malignant worms that had gnawed at these masterpieces imperilled since time immemorial, witness to their prefabricated poor condition.”⁹

After watching *Artist Unknown*, I wrote a letter to the British Museum, enquiring as to the current status of the Benin bronzes, and if there were any plans to repatriate them. It took me over a year to get a reply. Eventually, they posted me a photocopied article from the journal *Public Archaeology*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2005.

The article in question was called “The encyclopaedic museum: Enlightenment ideals, contemporary realities, A reply from Neil MacGregor and Jonathan Williams”, but I didn’t know what exactly it was a reply to. All I know is that McGregor is the Director of the British Museum while Williams works on that institution’s “international relations”.

There’s something simultaneously self-congratulatory and scared about the tone of this “reply”. Try this: “the British Museum is a resounding assertion that truth is a civic virtue that the state should foster”.(57) Orwellian? Moi? “The Museum was conceived for David Hume’s citizen of the world – a member of that international republic of letters which prized the shared pursuit of truth above national particularism. In Hume’s day, the Republic was limited to the educated of Europe and America. It is now worldwide”. (57-58) Don’t they mean it is now open to the educated and wealthy the world over? I don’t see the British Museum as performing a function for the rice-farmers of Laos and the miners of Mali. There is still an elitist assumption at play here, masquerading as equity.

But the authors of the article assure their readers that the museum is attending to this issue, not by returning artworks to their rightful owners, but by curating travelling shows! Since the 1970s “we have witnessed the unparalleled sharing of cultural patrimony, as museums in the developed world collaborated to bring great civilizations and great artists to new publics. Two recent examples: the British Museum’s exhibition on memory in world cultures was seen last year by over 1.3 million Japanese, while a selection from its Egyptian collection has now been seen by over 1.5 million North Americans”. How fantastic that the otherwise culturally starved Japanese and North Americans were able to dine out on the collections of the British Museum. What a

reversal of expectations and dominant trends! Bravo British Museum for thinking so far out of the box!

Perhaps I am being too cruel – the essay then goes on to sketch out contacts with Mexico, India, China and various African countries. And then there's a line, touching at first, which bears closer reading. "When peace returns, the British Museum will resume its longstanding collaborations with colleagues in Baghdad and Mosul". "When peace returns" implies that what's happening in Iraq is out of Britain's hands, and doesn't acknowledge that the British military continue to play an aggressive role in the misery of that country. The British Museum waxes lyrical about the global citizens it hopes to create and inspire, but can take no responsibility for carnage, past or present, can only whisper euphemistically about war, and can provide no vehicle for reparations.

In this sense I think the museums to be found in the colonial outposts, the Museum of Sydney and yes, even Te Papa, offer a far more intelligent and nuanced relationship with the people they service and the stories they tell. The British Museum and others of its ilk have a reputation based solely on their collections. No wonder they are so loathe to give them up.

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At the conference, the paper I enjoyed the most was by Eu Jin Chua, entitled "Modern Movement, *Free Radicals*: Len Lye's Animated Primitivism". Chua began by screening the film, one of the liveliest moments of the conference. According to Chua, Stan Brakhage had called the 1958 scratch animation "an almost unbelievably immense masterpiece". But as Chua notes, it is the drumming of the Sudanese Bagirmi tribe that the animations are cut to which "plays no small part in the electrifying liveliness of the film". And he asks, "whether *Free Radicals* is a kind of filmic variant of that tendency of the European primitivist to fetishise the authenticity of the state of nature that the uncivilised savage supposedly enjoys, and if so, should we denounce this film, or can we recuperate it?"

Yes, Len Lye's works and words were "primitivist", and yes, this is problematic in terms of a contemporary, post-colonial reappraisal (to a certain extent, the animations of Lisa Reihana and Veronica Vaevae have relocated the boundaries of this argument). Personally, I could never denounce Lye or *Free Radicals*, and watching the jagged, jumpy white lines on an inky ground for the millionth time, I wished for a way to integrate this powerful work into the MQB, instead of the overcooked, insipid Trinh T. Minh Ha video, or even the cool, cerebral photography of Michael Parekowhai. But how to integrate work by a white Westerner into this gallery of tribal artefacts without falling into the trap of MoMA's much-reviled 1984 *Primitivism* show, or the similarly suspect, though for different reasons, Parisian *Magiciens de La Terre* (1989)?¹⁰

My best advice to the MQB would be to hire as their head curator Benin artist Georges Adéagbo. Adéagbo's installations

combine African ritual figures with educational and political poster painting, along with the detritus of all world cultures in the form of books, records, t-shirts, and tracts of writing. Every Adéagbo installation requires a long period of research and collection on site, a return to Africa where this material is digested and often re-made, and then a return to the site where more information and material is collected. Finally, the combined words and images are assembled into a whole that is part research library, and part schematic voodoo mandala of geopolitical structure.

Sabine Vogel describes rather beautifully Adéagbo's "archival cosmos" in an essay entitled "Creativity". She says, "At night, when the exhibition is closed and the lights have gone off, the prepared primate controls the system. The index cards of the ethnological institute fly about, the computers go haywire. Things take on a new order. Somewhere there is the sound of music but there is none. The scales of humanity tip. And Georges Adéagbo proceeds to clean up".¹¹

I love the image of the museum that plays when the lights are out, which reminds me of Michael Taussig quoting Antonin Artaud, that we must "awaken the gods that sleep in museums".¹² The image of Adéagbo, however, as some kind of cosmic cleaner, is a culturally loaded one I'd like to avoid. What's fantastic about Adéagbo is that he is an African who is *not* a cleaner-away of western trash, but an artist who makes us reappraise our cultural detritus by looking at it through an African lens.

Adéagbo's *métissage* is as dense and complex as that found in the Paris Metro or in last year's riots. The MQB could use this kind of obfuscation, or rather, a clarification of the complexity of the relationships between the indigenous objects it "owns" and the contemporary Paris it "serves".

Notes

- 1 Quotes from Chirac's speech as posted by the MQB website, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/index.php?id=933>, then fed through the (wonderfully questionable) Babelfish translator.
- 2 Riding, Alan, "Imperialist? Moi? Not the Musée du Quai Branly", *New York Times*, June 22, 2006, <<http://www.nytimes.com>>
- 3 The magazine's editor, Michel Daubert, opines that all other terms are simply embarrassing: primitive, primordial, savage, Negro, tribal, outsider, opting instead for the weirdly loaded "Other".
- 4 Everything I've ever read about *Colonial Collection* cites "Stolen from the Zonge Tribe" as its example. No other tribes are mentioned, and upon attempting to research the Zonge Tribe, no references can be found, except in relation to Wilson's work. Who are this mysterious tribe? Are they Wilson's symbol for every plundered indigenous group?
- 5 The invisibility of those who serve us is thrown into high relief for the traveller. I was appalled that all the maids in my hotel were black, that all the trash collectors were black (whereas, somehow, I am inured to the Maori roadworkers and P.I. cleaners

back home). I remember asking my maid what the French word for rubbish was, holding up my wastebasket. “La poubelle” she said, with what I took to be weary resignation.

- 6 Later, I found an image on the Branly website which showed Jacques Chirac and Kofi Anan inspecting the room of *masques dogons*. I made it into an artwork, adding the question, “But where is the white monkey?” hoping that visitors will find the simian in Chirac’s pendulous features before they see it pinned to the wall. It’s a reference to one of my favourite books from childhood, “*But where is the green parrot?*”
- 7 I get so angry when I think about the Spanish Catholic zealot-bigots who burned the Mayan codices. And then one day I had a good look at some images of pre-conquest codices. All the pictures were of burning libraries.
- 8 I wrote about this in “pink eye: is this whitefella dreaming?” A review of *Albino*, Francis Upritchard and Rohan Wealleans, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, April 2004, published in the South African literary journal *Sweet*, on-line at: <http://www.substancebooks.co.za/content/view/67/62/>
- 9 Ouologuem, Yambo, *Bound to Violence*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1971, pp 95-96
- 10 The most rollicking debate on the *Primitivism* show took place in *Artforum* between a gloriously bitchy Thomas McEvilley and the waspish curator Kirk Varnedoe, and the whole text is reproduced in Beckly, Bill, (ed.), *Uncontrollable beauty: toward a new aesthetics*, New York: Allworth Press: School of Visual Arts, 1998. McEvilley was subsequently asked to provide a catalogue essay for *Magiciens de la Terre*, which desperately wanted to differentiate itself from *Primitivism*. McEvilley then reflected on the two shows and their differences in his essay “The global issue,” McEvilley, Thomas, *Art & otherness: crisis in cultural identity*. Kingston, NY, Documentext/McPherson, 1992
- 11 Vogel, Sabine, “Creativity”, Eiblymayr, Silvia, (Ed.), *Georges Adéagbo, Archaeology of Motivations – Re-writing History*, Galerie im Taxispalais, Austria, 2001, p. 55. But where is the prepared primate?
- 12 Artaud, Antonin, from *Le Theatre et son double*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 52, quoted in Taussig, Michael, *My Cocaine Museum*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2004, p. xvi. Even Ben Stiller appears to have read this.