

Telling and exhibiting minorities in France and North America: minorities and their museum mediations

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Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac / Campus Condorcet. (Paris/Aubervilliers)

Websites:

<https://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/colloques/appel-a-communication-raconter-exposer-les-minorites-mediations-museales/>

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In this symposium, we propose to examine the relationship between minorities and museums and sites of memory in North America and France and to abandon the majority viewpoint, expressed in terms of domination and assignment, to reframe the perspective. Situating ourselves from the point of view of the minority experience, we will be able to consider the minority's agency (Ndiaye, 2008; Chassain et al., 2016). Minorities are perceived and defined by the majority group as minor, according to two principles that are not mutually exclusive: numerical, which distinguishes different religious, ethnic or cultural traits, and status, which characterizes what is held to be minor, referred to the memory of the vanquished, the absence of history. In the relationship of minorities to museums, it is possible to identify two movements that, although autonomous, interact. The first, perhaps the most documented, is the one by which museums have attempted to "decolonize" narratives about the minority experience (Chivallon, 2013). In the second movement, minority groups have promoted the emergence of independent counter-narratives, in various forms, their actions often preceding the critical re-evaluation of museum policies (Laithier et al., 2008).

Since the late 1960s, museums and museum specialists have been challenged and called upon to participate in the debates raised in relation to the slaveholding past, colonial past, or nation-building phenomenon, in which they have taken since the nineteenth century (Conklin, 2013). The museology traditions, long marked by racial anthropology, have been challenged. So-called social museums have been at the center of these controversies. Thus, following the exhibition devoted to Aboriginal arts in 1987 at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada embarked on a policy of involving First Peoples in the management of museums (Dubuc, 2002, p. 31-58). Museum projects were sometimes born within academia, such as the Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, founded in 1951 —which incidentally reminds us that the United States is also concerned by the colonial question. In France, the exhibition "Les Anneaux de la Mémoire", in 1992 in Nantes, was an important moment in the return to the slave past (Hourcade, 2015). Thus, since the 1970s, the mediatization of minority histories has been largely rethought by museum practitioners, in collaboration with historians (Weiser, 2018). In the United States, African American mobilizations gave rise in the 1960s to museums on African American history and culture, such as the Du Sable Museum in Chicago (Feldman, DuSable Museum of African American History, 1981; Burns, 2013). In addition, since the 1970s, there has been a proliferation of different heritage devices that "museumize" historical sites: Indian War battlefields, concentration camps, African American cemeteries (Forsyth, 2003; Jeanmougin, Mencherini, 2013; Blee, 2018; Faucquez, 2018; Spencer, 2020). The vocation of these in-situ memorial devices, often without a collection, sometimes oscillates between commemoration and conservation. It should be remembered that the museum approach remains "critical and scientific, [unlike the] memorial one, which appeals, exclusively,

to emotion and adherence, to recollection" —the association of the two approaches can be problematic (Gob, Drouguet, 2014, p. 66). These heritage sites raise the question of sources and that of their rarity: what could be exhibited when there is no collection, what to show when there are no images? The minority fact often implies the scarcity of sources and the long absence of collecting practices that testifies to the lack of interest in these minority heritages. On the other hand, these sources sometimes become the support of a militant discourse. These debates are more topical than ever: the 2021 congress of the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) was entitled "Decolonizing Museology: Museums, Miscegenation and Myths of Origin".

The comparative dimension is essential as the national contexts are so different from the point of view of the minorities' situations as well as that of museum traditions. In the three countries considered, the minority assignment is based on essentialized cultural, religious, linguistic, or racial differences, which a historical approach makes it possible to link to the slavery, colonial, or migratory past (Teulière, 2005; Blanchard et al., 2006; Araujo, Seiderer, 2007; Vergès, 2008; Chivallon, 2012). National situations are different first of all because of history: Canada and the United States are the results of European colonizations, which subjugated the Amerindians and deported Africans into slavery, two closely related phenomena —slavery was one of the modalities of colonialism. France was a colonizing and enslaving power, but its plantations were located in America or in the Indian Ocean, in the sugar islands. This gives rise to different situations, depending on whether certain minorities live within the majority, such as African-Americans, Latinos, or Jews in the United States, while others such as West Indians are obviously the majority in Guadeloupe and Martinique (Gosson, 2012; Larcher, 2014). While both North America and France have experienced similar immigration phenomena, this immigration takes place in a different context. In France, republican universalism has long invisibilized minorities linked to the colonial, slave-owning past and migratory phenomena, and in French minorities are named "visible" when they claim equal treatment (Scioldo-Zürcher, 2016; Aje, Gachon, 2018). In the United States, settlement by immigrants of all origins and through slaves' deportation, led to the perception of a multicultural society at the turn of the 1960s (Takaki, 1993; Schor, 2009; Richomme, 2013). In Canada, "visible minorities" designates a legal category linked to the census, while so-called "Aboriginal populations", that is First Nations, are listed separately (Department of Justice, 1995).

Moreover, it is necessary to compare two partly distinct museum traditions. In North America, museums, most often founded by private initiatives, give pride of place to history: thus, social museums represent nearly 60% of the Canadian network (Gob, Drouguet, 2014, p. 13). In France, as in most of Europe, museums were most often founded by the authorities, and rely on the legacy of collecting practices. The history of different peoples has long taken the form of an ethnographic view that describes the "Arts et Traditions Populaires" tradition, named after the museum founded in 1937 by George Henri Rivière, or highlights local cultures, as it is the case with the Museon Arlaten, a pioneer in this field in 1903. As for the peoples considered "primitive", the interest that Europeans showed in them was part of the quest for exoticism, in line with romanticism. The colonial context explains why the historical narratives offered by museums and heritage sites have long ignored minority narratives, even though from the nineteenth century onwards, they were part of the processes of national construction, which included the creation of an "imaginary community" (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, Ranger, 2012). Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has highlighted, through his critique of modern historicism, how certain pasts were considered minor, while European "adults of age" claimed to take care of the colonized until they "came of age" (Chakrabarty, 2000).

During this conference, we propose to bring together the perspectives of social science researchers and museum professionals to examine how minority history has found its place in museums in the United States, France and Canada, and the evolution of these narratives. How

have these groups sought to have their own stories told within museum institutions? Did they demand their own resources, consideration by cultural authorities, or resources or have they given themselves the resources to tell and exhibit their stories in separate venues, in which they had control over the narratives and the pieces mobilized in service of them? Were the pre-existing narratives challenged? The sources and archives mobilized in the service of this museum mediation must also be interrogated.

In this comparative perspective, the following axes could be the subject of communications:

- We propose to reflect on the actions of minority groups whenever they aim to influence museum policies, to question public policies, or even to initiate new museum projects. What are the minority claims, what forms do they take, how do they evolve? It is often said that minorities are more inclined to demand the preservation of their memory than the mediation of their history, to favor commemoration rather than a critical approach (Teulières, 2005; Blanchard, Veyrat-Masson, 2008). This statement is probably open to discussion. Do these claims, which are sometimes seen as an excess of memory, jeopardize the writing of history? What are the effects and debates raised by the exhibits? (Faucquez, 2018). Thus, the appropriation of objects by the majority culture is problematic and as Élise Dubuc notes, "nothing [can] be changed about the fact that these objects are collected by another culture and interpreted according to foreign values, no matter how politically correct" (Dubuc, 2004, p. 51). The stakes of a new ethic in museology have been amply highlighted recently in France with the Sarr/Savoye report, however they are not limited to the question of restitutions of works of art in a "return of the same": "these objects, which have become diasporas, are the mediators of a relationship which remains to be reinvented" (Sarr, Savoy, 2019, p. 33).

- Furthermore, we wish to interrogate the place taken by the minorities' history in museums and its evolution. This means taking into account the way in which social demands, museum and public policies, and humanities and social science research interact and articulate (Bergeron et al., 2015). How do museographers and curators, on the one hand, and minority researchers and activists on the other, participate together in the shaping of minorities' representations in museum institutions? Which heritage is made visible, a material or immaterial one? Whom are we talking about, in which contexts, and in which institutions, dedicated specifically to a minority or not? Finally, how do heritage institutions respond to the injunctions of the duty of remembrance?

- It is possible to analyze museums' policies in their different functions of exhibition, conservation, animation and scientific research. What are the discourses developed, both in terms of content and form? Different types of narratives are used: a polyphonic form highlights a multicultural history, while other narratives are more linear. Two approaches are sometimes distinguished, a "museology of the object" opposed to a "museology of the idea" (Davallon, 1992, p. 99-123). Similarly, exhibitions devoted to these themes seem to give preference to a so-called "situational" approach through exhibitions that present situations that are easily readable by visitors, through dioramas, reenactments (Gob, Drouguet, 2014, p. 128, 129). North American history and social museums, grouped in the United States in the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) have a long experience in developing immersive experiences as do Canadian museums with, for example, the innovative exhibition "Nous, les premières nations" (We, the First Nations) at the Musée de la Civilisation du Québec in 1998 in collaboration with the 11 Aboriginal nations of Canada. In France, curatorial functions have long held a more important place.

Proposals

We encourage researchers from all fields of the humanities and social sciences (history, art history, American studies, sociology, anthropology) to submit proposals for papers in English or French.

Please send your proposal (500 words), in English or in French, as well as a brief CV, before the 30th of Novembre 2021 to this address: raconterlesminorites@gmail.com

Name, first name, institution of affiliation, e-mail address, and a list of key words. You will present the problematic in relation to the announced title, the scientific and conceptual background in which you are situated and the methodology adopted.

Calendar

Date of submission: 11/30/2021

Notification of selection: 12/20/2021

Symposium : **04/20/2022 & 04/21/2022**

Adresses : musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac / Campus Condorcet.

Organizing Committee: Olivier Maheo (IHTP, UPL), Pauline Peretz (IHTP), Sarah Frioux-Salgas (musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac).

Scientific Committee

- Yves Bergeron, Professor of museology, at UQAM, Université du Québec à Montréal.
- Alice Conklin, Professor of History, Ohio State University.
- Benoit de l'Estoile, Research Director at Centre Maurice Halbwachs, CNRS, Professor of anthropology, ENS.
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- Renée Gosson, Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies, Bucknell University.
- Thomas Grillot, Researcher at IHTP, UMR 8244.
- Renaud Hourcade, Researcher at Arènes, UMR 6051.
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- Pap Ndiaye, Head of the Etablissement public du Palais de la Porte Dorée.
- Fabien Van Geert, Associate Professor of Cultural mediation, Sorbonne Nouvelle.
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