"Exotic" people of the North in the Manitoba Museum of Winnipeg*

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Abstract
Adopting the theoretical approaches of cultural and postcolonial studies, this article will look at ways in which the peoples of the Canadian North and their objects are represented in *colonial* documents, displayed and/or housed in the Manitoba Museum of Winnipeg. In order both to examine the persistence of the colonial Victorian imagination of distant lands and to deconstruct the stereotyped imagery of the North, this essay will focus on the presence of Inuit peoples in northern lands, and on the cultural function of the museum as re-activator of the relationship between people, land, and objects. The colonial perspective will be contrasted with indigenous peoples' representations of themselves. Different stories will be revived and narrated which will give names, identity, and cultural significance to the artefacts in the museum. An *amauti* – the Inuit garment for women – and other Inuit artefacts will be offered as a case study.

Key-words: *amauti*, cultural museum, indigeneity, Inuit, Manitoba.

1. Colonial and postcolonial exotic

In colonial discourse, the word 'exotic' rightly applies to extreme places when they are perceived and represented according to a set of established norms of reference. The relationship of observation implies that the evaluative point of view dictates the paradigm according to which both the perception and the representation of what is distant and unfamiliar is constructed. The Greek root 'exo' means 'out', and marks two opposing sides where inside

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establishes the rules of interpretation. A low-grade difference qualifies the cultural representation of the colonial exotic, which is inevitably determined by, and laden with ideology (Gualtieri 2002). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said underlined the complicity of culture and empire in the relationship between the Self and the Other, the coloniser and the colonised. By setting up the history and culture of the empire at the centre of colonial policy and rhetoric, the hegemonic power constructs its peripheries as inferior and subaltern, and generates a persuasive and controlling alliance between the production of culture and the endurance and pervasiveness of the empire. Its master narrative articulates an effective language of stereotyping, marginalisation, and exclusion, which, according to Said in *Orientalism*, exposes the seductive degradation of knowledge serving imperial power.

In the British colonial imagination, the perception and representation of the Other, which was built on European reactions to the geographical discovery of distant lands at the end of the fifteenth century, culminated in the nineteenth century with the peak of European imperialism. Said analyses how colonial imagination narrated the Orient with different degrees of despicableness, and how the colonial discourse of the East established a canon of representation. The Oriental, African and non-European became figures of negative difference and absence. In different ways, newly discovered lands soon provided the mirroring paradigms for European authoritative self-definition, which forcefully helped to legitimise the spread of civilisation and conquest. The East, the South and the North of the globe were perceived as dependent upon the centrality of the West, namely Europe, and its paradigm of knowledge (MacKenzie 2001). European literature and arts bear testimony to the overwhelming strategy of all-encompassing exotic representations, which collapsed landscapes and peoples according to the familiarising strategies of cultural representation and military conquest.

As an ancillary science to colonisation, anthropology contributed to devising a hierarchy of human groups and their cultural productions. Accordingly, museums of anthropology assembled and displayed objects and artefacts out of their original physical environment, cultural context and worldview, where they had been produced, used, and given meaning. Today, the restitution of cultural life and ceremonial use to objects held in anthropology

museum collections is a cultural and political move that breaks the disempowering exotic stereotype by reconstituting the objects' identity, voice and relationships.

Colonial discourse is ambiguously unspecific and detailed as regards the classification of difference. If the intuition of Africa as unknowable and exceedingly negative makes it an extreme place in colonial imagination, the North is constructed as extreme because of its hostile environment, which seems to be almost impossible to explore and control, let alone to settle in. This line of thought leads to the relationship between people and land, which is central to a postcolonial reading and dismantling of imperial strategies of representation.

The colonial attitude to indigenous peoples has been problematic and complex, regardless of whom the colonisers and the local peoples were and are (Bhabha 1984; Gualtieri 1996). Nevertheless, it also shows peculiarities related to contexts within the general ideological frame of imperial subalternity. In settlers' colonies, like Canada, the fluxes of migration on inhabited land have produced specific dynamics of coexistence and survival, which affected, and still affect, the official relationship between indigenous peoples and Canada as a nation. As a matter of fact, the rhetoric of nationalism is fundamental both within the discourse of the British empire and of the Canadian federation after it enfranchised from Britain. The construction of the all-inclusive metaphor of national history in the master narrative of the empire is central to the colonial settlement project, according to which indigenous peoples were historically and culturally invisible in newly occupied lands. A colonial vision of exotic people of the North coherently draws on the exotic stereotype of indigenous peoples without a history who were naturally part of the environment.

A postcolonial strategy of deconstruction of the colonial exotic may usefully be applied to an analysis of the North. More precisely, while observing ways in which the idea of the North contributes to the identity of Canada as a nation, exposing the danger of obliterating cultural specificities, the North will be looked at through the lens of Inuit objects in the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg so as to illustrate how strategies of cultural empowerment may be productively derived and implemented through forms of material culture whose narratives speak of the life and history of people.

2. The idea of North

As an idea, a production of the imagination, the North has animated a variety of representations and sustained the 'invention' of the North Pole as a stable point of reference. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European explorers were obsessed by the thought of a North-West Passage in the Arctic. And while, in time, exploratory expeditions attempted to accomplish the search in practice, the armchair explorer August Patermann 'invented' the North Pole as the hypothetical scientific key to solving the physical and geographical problems of the Northern hemisphere (Felsch 2010). In a similar way, aiming to dismiss the widespread stereotyped notion of a hostile North, traveller and explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson tried to make the northern landscape familiar by tentatively offering scientific explanations and reassuring descriptions.

The imagery of the North has been widely represented in visual arts, literature, music, and popular cultural productions. In European Romantic sensibility, the North was mystical and mythical (Wilson 2003), and in *The idea of North* Peter Davidson dramatically forges an elusive and emotional concept of indefinable and suggestive North, showing how it becomes a mobile threshold that signals a frontier for the European imagination and consciousness, while supporting a specific cultural and national sensibility at the same time (Gould 1967). In addition, as national spokespersons of Canadian visual arts at the beginning of the twentieth century, the painters belonging to the Group of Seven used the inspiring source of landscape painting to shape a national imagery of the North. They succeeded in elaborating what was acknowledged as the typical Canadian representation of Nordic landscape.

Differently, the idea of North is explored by Sherrill Grace, who assumes "nordicity" as a fundamental defining notion for Canadian national culture. Grace foregrounds the creation of Nunavut in 1999 as a moment in national history when the North emerged as a qualifying trait and an urgent concern in Canadian politics and culture. By giving shape to the North as "home and native land" through a careful reading of Inuit texts and cultural objects, Grace argues in favour of the survival of the idea of domesticity by dismissing colonial discourse and modifying the exotifying ideology that it inscribes as regards the North. In order to pursue this aim, "a multiplicity of shared, equal subjectivities" should

be acknowledged (Grace 2001: 260), and a resurrection of the cultural relation between people and land should be made a crucial concern within changing representations of the North.

The film *Atanarjuat* – released in 2001, directed by Zacharias Kunuk, and produced by Igoolik Isuma with Inuit actors in Inuktitut– marked a breaking point in Canadian national history by exposing the function of culture in the processes of colonisation and resistance in the North. *Atanajuat* enacts a dialogue from the Inuit point of view between the past and the present, the colonial history of annihilation and the present history of self-determination, and produces an artistic statement of Inuit self-representation and cultural sovereignty.

A focus on the effect of the film – exactly, what the film *does* as a cultural statement – leads to observing Inuit cultural objects in action (Appadurai 1988; Bodei 2009; Hooper-Greenhill 1992). This perspective will be endorsed by looking at how the Manitoba Museum *acts* as a modern cultural museum where culture is enacted and dialogue takes place via objects.

3. The Inuit Collection in the Manitoba Museum of Winnipeg

The names Manitoba and Winnipeg bear reference to indigenous languages and refer to characteristics of the land and to their modes of being. The reconstruction of the relationship between land and people is one of the objectives the Manitoba Museum is pursuing in order to be true to its mission of reconnecting the object with its signifying context. The land of Manitoba was densely populated with indigenous First Nations (Ojibwe, Cree, Dene, Sioux, and Assiniboine, among others) when the Hudson Bay Company started trading in the area in the 17th century. In the 18th century, Britain consolidated its colonial power over North American territories as a result of its victory over France in the Seven Years' War. In the meantime, the land of Manitoba had been crisscrossed by fur traders from Europe and the Métis population had grown out of the encounter between indigenous and European people. The Canadian colonisation of Manitoba was completed when the prairies became part of the Confederation in 1870.[1] The collections that are now

[1] The colonial history of Manitoba is well documented from its earliest times. See Gunn (2013); Hill (1890); Morton (1965). The 1870 Manitoba Act is available at

housed in the Department of Ethnography and in the Hudson Bay Company gallery provide documentation about these moments in history. These collections will be referred to as case studies in the following discussion.

Before 1965 – when the present Museum building was designed by H.H. Gatenby Moody – collections were scattered in different places. Reliable information reports that the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba had been preserving objects since the 1870s, and private individuals and collectors were also assembling artefacts in disparate locations. In the early 20th century a number of cultural associations took care to organise a proper museum in Winnipeg which would bring together the incoherent assembly of collected objects. The official opening came about in 1970, by which time the museum comprised diverse galleries; other items were integrated over time. In 1994 the Hudson Bay Company donated its collection of 25,000 artefacts to the Museum for permanent exhibit. It bears testimony to more than three centuries of colonial history in northern Canada, as well as to the relationship among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people at that time.

In the Department of Ethnography, the Manitoba Museum holds the key ethnographic collections of the province, with 16,850 items. It hosts historic photographs and objects belonging to material culture, including 800 Inuit artefacts in the Marsh Collection. Inuit artefacts in the Manitoba Museum have cultural relevance both as art forms from Arctic and Polar regions and as expressions of Inuit life in relation to material and immaterial worlds. These cultural objects represent Inuit identity and its relationship with the personal (the maker's identity), the local (the Inuit community), the national (Canadian culture and identity), and the international spheres (the artist's place and that of his work on the global market).

The eclectic feature of the Museum is counterbalanced by its educational function, which consists in modifying its relation with the objects while also engaging in dialogue with the public. To this end, stories have a pivotal value because they connect the object to the community, bond the past with the present, enact ceremonies, speak to mixed audiences belonging to diverse

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http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/ma_1870.html, last accessed March 10, 2016.

traditions and descending from different histories, and invite cultural understanding and exchange. As Itala Vivan argues when writing about postcolonial cultural museums, a different and more imaginative cultural approach is required because anthropology and ethnography museums do not collect just artefacts, they also have custody of intangible elements and immaterial culture. This new function performed by cultural museums is ethical and political, insofar as it unmasks colonial versions of difference, dismantles exotic stereotypes, and delegitimises museum techniques that exhibit cultural objects in static undefined contexts (Vivan 2013).

By investigating its own collections, the Manitoba Museum aims at discovering information about the objects' stories in order to rebuild the complex network of relations and narratives from which the objects had been uprooted and estranged in colonial times. This procedure is implemented through working with indigenous communities, studying pieces of writing and official documents, visual and photographic materials and oral histories, searching archives and libraries, comparing and evaluating holdings and findings with other institutions and indigenous communities. This dialogic practice involves traditional indigenous objects as well as colonial artefacts in the Hudson Bay Company collection, thus articulating a conversation across time in which Aboriginal Elders also help to complete the colonial archive with information from the indigenous perspective. Community consultation is fundamental in order to excavate the history of subjection and colonial dependence which deeply affected the history of indigenous people in residential schools, reservations, marginal and exploited areas. Community advice is also indispensable in order to preserve, develop, and improve museum collections, and temporary and permanent exhibits.

A new narrative of history results from the Museum's research, which is dialogically rehearsed through the objects and passed on to the public by way of an interactive and discursive process where objects are central, active, and alive. As the curator of ethnography of the Museum, Maureen Matthews, explains, the Museum looks for a story for each object, because it is the story that is central to the object's cultural role. The very 'presence' of objects is evidence of their function and determines ways in which they modify relationships.

Most of the items in the collection were assembled in colonial times within the ideological imperial frame. The Museum is now trying to animate them, by giving them a face, a voice, a story, and a network of relations. It is the task of this essay to illustrate how the process of reconstruction of life relations through the objects and people of the North is taking place in the Manitoba Museum. By reconstituting the relational context of the cultural object, both object and people are de-exotified and recontextualised historically and culturally.

4. *Amauti* as a portrait

More and more often, Canadian museums are pursuing the objective of recreating the relationship among objects, peoples, and cultures (Phillips 1999, 2011). As a case study, a piece of clothing – the *amauti*, the traditional Inuit parka for women, which is enriched with a back pouch specifically for an infant – will be examined here. The general term for the Inuit apparel is parka, for men and women alike. Mostly made with caribou and seal skins and cleverly conceived, the parka is suited to endure the Arctic climate. It consists of a fur jacket in two layers: an internal layer (*atigi*) – the fur is worn inside against the wearer's body – and an external layer (*qulittaq*) – the fur is worn on the outside. The treatments of the skins, tailoring, proportions, and decorations have changed in time, and the final results have always been diverse and unique. Parka and *amauti* may be elaborately decorated with drilled caribou teeth, beads, or embroidery, which articulate stories about the wearer, his or her life, the life of the community to which they belong, and their relationship with the world. Parka and *amauti* have different specific functions and meanings that are expressed both through tailoring and symbolic decorations (*The Inuit Amautik* 1980; Oakes 1991).

In "What Stories Do These Garments Tell?" Sherry Farrell Racette anticipates the theoretical standpoint from which the story of Martha Eetak's *amauti* will be presented further on. By connecting clothing to people and searching for the traces that garments reveal, a gesture of reconciliation is made, which also allows both for silenced histories to speak, and for the reactivation of the ancestral indigenous knowledge that is triggered by the recognition of the object. In recent years, Inuit women and communities have

actively collaborated with curators of Canadian art exhibitions and museum staff, in order to investigate the symbolic language and the relationships of Inuit clothing, people, and histories (Hall, Oakes, Qimmiu'naaq Webster 1994; Albano 2007).

From this cultural perspective, objects may be understood as animate living beings. For the exhibition *The Artist Herself*, Maureen Matthews presented Martha Eetak's *amauti* as "a uniquely female portrait" that tells the story of its maker, her family, the Arviat women, and the Padleimiut community she belonged to (Matthews 2015-2016: 81). For the purpose of de-exotifying the *amauti* and its maker, it is relevant to point out the interdiscursive intercultural research that led Matthews and her staff to identify the relation between the parkas in the Manitoba Museum, their makers and communities.

As Matthews reports, in 2013 Martha Eetak's *amauti* at the Manitoba Museum was recognised by Levi Angmak, a school teacher in Arviat, and the maker was named on that occasion. In 2014 Mark Eetak, Martha Eetak's son, and his wife Angie visited the Manitoba Museum and were able to tell the whole story of Martha's *amauti*: the conditions in which it was created, the reasons for selling it, and the contingency in which the Museum acquired the piece. Museum records only recorded that the parka was obtained by Sergeant William O. Douglas of the Royal North West Mounted Police, who had acquired it from an Inuit family at Lake Yathkyed between 1918 and 1925. As reported by Mark and Angie Eetak, Mark's parents, Martha and John Eetak, had lived in the area (p. 81).

The reconstruction of the identity of Martha's *amauti* also required that a context of relational connections be re-established. In order to do so, the photographs of famous photographer and traveller in the Canadian Arctic between 1947 and 1953, Richard Harrington, allowed Maureen Matthews with the help of Inuit Elders, Mark and Angie Eetak, to trace back parental, kin, and community relations, so as to identify the makers and ascertain the people who wore the parkas. In Harrington's photos, Martha Eetak's parents were recognised together with Alanaad, Martha's grandmother. In addition, and fittingly supporting the interdiscursive networks of stories being reconstructed, Harrington also had photographs of Angie's mother when she was in labour with Angie. The photos were identified and commented on by Angie herself (Langford 2016).

Martha Eetak's *amauti* will return to the Manitoba Museum in September 2016, when the exhibition *The Artist Herself* closes, terminating its tour at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. On that occasion, one brand new *amauti* will be waiting for it: one which Angie Eetak started making from scratch in September 2015 to honour the return of Martha's parka. The making of Angie's *amauti* is a celebration, a process, and a continuation of the historical narrative. The process had started with caribou hunting, following the traditional steps of parka making and involving the extended family, particularly women, in the decorating practice. It evolved as a dialogical narrative across time and women's lives. Angie's *amauti* bears reference to Martha's in the way it is decorated, and also contains new patterns arising out of Angie's creativity and family history. The Manitoba Museum's recent acquisition of Angie Eetak's *amauti* marks a significant change in the ways in which the museum is adding to its collections by working with indigenous people, and therefore modifying its educational function.

Trajectories of relations and informants also helped to identify another garment in the Manitoba Museum collection, namely Charlotte Voisey's parka. Angie Eetak was in fact acquainted with Mary, the daughter of Henry and Charlotte Voisey, a Métis couple who had owned a shop at Padlei Post and had worked for the Hudson Bay Company. Mary had worked with Angie and lived in the same village as the Eetaks. Harrington's photos portray Angie's brother Billy, Mary Voisey, and Martha Otokalak, who is Mary's older sister. The Marsh Collection was also helpful to the research, since the paintings it contains represent scenes of Inuit life. The Manitoba Museum compared the Marsh Collection watercolours – painted by Winifred Petchey Marsh in 1933-1934 and collected in the book *People of the Willow* – with Harrington's photos in the Harrington Collection of the National Archive and was able to identify other parkas in the Museum collections.

This interdiscursive path is also helping the on-going Project Naming aimed at correcting imprecisions and mistakes in the Inuit names reported in the museum data and the National Archive (Proulx). These mistakes hinder the tracing of community and family relations. In addition, their reproduction and circulation lead to faulty documents that breed misleading common knowledge and obstruct the possibility of reconstituting the life and relations of objects and their original communities.

5. Conclusion

The interdiscursive collaborative network that the Manitoba Museum has activated in order to give names, stories, and relations to Inuit objects and peoples is a strategic move against the still pervasive colonial stereotype of the exotic. It also has political significance for Canada. The nation struggled feebly with accommodating indigeneity in the national frame and is now facing the backlashes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigation on Indian Resident Schools. Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government are now attempting to tackle questions related to indigeneity in radically new and inclusive ways.

As regards the role of cultural museums for Canadians, the active function of the Manitoba Museum is triggering a change in the ways in which traditional ethnography museums exhibit artefacts and insinuate cultural representations and interpretations of history. It stimulates a virtual debate which is open to a mixed and diverse public who wish to know and understand more by actively becoming part of a process of discovery, and of the narrative of new histories. An open ideological disposition and genuine intellectual effort animate the political and cultural project of the Manitoba Museum. This drive operates from within, taking its lead from the internal resources of the museum and making them speak. By enacting cultures, the museum is not merely a shrine of objects, but a collection of dialogic stories and cultural practices that contradict the stereotyped exotic representation of the people of the North and regenerate the cultural value of Inuit objects in the Museums.

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