

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

「文物、記憶與文化認同的建構」國際學術研討會

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On History, French Colonialism and Immigration: The Politics of Memory and Forgetting and the *Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration*

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Abstract

On October 10th, 2007, the Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration (CNHI) was inaugurated in Paris, but without the usual political fanfare. Members of the French government were conspicuous by their absence: Nicolas Sarkozy, the President of France, did not attend the opening of the new immigration museum, in part because of his polarizing stance on immigration. Conceived as a *lieu de mémoire* (“site of memory”) to commemorate two hundred years of immigration in France and its deep impact on French society, its language, culture, work, gastronomy, etc., the museum recognizes the important contributions made by immigrants who have shaped French cultural identity. And yet, in spite of all of its positive reassessment of the successive waves of immigration to France, the museum fails to deal with the important question of French colonialism and its legacy, a common if problematic history that binds the people of France and those from its former overseas territories in the Maghreb, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean. The founding decree instituting the new immigration museum made it clear that its mission was to concentrate on the positive aspects of immigration and the “assimilating trajectories of immigrant population in French society” (article 2, Decree no. 2006-1388 of 16 November 2006, *Journal Officiel*). To achieve such a goal, it would “collect, protect, and highlight/ exploit objects linked to the history of immigration in France since the 19th century and make them accessible” to a large public in order to “change [“faire évoluer”] the gazes [“regards”] and attitudes on immigration in France.” One of the aims of this paper is examine the museographic strategies used by a national French museum to shape a certain memory of immigration that, at the same time, represses the history of colonialism. The focus will be on the “permanent collection” named “repères” [markers] and the objects, images, testimonies, archival documents, photographs, drawings, works of art that delimit the space used to narrate two hundred years of immigration to France. The visitor encounters objects that are said to belong to three distinct fields (“historical, anthropological, artistic”): everyday objects like a suitcase, a radio, a pair of tailor’s scissors, that belonged to an immigrant and whose symbolic or real importance is narrated by their owner in video and audio documents. The significance of these objects come to the fore when the visitor hears or sees the oral or videographic testimony of the object’s owner who reframes the object in the interactive audio-guides made available to the public. In his installation entitled “Climbing Down,” the artist Barthélémy Togo, constructed a series of superposed wooden bunk-beds, complete with ladders, and decorated with the ubiquitous “Tati bag” that mark the space of the “foyers de travailleurs immigrants” [immigrant workers’ dwellings]. In addition to the banal objects of everyday life, and the artistic oeuvres selected by the museum curators that constitute the multi-media scenography of the permanent collection (where the visitor would also encounter the photographs of modern masters like Atget and Capa, the caricatures of Plantu, documentary film and video clips), the Cité also wanted to include other objects donated by the immigrants themselves. That is how the “Galerie des dons” saw the light. Inspired by sociologist Marcel Mauss’ concept of the “don” [gift], immigrants can still today bequeath objects of historical and affective value to the museum. If they are recognized as being appropriate for the museum, the latter would have to explain why a particular gift has been incorporated into the collection. Thus, singular objects supplemented by their distinctive oral history would become part of the collective history of France. And yet, in spite of these attempts to provide a more inclusive history of immigration, the Cité remains a problematic site of memory, in large part because it segregates historical knowledge and the violent legacies of colonialism and wars of independence from the immigration question. Although a commonplace object like the “suitcase” may signify

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immigration, work, and economic displacement, it may also suggest the Algerian war of liberation and the infamous “suitcase carriers;” it may even refer to the suitcase used to dissimulate weapons or torture instrument like the “gégène” during the Algerian liberation war. Objects can indeed delimit a fertile terrain for a rich history of immigration, but they must also be reinserted in many different types of discourses that may confront the viewer with unpalatable truths but tell a more complex history of immigration and colonialism that an official institution like the *Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration* will be unable to contain. The task of the historian and cultural critic is precisely to make sure that these stories are told.