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At the Limits of Description: Ethnography and Aesthetics
in French Modern Literature, 1859-1934

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in Comparative Literature

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The colonial conquests of the European nation-state and the ascendance of science and technology within European society characterize the modern era. Among those French writers who ventured into the non-European world, Eugène Fromentin, Victor Segalen, André Gide, and Michel Leiris saw how a politics of representation inheres in the literary task of describing the world peoples. In questioning the limits of their worldview and their aesthetic training, as well as the limits of European knowledge, these writers begin to articulate new forms of literary description. In their works, description emerges as a multi-tiered forum of representation in which epistemological and aesthetic thinking conditioned by an ethical principle shapes textual practice. Ethnographic textual production forms the outward limit of what these literary writers consider aesthetic. In their minor tradition, these writers move beyond the picturesque for more ethically minded descriptions of world peoples.

The dissertation of Matthew Reeck is approved.

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Biographical Sketch

I graduated with a BA from Carleton College. My graduate degrees include an MA from the University of Kansas and MFA from Brooklyn College, City University of New York. I have been awarded grants from the Fulbright Foundation, the PEN-Heim Translation Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts. My publications include *Mirages of the Mind*, translated with Aftab Ahmad from the Urdu of Mushtaq Ahmed Yousufi, and published by New Directions as well as by Vintage India; *Bombay Stories*, translated with Aftab Ahmad from the Urdu of Saadat Hasan Manto, and published by Vintage Classics in the United States and the United Kingdom as well as by Random House India; and *Class Warrior—Taoist Style*, translated from the French of Abdelkébir Khatibi, and published by Wesleyan University Press. Academic articles have been published by or are forthcoming in *Religions of South Asia*, *Postcolonial Studies*, the *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, *South Central Review*, and *Sagar: A South Asia Research Journal*.

INTRODUCTION

[Si] je prends un homme du monde, un intelligent, et si je le transporte dans une contrée lointaine, je suis sûr que, si les étonnements du débarquement sont grands, si l'accoutumance est plus ou moins longue, plus ou moins laborieuse, la sympathie sera tôt ou tard si vive, si pénétrante, qu'elle créera en lui un monde nouveau d'idées, monde qui fera partie intégrante de lui-même, et qui l'accompagnera, sous la forme de souvenirs, jusqu'à la mort.

Charles Baudelaire¹

[[If] I take a man of the world, an intelligent one, and if I transport him to a far-away country, I am sure that, if there are many things that astonish him upon arrival, and if it takes a long time, and a large effort, to accustom himself to the new place, whether at once or in time, his sympathy will be so strong, so penetrating, that it will create in him a new world of ideas, a world that will be an integral part of himself, and that will accompany him, in his memories, up till his death.]

Foucault's Pendulum: A Theoretic Cue

When Michel Foucault wrote in *Les mots et les choses* (1966) that anthropology was the most important orientation for philosophy since Kant,² the statement would have seemed hardly arguable. After all, structuralist anthropology had enjoyed a pride of place in French intellectual life for ten years, following a string of publications by Claude Lévi-

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "Exposition Universelle (1855)," in *Critique d'art suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. Claude Pichois, intro. Claire Brunet, rev. ed. (Paris, Gallimard, 2011), 236.

² Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 353.

Strauss that began with *Tristes Tropiques* and ending with Jacques Derrida's paper on Lévi-Strauss for the famous 1966 Johns Hopkins conference at the Humanities Institute.³ Foucault also writes that psychoanalysis and anthropology have a unique placement within the social sciences, as they, unlike other social sciences, do not take the human for granted.⁴ The first, psychoanalysis, attempts to delve into the human unknown of the unconscious. The second, anthropology, attempts to locate new qualities of the human in social organization outside of the Western world. Both are "human" sciences that question the scope and parameters of the human: quoting Lévi-Strauss, Foucault argues that anthropology "défaî[t]" [unmakes] (391) the human as it makes the human, creating a "new, non-Man centered épistémè."⁵

In his view of structuralist anthropology, Foucault relies upon the prestige and privilege of Western reason, "la *ratio* occidentale" (388), as a percipient, privileged tool of study. This privileging of rationality to the West has been the subject of justifiable criticism. Yet one thing about Foucault's anthropology continues to impress: not merely does it express how anthropology was defining to the human, or social, sciences, but also it conveys his belief that the study of human societies outside of Europe would lead necessarily to change in European notions of the human. But this aspect of his statements on anthropology seems under-reported. As Baudelaire suggested one hundred years before, for Foucault, the non-European represents the unknown, and

³ In particular, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), *Anthropologie structurale* (1958), and *Le cru et le cuit* and *La pensée sauvage* (1962). Jacques Derrida, "La structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967).

⁴ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 390-1.

⁵ Beatrice Han-Pile, "Is Early Foucault an Historian?" *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31.5-6 (2005): 602. Foucault points to anthropology's ability to excavate the unconscious of societies—the "normalisation des grandes fonctions biologiques, les règles [des] formes d'échange, de production et consommation, [et] les systèmes qui s'organisent autour ou sur le modèle des structures linguistiques]" [normalization of large-scale biological functions, rules of forms of exchange, production and consumption [and] the systems that are organized around or on the model of linguistic structures]. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 389. This effects a bypassing of the human subject through a focus upon the relation of nature to culture.

European knowledge must expand in order to move past the known into the unknown. Not only do I find this sentiment reasonable and likely to be true, but I also find appealing the hope that knowledge about humankind is always open to revision. Moreover, this sense of possibility describes the writers in this study, all who find themselves revising their aesthetics, ethics, and ideas of the world when they are brought into contact with the non-European—and, hence, “unknown”—world.

There is another aspect of Foucault’s anthropology that I would like to cite as a source of inspiration and critical engagement for my study of the forum of representation that I call description, namely, his sense of the “strange” “empirical-transcendental” “double” called the human. It might not be immediately apparent in Foucault’s remarks upon anthropology in *Les mots et les choses*—coming as they do near the very end of a very long book—that his interest in anthropology was already considerable. But, in fact, both parts of his state doctoral thesis deal in part or in whole with anthropology: in *L’Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), his principal thesis includes a final chapter entitled “Le cercle anthropologique” [“The Anthropological Circle”]; and his complementary thesis deals intensively with questions of anthropology—his translation with notes and introduction of Immanuel Kant’s *Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*.⁶ It will be worth our while to consider briefly Foucault’s interest in Kant’s version of anthropology for what it might propose as a contemporary method for mobilizing anthropology as a historical and theoretical concern for literature.

⁶ Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961); Foucault, introduction to *Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*, by Immanuel Kant, trans. Michel Foucault, rev. ed. (Paris: Plon, 2008). The original 1964 publication of Foucault’s translation came only with six of the one hundred twenty-eight typewritten pages of his introduction, a state of affairs that continued until the 2008 republication with Foucault’s full introduction. Roberto Nigro, Afterword to *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, by Michel Foucault, trans. Robert Nigro and Kate Briggs, intro. Roberto Nigro and Kate Briggs, ed. with after. Roberto Nigro (Cambridge, MA: Semiotexte, 2008), 129.

Kant scholar and translator Mary J. Gregor points out that Kant's enigmatic work distinguishes between the metaphysical and the empirical;⁷ and, indeed, Foucault makes sure to acknowledge that our modern bearing upon transcendental philosophy is different from Kant's.⁸ But instead of the clear separation between the metaphysical and the empirical that Gregor notes, Foucault sees in Kant's text a "double système de solidarité" [double system of solidarity] between transcendental philosophy on the one hand and "l'immense série des recherches anthropologiques qui se développent, surtout en Allemagne, dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle" [the whole series of anthropological researches which were being undertaken, primarily in Germany, in the second half of the eighteenth century].⁹ The language of doubling in his introduction to Kant is, then, the model for Foucault's later statements, where the human is an "étrange [...] doublet empirico-transcendental" [strange ... empirical-transcendental double],¹⁰ and where these two seemingly separate concerns—the transcendental and the empirical—converge. The human is at once subject to the physical laws of the world as an organic, earthly being, and transcendent, in the sense that the human alone (we imagine) has the freedom to question existence and the physical laws that determine the parameters of our empirical existence.¹¹ As such, the human is a philosophical and a scientific object of investigation. There is a horizontal discourse possible through the comparison of empirical finds, and a vertical one, that, though this does not imply a reaching toward god, nevertheless does imply a consideration of the conditions of empirical analysis, a

⁷ Mary J. Gregor, Translator's Introduction to *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, by Immanuel Kant, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), x.

⁸ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 329.

⁹ Kant, *Anthropologie du point de vue*, 69; Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point*, 109.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 329.

¹¹ Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism focuses on its wish to be a critique of empiricism at the same time as it constructs its own version of knowledge as empirical truth. Derrida, "La structure, le signe," 422.

“conceptual” questioning of the “constitutive conditions” through which anyone can claim to make representative statements about empirical reality.¹² Taking the double definition of the human as a suggestive precedent, I treat literary description as a node of conjunction where the empirical surfaces of the text are joined by theoretical interrogations of the “constitutive conditions” underwriting the textual surfaces. That is, description, for its part, can be understood as well as a strange doubling; I define it as the forum of representation that includes the multiple layers and nodes where epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical concerns meet observational and textual practices to produce a “being” of horizontal empirical nature and vertical transcendent speculation.

There is one last item from *Les mots et les choses* which, I think, deserves more consideration—particularly in a study where colonial anthropology lingers never far from the literary texts under consideration—and that is Foucault’s bipartite theory of comparison. According to Foucault, there are only two possible forms of comparisons, those of scope and those of order.¹³ Foucault says that comparisons of scope are additive; an entity is perceived, defined, and entered into an arithmetic formula through which a preconceived whole will be approached—the human condition, for instance. The human condition, then, is understood in its totality as the addition of “les formes singulières de chaque culture, les différences qui l’opposent aux autres, les limites par quoi elle se définit et se ferme sur sa propre cohérence” [the unique forms of each culture, the differences that distinguish them from others, the limits by which a culture defines itself and cinches its own coherence] (389). By studying all primitive world cultures, colonial anthropology adds these cultures to collectively describe the human

¹² Tyler Burge, *Origins of Objectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3, 5.

¹³ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 67.

condition before it was marked by technology and admixture.¹⁴ A comparison of order differs; it does not take a preconceived whole as its generative mechanism. Instead, a distinguishing feature is selected, and a comparison is formed when this entity is placed alongside another organism (or thing) with the same feature expressed with a slight difference. This second form of comparison also inheres in colonial anthropology: by studying all primitive world cultures, colonial anthropology also then constructs a horizontal series of resemblances in which any two cultures may be, upon a single point of comparison, minimally different. These would be cultural families. Yet a comparison of order introduces one hitch to the ideology of colonial anthropology.

When a separate feature is chosen for cultural comparison, conceivably the proximity of one culture to another established through the analysis of the first feature may no longer obtain in the same ratio. In this way, cultures can be seen to manifest imbrication as much as firm separation. Non-distinction obtains as well as distinction: the orderly classification of cultural families, inherited from a zoological model,¹⁵ could be said to fail broadly. That both forms of comparison inhere in colonial anthropology, and the broad relevance of colonial anthropology to the works under consideration in this study, means that the question of these two types of cultural comparison remains open-ended for the writers here. At the level of anthropological or cultural analysis, the writers here respect the individuality, reality, and value of different world cultures—indeed, this core ethic compels them toward new aesthetic innovations; this is inherent in vertical comparisons of scope. At the level of aesthetic representation, these writers separate

¹⁴ Amos Morris-Reich writes, there was “a structural relationship between the belief in the natural division of the human species into races and the belief that modern conditions increasingly undermine and erode that boundary.” Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography: Racial Photography as Scientific Evidence, 1876-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7. “Primitive” societies were thought to embody social functions and characteristics that European societies had before intermixture.

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

themselves from nefarious hierarchizations implicit in certain comparisons of order in which the presence or absence of certain cultural characteristics places cultures on different positions of a remnant “great chain of being.” They do so by either borrowing cultural elements to form hybridized aesthetics, such as in the case of Victor Segalen, or, with varying degrees of practical application and theoretical resolve, they replace the European cultural element—a cultural object fashioned through tradition into a stylized subject—with a non-European element as the implicit feature of comparison, and then strive to find the means to represent that element’s reality.

Description, Ethnography, Objectivity: Key Terms in a Discursive Field

Description and Epistemology

After the structuralist and narratological theories of description in such commanding works as Gérard Genette’s “Frontières du récit” (1966) and Philippe Hamon’s *L’introduction à l’analyse du descriptif* (1981),¹⁶ contemporary scholars are formulating new rubrics for description that seek to unite analyses of textual surfaces with epistemological and aesthetic preconditions.¹⁷ Toral Jatin Gajarawala theorizes postcolonial description to emphasize how epistemological frames inherited from racist colonial ideologies determine content and surface styles. She writes, “Description is a narrative form that indicates an epistemological problem, a particular way of knowing the other, and one that has been normalized into the ‘common sense’ of several

¹⁶ Gérard Genette, “Frontières du récit,” in *Communications* 8 (1966): 152-63; Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l’analyse du descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1981).

¹⁷ I do not include Fredric Jameson’s engaging *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) for the fact that beyond attaching affect to description he maintains the same basic rubric as Roland Barthes in *L’effet du réel* where narrative is “predictive” and description is not. Jameson leverages non-predictive description to function in the novel as affect. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), 142-3.

disciplines.”¹⁸ Reading back chronologically from her interpretation of description in V.S. Naipul’s *Guerrillas* to the French writers in this study, we find that on many sides of presumed divisions—British and French; colonial and postcolonial—description struggles to overcome the ideological inheritance that subtends its textual surfaces, an inheritance that returns us to the “voyage pittoresque” [picturesque voyage] and the racism inherent in the advent of national historiography.¹⁹

Dora Zhang’s reading of literary modernism is another important point of reference. Through the case of Virginia Woolf, she presents the paradox in which modernist writers evince a fascination with first-person experience while grave doubts assail them, making them uncertain of their ability to describe the affective limits of experience.²⁰ The scientific method—formulating a hypothesis, testing that hypothesis, and analyzing the results of the experimental test—would give Michel Leiris, for one, the hope of achieving through ethnography a legitimate portrayal of the non-European cultural world, and the scientific method would as well serve for him as a model of sorts for literary composition.²¹ But Zhang argues that modernist writers did not find a comparatively suitable epistemological or philosophical frame through which to describe

¹⁸ Toral Jatin Gajarawala, “Fictional Murder and Other Descriptive Deaths: V.S. Naipul’s *Guerrillas* and the Problem of Postcolonial Description,” in *Journal of Narrative Theory* 42.3 (Fall 2012): 292.

¹⁹ Situated historically within the dates of overlap between the picturesque voyage, as literary genre, and the advent of national historiography, Immanuel Kant shows this racist prejudice toward Africa in “Of National Characteristics, so far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” chapter 4 of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, where he writes, “The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. [...] So fundamental is the difference between [blacks and whites], and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.” Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 110-11.

²⁰ Dora Zhang, “Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James, and the Limits of Description,” in *New Literary History* 45.1 (Winter 2014), 52.

²¹ Leiris calls this “réalisme positif.” Leiris, “De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie,” in *L’Âge d’homme*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 17.

affective life, a failure she locates in the “social fracture and epistemological uncertainty” of modernity (53).

While I am not interested specifically in descriptions of affective life, it is interesting that in Woolf’s descriptions of affective life, Zhang finds a predominance of demonstrative pronouns: a modernist author, she suggests, can only signal with a pointing gesture what affective experience entails. As a result, Zhang notes a reticence in modernist fiction. She writes, “realist verisimilitude tends not toward greater descriptive detail but toward the austerity of ostension, this being in fact the most precise way of describing” (65). This idea serves as a bellwether for this study. A certain reticence appears in this study, too. In the case of these examples of modernist travel writing, epistemological uncertainties produce new perspectives. The overlapping impact of travel, the modernization of science, and particular writerly concerns uniting ethics and aesthetics lead to a rupture with tradition. This rupture with tradition brings about a reticence in different ways, in the redefinition and circumscription of the descriptive task per se and its more complex theorization. In each of the writers in this study, a reticence, a circumscription, and a series of questions or doubts of epistemology occur. Recalling Foucault’s exemplary pairing of psychoanalysis and anthropology, we can appreciate how descriptions of the writer’s personal affective world and the non-Western cultural sphere both force the writer to confront the limits of the known during an era, modernity, when traditional epistemologies and literary dogma and doxa were being challenged without remit.

In another way, the intuitive leap that characterizes these writers and that defines them as eccentrics, of nomads beyond the known, raises the specter of realism, that is, the dense intertextuality that constrains depictions of the world through the label of realism. Roland Barthes captures the sense of this intertextual pressure upon description both in “L’Effet du réel” and in *S/Z*, where he writes about how, paradoxically,

realism touches less the world than other representations of the world in the style declared “realistic”: “Thus, realism [...] consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous *reality* [...] is set *farther away*, postponed [...].”²² The writers in this study, then, wish to move beyond the solipsistic confines of the rehearsal and repetitions of style as propagated through literary genre and the doxologies of traditional descriptive and narrative forms—i.e. the novelistic real produced through naturalism’s moral order; they wish to move beyond the copy to the world writ in another way.

Ethnography and Description

The rise of modern anthropology and its ethnographic monograph play important roles in this study, though in various ways. This study hovers around the phrase “ethnographic description” without meaning to define it as a methodological necessity or disciplinary lynchpin. To understand the regimes of description in ethnography, one could turn to James Clifford’s celebrated differentiation of the cultural anthropologist’s writing tasks between inscription, transcription, and description. For Clifford and others, inscription, the first step, is assumed to be “at the origin of ethnography’s more or less realistic descriptions.”²³ Description is then the final stage (“Notes,” 51), the public face of the process in the ethnographic monograph’s published representation of the people under study. This rubric for description in ethnography is meant to explain a form of scientific textuality.²⁴ Yet the term “ethnographic description” might refer as well, I argue, for the

²² Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 55.

²³ James Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes” in *Fieldnotes, The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 56.

²⁴ The limitations of describing ethnography as a text were the focus the seminar out of which *Writing Culture* was generated. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

gradual historical shift toward a more objective style of representation of non-Western people, a shift that refined the picturesque voyage's pre-modern generalizations about the habits, customs, and manners of peoples of the world. I use the phrase to refer to the entire complex system of ideational practices, observational practices, and textual surfaces that constitute a forum of representation.

Historians of anthropology have pointed out that the origins of its modern textual forms are located in the crosshatch of para-literary and proto-scientific genres, with anthropological analysis and subjects circulating amidst those of other modern sciences. In the buildup to modernity, descriptions of people and nature, for instance, were not distinct disciplinary practices. The anthropologist Robert J. Thornton writes of how the modern ethnographic monograph emerged through cross-pollination with many genres: "The ethnographic monograph is not self-defined. The authors of ethnographic monographs sought to distinguish their writing from the contemporary generic types of travelogue, missionary letter, diary and journalism, while they sought to emulate the monographs of the natural sciences."²⁵ Mary Louise Pratt has documented the same.²⁶ The descriptions of non-European peoples in French modern literature share, then, a common textual ancestor with ethnographic monographs and natural history ones. It is useful to bear in mind, then, that the style and limits of French modern literature's descriptive surfaces in regard to the depiction of non-European peoples are structured by systems of knowledge and aesthetics more general than any one modern science;²⁷

²⁵ Robert J. Thornton, "Narrative Ethnography in Africa, 1850-1920: The Creation and Capture of an Appropriate Domain for Anthropology," *Man* 18.3 (Sept. 1983): 503.

²⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," in *Writing Culture*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 35.

²⁷ George W. Stocking, Jr. has written on Franz Boas' disciplinary evolution from physics to ethnology. The work of the followers of Karl Ritter in the nineteenth century shows the "considerable overlap between the ethnological and the geographical [...]." Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 141. The link between geography and people goes back in France to Buffon, the first French intellectual to develop race as a physical concept, who saw race as a

rather, literary description must be analyzed as an ethics and aesthetics in reference to the modern episteme and the Western onto-theology of *parousia*. In fact, as a inroad into a more rigorous and extensive study of description in modern and contemporary French prose of cultural, racial, and ethnic “difference”, I suggest that description serves as a useful site for the inspection and critique of the subtending ideological mechanisms that produce genre, objects of study, and style.

For locating how the rise of modern anthropology and the ethnographic monograph’s put pressure upon literary description, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s history of objectivity²⁸ is one last useful reference point. They name three “epistemic virtues” as representative modes through which scientific atlases presented objectivity as a modality of authority—truth in nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgment. These virtues emerge in sequence after the end of the era of the medieval compendium and its encyclopedic yet chaotic design, and yet the authors argue that these virtues are not absolute, in the way of Foucault’s epistémè, but form tensions at stake in scientific operations that produce objectivity as science’s implicit subject position and pre-critical point of view.²⁹ In truth-in-nature, artists render typical examples of nature; in mechanical objectivity, there is a prizing of a transparent, one-to-one reproduction of nature without the intervention of a human subject; and in trained judgment, natural processes or objects invisible to the naked eye or observable only through the collection of data, are rendered visible through the scientist-artist’s production of simplified, characteristic

factor of climate. See Claude Blanckaert, “Les conditions d’émergence de la science des races au début du XIX^e siècle,” in *L’idée de “race” dans les sciences humaines et la littérature (XVIII^e -XIX^e siècles)*, ed. Sarga Moussa (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), 135.

²⁸ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007).

²⁹ Daston’s description of the problems of the encyclopedia episteme is evocative: “[A]n avalanche of descriptive detail, both visual and, especially, verbal [presented] the challenge of the practices of synthesis.” See Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800,” in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, eds. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 100.

images.³⁰ While all three virtues are of interest theoretically to the reading of the authors in my study, mechanical objectivity must be mentioned here for the way that anthropology's rise to a modern science was aided in no small part by photography and the ascension of the virtue of mechanical objectivity.³¹

Indeed, photography promised to reveal nature in new ways; the photograph captured nature unawares, as it were. The “goût exclusif du Vrai” [the exclusive taste for the Real]³² that Charles Baudelaire rails against in 1859 was threatening exactly because of the appeal that mechanical objectivity possessed in opening up the world to representation. That is, the variety of nature, too, was newly visible with representation not confined to the whims or fads of an elite group of artists. With mechanical objectivity, the photograph's frame could present visually the variability of nature as though for the first time. By the 1880s, with new techniques such as the Woodburytype and half-tone photolithography, photography became capable both of quick production and easy reproduction.³³ Daston and Galison note that in the late nineteenth century as photographic techniques expanded into common usage, ethnographers preferred photographs over drawings because of the fear that the artist, trained in European artistic conventions of human representation and portraiture, might “distort” non-European bodies to conform to models that their ingrained artistic habits would subconsciously produce.³⁴ Quite in contrast to any spurious reproduction of reality, “[a]

³⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 40-41.

³¹ Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion, 2011).

³² Charles Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859,” in *Critique d'art suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. Claude Pichois, intro. Claire Brunet, rev. ed. (Paris, Gallimard, 2011), 276.

³³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 137.

³⁴ *The People of India* is the most illustrative example of such scientific-ethnographic atlases of this period: the massive, eight-volume work was meant to provide photographic evidence of Indian's racial (and cultural) diversity, uniting this diversity through the holistic template of the nation-state—India as a

photograph was deemed scientifically objective because it countered a specific kind of scientific subjectivity: intervention to aestheticize or theorize the seen.”³⁵

While this study does not deal specifically or extensively with photography, its status as an objective sign remains a subtext that must be excavated upon further consideration of these authors and their literary texts; nevertheless, mechanical objectivity, photography’s epistemic virtue, provides a grain of sand in the oyster shell for all the writers—from Fromentin to Leiris—in this study. For Fromentin, the possibility of mechanical objectivity stands as his worst nightmare—it threatens to overwhelm and negate art. For Segalen, mechanical objectivity stands as well for misprision of the reality of the world. Segalen’s goal is not at all like the implicit direction of Gide’s turn to the quasi-scientific note as an objective, documentary descriptive form or Leiris larger and more self-conscious commandeering of objectivity. Rather, Segalen’s relation to objectivity is formulated in the strange concatenation of subjective-and-objective in which a form of objectivity is reached through immersion in another culture’s subjective philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural stances. It is a form of hyper-subjectivity through which a non-European perspective—objective, thus, in that respect alone—can be fashioned. For Gide, mechanical objectivity, introduced in Daston and Galison’s terms, would not have shocked him since Marc Allégret’s attempts at cultural “capture” were of the genres that rely almost exclusively upon its principles. Lastly, for Leiris, mechanical objectivity was both the elixir and the poison that animates his ambivalent and frustrating quest for a type of representation that he finds authentic, authoritative, and aesthetically

naturalized, proto-national category. J. Forbes Watson and John William Kaye, eds., *The People of India, A Series of Photographic Illustrations of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan* (London: India Museum, 1875).

³⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 135.

compelling. Mechanical objectivity, then, and not photography per se represents the core of what objectivity will mean in my discussions of these texts.³⁶

Rereading the Canon

The very act of reading reconstitutes the texts before us, breathing new life into them, establishing the possibility of their relation, their meaning, to us. By itself, reading is a powerful and political act: to read to the end of any text—especially in our distracted, noncommittal times—means that it means to us. This is an act of commitment. Writing about texts is also invested with the commitment expressed in this first rite of reading: to write about a text ought to be, in part, to express how that text means to us, as individual readers, thinkers, citizens of the world, and magnets of culture. I subscribe first to the critical position that however complex the meaning of the works about which the critic writes, the genesis of the desire to write about those particular works should involve some level of respect born out of sympathy or accord. But, to the point that I wish to make, it is also true that a critic writing about a collection of texts necessarily makes an intervention into a diffuse but extensive debate, and when those texts are literary, this intervention at some level implies a rereading of tradition and literariness as expressed through a literature. Implicit in this study, then, is a re-reading of the French canon. To associate Fromentin and Gide with ethnography is novel: critics have beaten around the bush, pardon the very colonial metaphor, but have not, for whatever reasons, found the means to acknowledge the descriptive experiments of Gide's travelogues and their associations with ethnography. As for Fromentin, only Roger Benjamin has pointed to how Fromentin's thinking and art inspired generations of artists interested in ethnographic depiction, and, thus, in two critical aspects of his work's potential legacy: a

³⁶ Beyond Daston and Galison's book and Burge's philosophical treatise on objectivity, see as well, Alan Megill, ed., *Rethinking Objectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

historical break with exoticism, and the overture of objectivity as a modality of art as well as of science. At the same time, to disassociate Segalen from a simplistic rendition of ethnography, as well as to question his own self-application of his aesthetics of the diverse is new, as is my reading of Leiris outside the bounds of strictly anthropological or Surrealist paradigms.³⁷ Together, these writers compose a suppressed or intuitive counter-tradition of creative-critical insight into the ethics and aesthetics of description as a *forum* of representation. That these writers and these works are of great interest to me is, by the expression of my critical views, a foregone conclusion. That these writers suffer from neglect in the American university is concerning as it implicates an unexpected lacuna in contemporary pedagogy. I resist the pressure that means to force historical scholarship into a purely utilitarian role in relation to contemporary debates.³⁸ At the same time, I cannot help but point out that historicization eludes much contemporary debate, and that contemporary literary and cultural scholarship could indeed turn to these writers to understand the arc of the trajectory that began in colonial times and continues today and that poses anthropology and literature as, at times, nemeses, and, at times, collaborators.

More specifically, I propose that the loose tradition outlined by these four writers forms an important pre-history for the postcolonial and the francophone in French literature, a pre-history in which the French literature evinces traces of an ethical consideration of world peoples in literary description. To take one writer from my study, Segalen, his name appears as a leitmotif or compass point (a Kaaba I would say, stretching the metaphoric sphere from the colonial into the postcolonial) for postcolonial

³⁷ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Surreal anthropology," a review of *Phantom Africa* by Michel Leiris, trans. Brent Hayes Edwards (Chicago: Seagull, 2017). *New York Review Books* 8 Mar 2018.

³⁸ Speculation, I would argue, is at the heart of all cultural criticism. For the contemporary history of the delimitation and suppression of speculation as the end of scholarship, see Davide Panagia, "The Notion of Pantry: A Speculative Defense of Unuse," *World Picture* 6 (Winter 2011). http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Panagia.html.

French writers: Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Abdelkébir Khatibi cite him frequently, and Khatibi and Glissant have essays dedicated to aspects of his work.³⁹ As such, a trajectory can be traced back across the divisions of modern/postmodern, or colonial/postcolonial, or French/francophone—sectors of knowledge separated through academic specialization and sub-specialization. Like all categories, these too tend to centralize knowledge while minimizing or ignoring eccentric or ambivalent elements. Derrida criticizes Lévi-Strauss for how structuralist knowledge makes for a falsely ahistorical perspective that leaves poorly explained the transition of one structural imperative to another; moments of phase shift are consequently viewed as the cause or result of a “catastrophe.”⁴⁰ While I am not saying that academic disciplines construct scholarly categories through explicitly structuralist methods, I do think that scholarly categories in literature tend to elide such transitions among categories, and so transitions—like the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial—are over-determined as historical ruptures, or “catastrophes,” across which thinking stalls and the past is discarded as the unthought.

Chapter Summaries

Foucault writes that the meeting of the cultural other—especially when that other is as manifestly different from Europeans as the people of non-European cultures—will propel a new understanding of humankind, thereby revising existing European ideas of the same.⁴¹ Whether Foucault actually believed in practice that European knowledge should

³⁹ Édouard Glissant, *L'Intention poétique*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 121-129; Glissant, “Repli et dépli,” in *Traité du Tout-monde*, 128-138 (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Khatibi, “Célébration de l'Exote,” in *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française*, 18-56 (Paris: Denoël, 1987).

⁴⁰ Derrida, “La structure, le signe,” 426.

⁴¹ This statement is couched within an abstract argument about the European social sciences to be sure. Foucault's obtuseness about colonial and imperial culture has been roundly rebuked by Edward Said,

be decentered remains an open-ended discussion, but most postcolonial readers and citizens of the contemporary world hope that encounters with cultural others would revise individual and collective Western (and otherwise) notions of the human. At least, that is true of me. In fact, I have a deep-seated desire to promote such a belief and such a possibility. The texts in this study engage with the conundrum of the limits of European knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics. As a matter of literary art, the question of how to interact meaningfully with such limits is formulated in an interrogative trajectory traced back from the text itself through practices of observation and perception to formulas and regimes of thinking, and then relaunched in the opposite direction back toward the surface of the literary text. In their collective statement through the texts studied here, Eugène Fromentin, Victor Segalen, André Gide, and Michel Leiris form an eclectic, eccentric group of modern French writers who exceed metropolitan conventions, idioms, and historical limitations in at times subtle and at times obvious ways. Meeting the cultural other leads to changes in self-perception and ethical awareness for these writers, and subsequently leads to changes in aesthetics as an ideational and practical field. In their testing the literary norms that defined the center of artistic and literary expression of their times, these writers can be called experimental in the sense that by pressing beyond the limits of the known and by recognizing the ethical and aesthetic challenges that such activity presents, self-conscious and eccentric writers link writing anew to creation—to ad hoc, contextually alive, and partially deregulated creation.

Gayatri Spivak, Robert C. Young and others. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 41; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 291; and Young, "Foucault on Race and Colonialism," *New Formations* 25 (1995): 57-65. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, however, attempts to understand the anthropological point in a real-world context, arguing that Foucault's understanding of the Iran Revolution "not as an instance of Eurocentric theories of power, politics, and history" (xiii) but "the indeterminacy [to Western models] of the revolutionary movement" suggested a "possible source of creativity and inspiration" (3) that "transformed his ideas" (7). Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

In this study, I show how a loose tradition of French modern writers sensed the ethical imperative that inheres in the representation of non-European peoples. This awareness transformed description as an observational practice, textual practice, and as a theory and *forum* of representation. Description, then, is an integral part of a forum of representation, and I use this word to suggest the mental housing of representation, the physical practices of observation necessary for representation, and the forms of textual representation in which ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological appear on the page.

The rise of anthropology as a modern science was significant to this little studied literary history; it provided a goad toward reconceptualizing description of non-European peoples in literature. This goad could be said to be ambivalent—certainly the writers in this study relate differently to the idea of a modern scientific description of world peoples, both as a horizon of objective description set within or thought of separately from Western metaphysics and structures of thought that precede chronologically and exceed in scope the modern discipline of anthropology. Yet as the entire forum of representation that I would like to treat as an integrated exchange, crosshatching, and circulation of ideas and practices ends with description as a textual element, trace, or realization, the word “ethnography” refers both to the dominant textual mode of modern anthropology and to more expansive and less delimited senses of the word that precede the institutionalization in France of modern anthropology in the 1920s, with, most significantly, the opening of the Institut d’ethnologie in 1925, founded by Marcel Mauss, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Paul Rivet.⁴² The meaning of ethnography changes with its location in institutions and across time, to such a great extent that a major contemporary practitioner such as Florence Weber can seriously forward that the ethnographic *modus operandi* of the modern era, “co-présence physique” [in person observation], might no

⁴² Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield*, trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 26.

longer be necessary as a defining parameter of ethnography per se.⁴³ Thus, in many ways, my interest in modern anthropology, premodern ethnography, and the modern ethnographic monograph extends beyond disciplinary concerns of definition of field and method; instead, I think of these terms as elements or sites of énonciation in a discursive field in which representations of non-Western people were increasingly constrained by some degree of objectivity and facticity, some degree of escape from para-literary genres and their descriptive tropes that ultimately mask non-Western people through clichés and prejudice as opposed to revealing, or representing, them.

The dates of my study are admittedly expansive. I begin in 1859 and end in 1934—the first, a mark of emergence and the last, the sign of a height and, paradoxically, decline. The breadth is necessary to suggest the resilience and ongoing urgency of the concerns. The dates also suggest that the subject matter cannot be treated as an issue once treated thus solved, in the manner of much scientific study. The persistence of these concerns over sixty years in colonial history suggests, as well, I believe, the urgency for understanding epistemological preconditions and routines of perception within the depiction of cultural others in the postcolonial world—but now in every direction possible, not merely in the culturally hierarchized form of colonizing observer to colonial subject. The first date corresponds to the full publication in book form of Fromentin's *Une année dans le Sahel*⁴⁴ and his overlooked and crucial—but ambivalent, to be sure—remarks upon the pressure of ethnography upon the arts, both literature and painting. It is of considerable interest to me that Fromentin uses the word “ethnography” in this work; it would appear only one more time in his oeuvre, in his odd,

⁴³ Florence Weber mentions an archival micro-history, historical ethnography, or “multi-situated” ethnography of “delocalized” societies as possible contemporary forms of ethnography. Weber, Introduction to *Essai sur le don*, by Marcel Mauss (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 3-4.

⁴⁴ Eugène Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, ed. and intro. Élisabeth Cardonne (Paris: Flammarion, 1991).

anonymous self-critique for the Salon of 1876.⁴⁵ I have chosen to use the word “ethnography” over a more general “anthropology” due to this conspicuous appearance in Fromentin. I suggest the word represents the mark of a discontinuity in the history of thinking, such a mark that Foucault explains in his discursive analyses.⁴⁶ The word in Fromentin identifies the discursive field in which the concerns that interest me are all located—description, literature, science, objectivity. We can lament that Fromentin chose this word to use, as complex as the word becomes within the history of anthropology; but I think it wise not to ignore it. That Victor Segalen’s *Les immémoriaux* (1907),⁴⁷ then, has been retroactively called since its republication in 1956 the first ethnographic novel in French means that the word has momentum within this understudied aspect of French modern literature—its association, overlap, crosspollination, and agonistic relation with the emergence of the modern discipline of anthropology.

Thus, that anthropology and literature should be found together in one literary study should not alarm readers. Taking Foucault’s comments as a point of theoretic orientation and multivalent origin, I suggest that, in one broad sense, these are the two most natural forms of knowledge to find together, for what is literature, in the main, for better or worse, but the study of humankind, infused with the perspectivism of subject accounting and aesthetic styling? Foucault’s comments about anthropology as an “empirical-transcendent” study of the “strange double” of humankind suggests a much broader purchase from which to view the anthropological within literature, freeing it from an empirical cataloguing and inventory mentality to a genuine inquiry into the extent to

⁴⁵ Eugène Fromentin, “Salon de 1876,” in *Œuvres complètes*, ed., notes and intro. Guy Sagnes, La Pléiade, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 1220-1228.

⁴⁶ For the idea of discontinuity of ideas in history, see Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 64.

⁴⁷ Victor Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, Terre Humaine, rev. ed. (Paris: Plon, 1956).

which factors of objectivity and ideology shape representation of people of all sorts in creative writing. In the more limited case of this study, the texts that I have chosen are travel writing: I use that term, one step more vague than travel narratives, or travelogues, in order to include Seglan's *Les immémoriaux*, a book that defies easy categorical placement, but which was born through travel in a practical sense and in a second sense—Segalen's personality and its strong orientation toward the voyage as metaphysical enterprise.

Chapter 1

In *Une année dans le Sahel* (1859), Fromentin notes the rise of ethnography as a new challenge bearing down upon art, and he shows the ambivalence, or the contradiction, that marks his own ideas about art, his artistic practices, and his artistic products. Ethnography challenges art in a climate in which the public has an increasing taste for the "Real" at the expense of the "Beautiful." Similar to how Baudelaire fears that photography will ruin art, Fromentin worries that ethnography's inventory of cultural objects and its meticulousness of depiction will make art too pedagogic. But to paint North Africa in any way poses as an enormous challenge: since the subject matter of North Africa is foreign to European aesthetics, either the subject matter will have to be curbed to match the dictates of European aesthetics, or aesthetics must change to adapt to new subject matter, new qualities of light, and thus new styles. This latter conundrum was one that Fromentin felt fully; in his speculations about the new possibilities of North African art, he gave great value to the full and entire depiction of North African life, and the sincerity of spirit that moves the artist to accomplish such depictions. Chapter One seeks to explain the ambivalence of Fromentin's thinking and artistic production, putting into place several important elements: (1) the thinking of ethnography in relation to the emergence of subject matter in Dutch Golden Age paintings and in relation to the

documentary as a new “ordre de sujets” [order of subjects]; (2) evidence of Fromentin’s practices of observation and their relation to emergent modes of objectivity; and (3) Fromentin’s descriptions of people in his travelogues and the degree to which they express the same ambivalence about ethnography’s impact upon aesthetic description. While not suggesting anything other than the fact that Fromentin was ambivalent about the going age of science, objectivity, ethnography, and mechanical objectivity (as produced through photography), I do mean to propose that Fromentin was an important, early theoretician of art, ethnography, and description.

Chapter 2

In Chapter Two, I read both Victor Segalen’s *Les immémoriaux* (1907) and his meta-travel narrative *Equipée* (1929) as experiments in overcoming Western worldviews and Eurocentric aesthetics. While much of Segalen’s work is being re-read through his aesthetics of the diverse, adumbrated in his *Essai sur l’exotisme* (1978),⁴⁸ my reading takes the aesthetics of the diverse as a hinge. This aesthetics itself has problems in its ability to situate Segalen against the solipsism of Loti’s brand of exoticism, against which Segalen writes. First and foremost, if the aesthetics of the diverse respects cultural difference and urges that this difference must be allowed to exist, when we encounter that difference as pure difference we experience a “shock,” an affective sensation, that does not lead to understanding but rather to the European subject’s renewed understanding that cultural limits govern their place in the world. Instead of emphasizing that *Les immémoriaux* falls in line with Segalen’s aesthetics of the diverse, I suggest the novel actually reads over the barrier of cultural difference. In an act of extension, it performs an experiment in trying to see the world through a different culture’s viewpoint.

⁴⁸ Victor Segalen, *Equipée* (Paris: Plon, 1929; Gallimard, 1983); *Essai sur l’exotisme*, intro. Gilles Manceron (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978; Librairie Générale Française, 1986).

If cultural anthropology means to understand the essence of other cultures, then in this sense alone is the novel ethnographic. But more significantly, it is in leaving behind objectivity, in achieving a hyper-subjectivity of vision, that the novel attempts a broad critique of the authority of science, objectivity, and the arbitrariness of the sign. Then I extend this formula, if you will, to Segalen's Chinese oeuvre, where the same attempt is underway, particularly in *Equipée*. In this abstract travelogue, the work is structured through "Chinese" aesthetics and epistemology: Taoism penetrates the narrative and descriptive structures to demonstrate the limits of Eurocentric description. That is, the work shows how restructuring an entire genre—the travelogue—through a sympathetic, if essentialized, view of Chinese culture, philosophy, and aesthetics, can produce new rubrics for description.

Chapter 3

Few would normally suggest that André Gide was a scientist. It is with surprise, then, that we find him in *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* (1927/1928)⁴⁹ striving to write in a new way—a new way in which the pressure of his desire to represent African society, people, and reality accurately leads him toward a new form of expression, the quasi-scientific "note" in which objectivity inheres as a contrary force to subjective flights of fancy, aesthetic embellishment, and the forms of the traditionally beautiful, as typical in belles-lettristic prose. While from the earliest readings of these books, scholars and readers of every sort have focused upon the fact that Gide describes with meticulous attention nature, landscape, and the passage of the two French travellers—he and Marc Allégret—through central Africa. But early on in the books, Gide's interest in the people he encounters changes in focus: instead of seeing them in the background, on the same level of the landscape through which they travel, they come to the

⁴⁹ André Gide, *Voyage au Congo suivi de Le Retour du Tchad*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

foreground. He begins to depict them despite his acknowledgement that, basically, he lacks the requisite knowledge to do so. His desire to depict the peoples he and Allégret meet as best as he can comes with a dawning realization of how oppressed many of them are beneath French colonialism. What emerges, then, are notes. These notes aim at curbing the rhetorical and aesthetic excesses of traditional literary prose—even traditional literary Gideian prose—for the benefit of eclipsing considerations of style for the power of raw imagery, bare facts, freestanding details. Through the limitations of the conditions of the writing, and through his growing sympathy with the peoples he meets and his desire to show them as they are (and as the good they are), a type of objectivity emerges. In relation to the depiction of non-European people, I call this objectivity ethnographic description.

Chapter 4

The Dakar-Djibouti Mission from 1931 to 1933 was instrumental in the history of the influence of anthropology within French modern letters as it was the first state-sponsored French ethnographic mission. Leiris was the mission's secretary-archivist, and in his mammoth *L'Afrique fantôme*,⁵⁰ we find the apogee of a type of cross-fertilization between ethnography and literature. Leiris' work shows how enmeshed scientific prerogatives of objective observation became in literary colonial travel writing, and how these prerogatives suggested not merely rules for objective observation and its recording in texts but also ethical standards for the depiction of peoples. The tension between ethnography and literature reaches a point of paroxysm in his imprecations against ethnography and its seemingly unnatural demand for objective distance. In Chapter Four, I document how in Leiris' ambivalence speaks directly to the entire complex of description as a forum of representation: he deals explicitly with the

⁵⁰ Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of the theoretical aspects of the representation of African peoples; his observational practices highlight the quest for documentary, objective realism; and descriptions morph under the pressure of a new literary principle, that of information. Arguing to read his book as a literary work, I suggest that it reveals to us interesting ontological limits of literature itself, and the literary. Opacity/transparency, the sayable/the unsayable, and the describable/the indescribable function differently between science and art, and Leiris shows us how to read his own work not as literary anthropology, but as literature, defined against the cut of anthropology.

Conclusion

In my conclusion, I show how Glissant takes two key concepts from the writers studied here: opacity from the anthropological adventures of Leiris, and the “Diverse,” capitalized as such in Segalen. His redefining of opacity exemplifies the complex ways that theories of representation and practices of description ought to be implemented—in a sort of “best practice” way—in the contemporary, seen as a harbor and reservoir of knowledge, worldview, and insight developed from the ethical query that these metropolitan writers first intuited and began to put into action in various ways.

CHAPTER ONE

“Le goût de l’ethnographie,” Aesthetics, and the Problem of Ethnographic Description in Eugène Fromentin

“[c]ette curiosité récente chez moi de surprendre, de saisir la chose exacte et de l’exprimer.” Letter from June 1852

[this recent curiosity in me of surprising, of seizing upon, the exact thing and expressing it]⁵¹

In his 1874 preface to a republication of *Un été dans le Sahara*, Fromentin writes that he discovered Algeria as an artistic subject by chance.⁵² That “hasard” occurred in 1846, when Fromentin’s new friend, the artist Charles Labbé, whose family had settled in Algeria, returned for the wedding of his sister, and upon Labbé’s invitation, Fromentin went too. Upon his departure, Fromentin was uncertain about his future as an artist. If he made bold pronouncements in his 1845 Salon that attested to his critical eye and ambition, he still lacked skill, which he admitted the previous year while writing to his lifelong friend Paul Bataillard, “[V]ous me connaissez fort en promesses, mais faible en exécution” [You know me to be full of promise but lacking in execution].⁵³ One consequence of the trip was that, in hindsight, he could see that the question was not merely one of skill but subject matter. His unexpected but sincere and deep attraction for

⁵¹ Eugène Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse: Biographie et Notes*, ed. Pierre Blanchon (Paris: Plon, 1909), 57.

⁵² Eugène Fromentin, preface to *Un été dans le Sahara*, ed. and intro. Ann-Marie Christin (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 87.

⁵³ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 118.

the scenery and people of Algeria gave him his subject matter. Half of the problem of an artistic program solved, it remained for him but to “trouver la forme” [find the form].⁵⁴

Fromentin took advantage of the opportunity to return to Algeria the following year when he accompanied Labbé and Auguste Salzmänn, a painter who would achieve renown as an Orientalist photographer. They arrived in Algiers on October 4, 1847. Fromentin had shown his first Algerian painting at the Salon earlier that year, but he was still not sure of himself. Writing to his close friend Armand du Mesnil on February 20, 1848, Fromentin acknowledges his continuing doubts: “Je suis triste, je suis inquiet. Tous ces sacrifices que je fais et que j’impose à mes chers seront-ils payés par le succès que je veux et qu’ils attendent?” [I am sad, restless. Will all the sacrifices that I have made and that I impose on those dear to me be repaid in the success that I want and that others expect?].⁵⁵ Yet Fromentin’s time in Algeria proved so rewarding for his thinking and art practice that when he returned to France, he could write to the recently widowed wife of his friend Emile Beltrémieux that “ma vie de peintre, par et pour la peinture, ma vie à Paris par conséquent, est un fait accompli contre lequel rien ne peut prévaloir, et rien ne prévaudra” [my life as a painter, through and for painting, and so my life in Paris, is now a *fait accompli* that nothing can and will derail] (341). The salon of 1848 was not held due to the tumult surrounding Napoleon II’s exile to Great Britain, but the Algerian paintings that he would show in 1849 solidified his reputation, leading him, who had been entirely unknown the year before, to “relations ouvertes de pair à pair avec la plupart des peintres, qui, il y a trois mois, ne me connaissaient pas” [amicable,

⁵⁴ Fromentin, preface to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 87.

⁵⁵ Fromentin, *Lettres*, 300-1.

mutual friendships with most painters, who, three months ago, did not know who I was].⁵⁶

Yet, just twenty years later, Jules Castagnary, among the first critics to embrace Impressionism, leaves no uncertainty that Fromentin reached a point of blockage in his art: “C’est toujours le même jet libre et spirituel, toujours la même fantaisie charmante, toujours les mêmes jolies taches de couleur, toujours les mêmes petits chevaux vifs, emportés, pleins de feu” [It is always the same gesture of freedom and spirit, always the same charming fantasy, always the same nice bits of color, always the same little horses, so spirited, headstrong, brimming with fire].⁵⁷ According to Castagnary, Fromentin, like many artists, became a caricature of himself. And yet Castagnary offers this opinion with regret because he considered Fromentin an exception within Orientalist art, that is, an artist of promise: “[il] est de ceux qu’on suit avec intérêt, et dont on ne manque jamais de s’informer chaque année” [he is one of those that we follow with interest, and of whom each year we make sure to keep abreast] (349). After a rather abrupt and abbreviated prestige near the top of the French art and literary world, Fromentin found himself eclipsed by the art world and, furthermore, in the confusing and paradoxical situation of being “passed over entirely by events and in a reactionary position after having been almost avant-garde.”⁵⁸

Despite the amount of scholarship on his art and writing, I share James Thompson and Barbara Wright’s sense, now thirty years old, that Fromentin’s contribution remains not fully demonstrated. In 1987, they suggested that what lacked in scholarship was an integrating function that could unite his “double moyen d’expression”

⁵⁶ Fromentin, *Correspondance et fragments inédits*, ed. Pierre Blanchon (Paris: Plon, 1912), 8.

⁵⁷ Jules Castagnary, *Salons, I: 1857-1870* (Paris: Charpentier, 1892), 350.

⁵⁸ Jacques Foucart, introduction to *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*, intro. and notes Jacques Foucart (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1965), 21.

[double method of expression] so as to explain his “véritable accomplissement” [true accomplishment], that is, “his manière unique” [unique manner].⁵⁹ Sixteen years after Thompson and Wright’s hopeful call for inroads in scholarship, Roger Benjamin presented one such scholarly possibility, when in *Orientalist Aesthetics* he mentioned that Fromentin’s “role as a theorist of Orientalism” has lacked scholarship.⁶⁰ This chapter attempts a synthesis of Fromentin’s aesthetics in theory and in practice. It takes up, as Benjamin suggests, the rigorous formalization of Fromentin as a theorist of art in the Orient. As a point of origin, this chapter focuses upon a phrase in his travelogue *Une année dans le Sahel* (1859), specifically, the phrase “le goût de l’ethnographie” [the taste for ethnography], mentioned in the course of the narrator’s long and astute art-critical monologue to his travel companion Vandell. This phrase indicates that emergent practices of ethnography exist as an important hinge in Fromentin’s thinking. For Fromentin, ethnography is both a frightening challenge and a key concept for practices and possibilities that excite and influence his beliefs as an artist and thinker. The aesthetic uncertainty of ethnographic description was the irritant against which his theories of descriptive practice crystallized, and through Fromentin’s pen, ethnographic description appears for the first time in French literature alongside its own critique.

In this chapter, I will document the indecision that he experiences in regards to ethnography. First, I will provide the basic history for the rise to ethnographic consciousness that occurred in the French intellectual sphere during the years of Fromentin’s life. The rest of the chapter will be divided in two large sections, the first dealing with important aspects of his theorization of Orientalist art and the second delving into his two Algerian travelogues to see to what extent his ambivalent ideas

⁵⁹ James Thompson and Barbara Wright, *La vie et l’œuvre d’Eugène Fromentin* (Paris: ACR, 1987), 323.

⁶⁰ Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 17.

about the possibilities of a new art of the Orient play out in literary practice. Concerning his art theory, I will document three related concerns: his ideas about the “pittoresque” [picturesque], the basic genre in which Orientalist art grew; how his ideas on the Dutch Golden Age can be read effectively as a prehistory to Orientalism through the way that the values of an “ethnographic” subject appear in these paintings; and, last, how the problems of artistic subject appear in new form in the Orient, where the basic logic of the “impression,” the term that signifies the central tenets of his art theory, buckles, but does not entirely give way, under the pressure of these new problems of representation. While I will not, regrettably, treat Fromentin’s paintings in this chapter, nevertheless, after detailing this art theory, I will note passages from his two Algerian travelogues that manifest the same tensions prevalent in his thinking about Orientalist art, and that otherwise show a new form of artistic representation of the non-European other, a form in which a sedentary, distanced observation and sincere and meticulous examples of portraiture point toward an ethnographic orientation. Beyond being the first person to use the word “ethnography” in French letters, Fromentin foreshadows the work of the three writers who will follow him in this dissertation. He, like them, articulates the ethnographic turn as intensely problematic. For him, the value of ethnography is so deeply entwined in social and artistic demands placed upon him as an Orientalist painter and writer that he cannot see the ways in which it has already infused his own thinking, writing, and art. This contradiction is at the heart of ethnographic description.

Part I. The Rise of Orientalist Learned Societies, Ethnography, and the Arts

The appearance of the word “ethnography” in Fromentin’s *Une année dans le Sahel* would seem both surprising and hardly surprising at all. Aside from the important usage of the word in his travelogue, he uses the word just once again, in his 1876 Salon where

he praises his own painting for having escaped the trap of ethnographic depiction.⁶¹ As such, the word feels almost like a slip of the tongue, a repressed secret springing to the surface of consciousness. Also, since Fromentin uses the word explicitly as a complaint against the public's bad taste, it also feels like a variation upon the general theme of artistic contempt for the expanding art consumption of the middle class—an irony to be sure, since it would be due to this middle class's purchasing power that Fromentin could hope to earn a livelihood.

From a separate angle, the word's appearance would be not surprising. The aesthetic debate into which the word "ethnography" intervenes can be thought of as a discursive field in which many énoncés coexist, and Fromentin is perhaps overly familiar with these terms: his art theory is articulated through the terms of the picturesque, genre painting, traits, types, particularity, physiognomy, curiosity, fidelity, exactitude, resemblance—a whole lexicon that he inherited and through which he conceives his ideas about art. Also, the use of the word "ethnography" does not lack ample context through its currency in scholarly circles throughout Fromentin's lifetime. As we will soon see, the word, established during the 1830s, began to appear in art circles in the 1860s, and by the end of the century, explicit ethnographic concerns were to infiltrate into the heart of French intellectual life in such a way that one does not blanch when Benjamin refers to Nasreddine Dinet and Paul Gauguin, two turn-of-the-century artists "gone native" in Algeria and Tahiti respectively, as tacitly ethnographic painters.⁶²

The picturesque voyage—the anthropological and literary genre of early imperial travels—supplied the first records that French intellectuals had of many places in the world, and, in response to the growing availability of these documents, learned

⁶¹ Eugène Fromentin, "Salon de 1876," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed., notes, and intro. Guy Sagnes, La Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 1220-1228.

⁶² Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 92-103.

Orientalist societies began to dot the map of European capitals in the first decades of the nineteenth century. As a colonial power, France competed chiefly with Great Britain for prestige. Yet the relation was not merely competitive but also collaborative: the competition for and swapping of knowledge between the two imperial powers in the “Anglo-French imperial formation”⁶³ produced a chain of learned societies extending over the English Channel. The Société Asiatique was founded in Paris in 1821; the next year, the Asia Society was birthed in London. The Société ethnologique de Paris marked its origins in 1839; the Ethnological Society of London was created in response in 1843.⁶⁴ The Société d’anthropologie de Paris, inaugurated by Paul Broca in 1859, met with the response of a similar body, the Anthropological Society of London in 1863. While these two last British groups would merge, this did not happen in France, where Broca’s physical anthropological “race science,” a legacy of the physiologist and “father of ethnology” in France, William Frédéric Edwards, remained a distinct endeavor.⁶⁵ To compete in France with Broca’s race science, the Société d’ethnographie Américaine et Orientale (a title shortened in time to the Société d’ethnographie) was founded the same year as Broca’s institution. This learned body emphasized ways of thinking about human variation through a spiritual lens.

The term “ethnography” held currency in the circles of the Orientalist savant. Garcin de Tassy, member of the Société Asiatique, member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and the holder of the first chair in Hindustani at the Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes, used the word in 1832, three years prior to its official adoption by the Académie Française where it would mean the “part of the practice of

⁶³ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 32.

⁶⁴ George Stocking, “Qu’est-ce qui est en jeu dans un nom?” in *Histoires de l’anthropologie: XVIe-XIXe siècles: Colloque, La Pratique de l’anthropologie aujourd’hui, 19-21 novembre 1981, Sèvres*, ed. Britta Rupp-Eisenreich (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984), 422.

⁶⁵ Pascale Riviale, *Un siècle d’archéologie française au Pérou (1821-1914)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 12.

statistics that has for its object the study and description of diverse peoples.”⁶⁶ In reviewing *Observations on the Musulmauns of India*, an English text of the customs and manners genre, de Tassy writes of matters that are “very interesting from the ethnographic point of view.”⁶⁷ Christine Peltre marks the turn toward the ethnographic with the paintings exhibited in the 1855 Universal Exposition by Théodore Valerio’s ethnographic paintings of Eastern Europe showed the painter’s interest in racial-typological portraiture.⁶⁸ Thus, by 1859, the year of the publication of *Une année dans le Sahel*, the word “ethnography” was hardly a neologism. In fact, on May 28th Théophile Gautier characterized Fromentin’s art as that of “peinture ethnographique” [ethnographic painting] while writing in *Le Moniteur universel*.⁶⁹ A year after Fromentin’s *Une année dans le Sahel* was published, the sculptor Charles Cordier would exhibit fifty ethnographic sculptures in an exhibition called a “Galerie anthropologique et ethnographique” at the Exposition of Algerian Products at the Palais de l’Industrie (120).⁷⁰ By 1868, the term was current enough that the art critic Emile Galichon could call Jean-Léon Gérôme a “painter-ethnographer” (113). By 1881, Flaubert could mock ethnographic authors and painters in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), where the author satirizes Balzac’s penchant for minute description of various bourgeois subjects and Louis Gustave Ricard’s portraits of French native types, writing, “Nous en aurons sur

⁶⁶ Nélia Dias, *Le Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878-1908)* (Paris: CNRS, 1991), 23. Cited in Riviale, 13.

⁶⁷ Garcin de Tassy, review of *Observations on the Musulmauns of India*, by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, in *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays*, trans. M. Waseem (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

⁶⁸ Christine Peltre, *Orientalisme* (Paris: Terrails, 2004), 113.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Guy Barthélemy, *Fromentin et l’écriture du désert* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 137.

⁷⁰ See also Laure de Margarie, Edouard Papet, *Facing the Other: Charles Cordier (1827-1905), Ethnographic Sculptor*, with Christine Barthe and Maria Vigil, trans. Lenora Ammon, Laurel Hirsch, and Clare Palmieri (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 230. Du Camp’s 1857 Salon characterizes Cordier’s work as “curieux, surtout au point de vue ethnographique [...] mais loin de valoir” [curious, especially from an ethnographic perspective]. *Le Salon de 1857* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1857), 172.

tous les métiers et sur toutes les provinces, puis sur toutes les villes et les étages de chaque maison et chaque individu, ce qui ne sera plus de la littérature mais de la statistique ou de l'ethnographie" [We would have in this all the jobs and all the provinces, all the towns and the floors of each house and each person, that which will no longer be literature but statistics or ethnography].⁷¹

The trend toward a less Romanticized and more ethnographic vision of Oriental subjects in art found its most mature institutional form, Benjamin argues, with Dinet's participation in the Society of French Orientalist Painters. Conceived of by Léonce Bénédite as an entity during the 1889 Universal Exposition and formalized in 1894, this society created a platform for Orientalist art of "naturalism, of observation and the direct experience of different climes and their people," where "the duty of painters capturing the sartorial and ethnographic fascination of patriarchal Arab life in 'Muslim France' [...] was to document and, where possible, protect it from the vicissitudes of a harsh colonialism."⁷² The Society aimed to "improve knowledge of the lands and indigenous races of those parts of the world, to give critical direction to the study of their ancient arts, and to contribute to the restoration of their local industries" (66).

Part II. Fromentin's Aesthetic Theory

Fromentin's aesthetic theory can be described as wedged between two terms, conceptual fields, and their aesthetic prerogatives, both of which he wished to separate himself from, but both that define his thinking as bookends: the picturesque and ethnography. The former is part of his inherited lexicon, and, as such, it appears more frequently; ethnography is part of an emergent discursive field in which science, objectivity, and new forms of representation such as photography intervene, and,

⁷¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, 1881, rev. ed. (Ebooks libres et gratuits), 165.

⁷² Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 62.

consequently, it appears infrequently. Anne-Marie Christin has used another word to describe Fromentin's artistic tastes; she argues that his thinking about art manifests the "philosophy" of the "impression."⁷³ I divide this section into three parts to trace out how the picturesque and ethnography as critical terms intersecting with the logic of the impression might lead us to a precise understanding of Fromentin's ideas of art, and, specifically, his ideas of the limits of description in relation to the politics and possibilities of representation of people in North Africa.

The Picturesque and Genre Painting

By the time that nineteenth-century French authors were using the word "picturesque," the word had already been passed from Britain to France, and its concept passed from landscape painting into literature. The eighteenth century in Britain saw, W.J.T. Mitchell notes, the simultaneous rise of the British Empire and landscape painting.⁷⁴ Yet the emergence of landscape painting might not reflect "gradual artistic processes" that lead to landscape's transformation from background effect in portraits into the newly opened foreground.⁷⁵ Charles Harrison writes, rather, that eighteenth-century landscape painting signaled the liberation of the English landscape from the landed gentry's hold over the land, and, thus, land became "viewable under some aspect other than its aspect as property" (215). This allowed two things: a personal relation to land and the possibility of conceiving of land "in terms of *painterly* effects" (215). The picturesque in landscape painting can be identified by a host of conventions, including the "unquestioning

⁷³ Anne-Marie Christin, introduction to *Un été dans le Sahara*, by Eugène Fromentin, intro. and notes Anne-Marie Christin (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 32-3.

⁷⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 17.

⁷⁵ Charles Harrison, "The Effects of Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 215.

acceptance of the illusion of deep space” (218)—which allows an endless depth of descriptive possibility. It is also not mimetic, and the genre allows painters to lightly transform the real to match an aesthetic vision. This includes the *repoussoir* effect in which “the painter [is allowed] to introduce a convenient tree (or to cut it down), in accordance with the demands of the convention” (ibid.). The addition of such trees to divide the painting’s depth into sections also functions within imperial and Orientalist aesthetics, as such trees give “a dark refuge for the viewer to hide behind,” connoting at least partially a “visual field of violence (hunting, war, surveillance).”⁷⁶

In the picturesque landscape, people are generally absent. More specifically, the political, social, and cultural agon of humans and their relationships are disinvested from the human form so as to conduce to the observer’s appreciation for scenic beauty. “An avowed follower of the picturesque,” writes Gary Sampson, “would not admit elements into the frame suggestive of, say, social conflict between landowners and local laborers.”⁷⁷ Instead of representing people in conflict—as socio-economic classes inevitably are—the picturesque landscape, when it includes people, would suppress all potential conflict in order to serve an aesthetic end and thus “to foster an emotive vision that would seem to have no connection with present-day political realities” (ibid.).

In literature, the picturesque was first articulated by Reverend William Gilpin in *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (1788).⁷⁸ But it is the genre of the picturesque voyage that concerns us here, as this cross-genre combined the aesthetics of landscape picturesque in painting with that of literature. Developing from Renaissance

⁷⁶ Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” 23, 24, 16.

⁷⁷ Gary D. Sampson, “Unmasking the Colonial Picturesque: Samuel Bourne’s photographs of Barrackpore Park,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

⁷⁸ Reverend William Gilpin, *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty made in the Year 1772, on general parts of England, particularly the mountains and lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (London: R. Blamire, 1788).

and seventeenth-century texts of explorers, missionaries, and traders, the picturesque voyage reached its zenith after Alois Senefelder invented the lithograph in 1796. The lithograph allowed the easy reproduction of images, and the picturesque voyage's format of literary text plus image provided "a thoroughgoing inventory of the natural, archaeological and architectural heritage" of non-European countries.⁷⁹ It remained popular until the invention of photography in 1839 slowed lithographic production.⁸⁰

The first commentary in France for and against the picturesque as the presiding aesthetic for travel writing came about simultaneously. Appearing in 1833, *Le Magasin pittoresque* was one of several periodicals dedicated to picturesque travel writing that discovered the beauties of France, a genre that featured "l'artiste, poète et peintre, [qui] donne en toute chose accès au monde du beau [...] où les préceptes de l'école continuent de régir un 'paysage' à l'anglaise, 'émaillée' de curiosités folkloriques ou spectaculaires" [the artist, the poet and painter, [who] gives above all else access to the world of the beautiful [...] where the precepts of the school continue to enforce a 'landscape' in the English style, 'enameled' with folklorist and visual curiosities].⁸¹ Simultaneous to the promulgation of these periodicals, Stendhal wished to jettison its already stale—and British—conventions. In *Mémoires d'un touriste* (1838), he writes, "Le *pittoresque*, comme les bonnes diligences et les bateaux à vapeur, nous vient d'Angleterre; un beau paysage fait partie de la religion comme de l'aristocratie d'un Anglais; chez lui c'est l'objet d'un sentiment sincère" [The *picturesque*, like good stagecoaches and steamships, comes to us from England; a good landscape is part of

⁷⁹ Peltre, *Orientalisme*, 79.

⁸⁰ Photography's popularity from its inception was staggering. Thirty-one photographers were registered in Paris in 1844, and thirteen commercial studios in 1848. By 1851, more than twenty-one million daguerreotype images were in circulation in Paris alone. See Julia Ballerini, *The Stillness of Hajj Ishmael: Maxime Du Camp's 1850 Photographic Encounters* (New York: iUniverse, 2010), 5-6.

⁸¹ Gérard Rannaud, "Du pittoresque à l'égotisme: une poétique de l'ironie dans le récit de voyage," in *Voyager en France au temps du romantisme*, ed. Alain Guyot and Chantal Massol (Grenoble: ELLUG, Université Stendhal, 2003), 236.

the religion and the aristocracy of the English; for him, I is the object of a sincere feeling].⁸² This was Stendhal's attempt to define a new French form of travel writing, the "egoistic" (238), to contrast with the inherited British picturesque tradition. It was to feature a turn away from "cette 'bonne' ou 'ancienne' France que le pittoresque du *site*, venu du *paysage*, de la *scène*, issu de la *peinture de genre*, isole, *recadre*, et, dans le registre du *beau* ou de l'*anecdote*, marque d'un signe de *différence*, d'altérité convenue, qui autorise le récit" [this 'good' or 'ancient' France that the picturesque of the *site*, developed from the *landscape*, from the *scene*, from *genre painting*, isolates, *reframes*, and, in the register of the *beautiful* or of the *anecdote*, marks as a sign of *difference*, of conventional otherness, that authorizes the narrative] (emphasis Rannaud, 237). Two things are significant here. First, Stendhal formulates a critique of picturesque description twenty years before Fromentin would try to exemplify a counter-tradition in travel writing. Second, Stendhal's critique of the picturesque applies only to European travel and yet, in Fromentin, a similar critique finds its natural extension in North Africa. That is, as the terms of Stendhal's picturesque reappear in Fromentin, we see the link between European art criticism and an Oriental one. Interestingly, in the 1880s, if Flaubert retroactively mocks Balzac and Richard as closet ethnographers who would destroy literature and the arts through their overly literal portraits, the French press took aim at Pierre Loti's war reporting for the opposite reason, calling it "atrocement pittoresque" [exceedingly picturesque] and thus too literary for the documentary function of journalistic reporting.⁸³

In Fromentin's aesthetics, the picturesque is for him not as deeply thought through as the impression. The impression refers to an entire metaphysics, namely, the entire system by which art transcends nature and how sense impressions are changed

⁸² Stendhal, *Œuvres de Stendhal, Mémoires d'un touriste*, rev. ed. (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1891), 87.

⁸³ Charles Longuet, "Les Inhumains," *La Justice* 22 Oct 1883.

through artistic sublimation into art. But the picturesque is less nuanced. In general, it refers to an artistic practice or style of representation: the creation of layers of depth in a painting through techniques such as *repoussoir*, the filling of that depth with any proliferation of descriptive details, and *chiaroscuro* techniques providing another source of contrast within a painting, and the forwarding of beauty, design, and organization of natural beauty over social and political themes.⁸⁴ More specifically, in his lexicon, the picturesque refers to two things.

First, Fromentin uses the word to describe something wild, chaotic, or different and new⁸⁵—and thus conveying the sense of something being impregnated with a certain frisson in keeping with the “goût de l’antithèse” [taste of antithesis] with which the picturesque was associated.⁸⁶ Fromentin’s use of the word appears early in his journals, including his note upon his first visit to Paris that the woods of Versailles are, even in the depths of winter, “picturesque” and in places “excessivement sauvages” [excessively wild].⁸⁷ During his first voyage to Algeria, he writes in a letter to Bataillard that “[c]e qu’il y a de vraiment pittoresque” [what is really picturesque] (310) are the Arabs from the south with their camels laden with dates. The word implies that the nomadic southern Arabs contrast more from a European model than the sedentary Arabs of the northern coast. The deserts of the south are the home to the Bedouins, with whom Fromentin is most intrigued, since it is in Bedouin culture that “les mœurs arabes qui sont là dans leur primitive intégrité” [Arab customs are there in their primitive integrity]. That is, in the desert, one glimpses “la Bible juive, ce qu’il y a de plus primitif, ce que nous avons de

⁸⁴ Linda Nochlin writes that the picturesque would “mask conflict with the appearance of tranquility.” *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50.

⁸⁵ Sampson writes that these “irregularity, variation, decay, and wildness” would increasingly define the photographic picturesque. Sampson, “Unmasking the Colonial Picturesque,” 94.

⁸⁶ N/a, *La République française*, 25 Oct 1883.

⁸⁷ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 39.

plus sauvage” [the Jewish Bible, what is the most primitive, the most wild].⁸⁸ The picturesque is linked to Biblical images and ancient customs. If Fromentin admits that Bedouins “en marche, *nedja*” [on the move, *nedja*] is an “admirable spectacle” that recalls “les migrations d’Israël” [the migrations of Israel], he nevertheless forbids the artistic, allegorical recreation of a Biblical scene through the license of the costuming and exotic coloring of “la *couleur locale*” [local color], which would have the effect of “traduire en histoire un livre antéhistorique” [to translate into history an anti-historical book].⁸⁹

In contrast to in his letters, Fromentin uses the word with a somewhat more restricted meaning in his travelogues. Red and black Arab tents are held up by poles “pittoresquement” [picturesquely].⁹⁰ In *Une année dans le Sahel*, Arab culture is “[t]oujours pittoresque dans le bon sens du mot” [always picturesque in the good sense of the word].⁹¹ An intersection in Algiers is picturesque (67). The old Turkish homes in Algiers are also picturesque: “Toutes sont bâties dans une situation pittoresque, sur un échelon de pentes boisées, et toutes regardent la mer” [All are built in a picturesque setting, on terraces with woods, and all looking at the sea] (85). Then, a ravine through which they pass is “picturesque” (145). Here, too, the same senses occur, but with less fanfare: the word implies the frisson of experience but describes the objects with only a cursory gesture.

⁸⁸ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 310, 307.

⁸⁹ Eugène Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, intro. and notes Anne-Marie Christin (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 147-8. For a historical account of this view, see Sarga Moussa, *Le mythe bédouin chez les voyageurs aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris: Presses de l’université Paris-Sorbonne, 2016).

⁹⁰ Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 146.

⁹¹ Eugène Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, ed. and intro. Élisabeth Cardonne (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 50.

In his more restrictive use of the word in his travelogues (and moreover in the rarity of its occurrences), we can sense Fromentin's implicit critique of the picturesque taken to an extreme. If the picturesque exists as a facet of perception of non-European places and peoples, then it should be relatively compressed within a delimited space within the scene being rendered in painting or in writing. The picturesque is, then, closely aligned with local color. Fromentin critiques both. Local color emerged from the Renaissance's interest in particularity when "especially in the embrace of the exotic, [painters] foregrounded what had once been mere details."⁹² In 1871, when writing to Ferdinand Humbert, Fromentin asks the young artist to consider not using the aesthetics of local color in his painting "Judith and Holopherne." Local color refers, in this passage, to the milieu in which the painting's true subject appears. Unfortunately, these details—"le luxe des étoffes, le déshabillé de la femme, l'atmosphère de la tente, l'homme endormi dans le clair-obscur" [the luxury of the fabrics, the state of undress of the woman, the atmosphere of the tent, the man asleep in the chiaroscuro]—risk overwhelming the painting; he warns that these details "peut donner à votre sujet un faux air d'aventure galante et de tragédie d'alcôve, ce qui n'est ni dans l'esprit de l'œuvre, ni dans la vérité de l'histoire" [can give to your subject a false air of gallant adventure and of romantic tragedy, which is not in the spirit of the work or in the truth of history].⁹³ Instead of reproducing the clichés of French Orientalist representation of the Orient, Fromentin strives to contradict the excesses of such descriptive practices, as well as the logic that sponsors such excesses. Strive for balance, Fromentin says to the young artist; identify your true subject. Vladimir Kapor calls Fromentin's aesthetics that of "la couleur *anti-locale*" (italics mine)—an oppositional aesthetics in which Fromentin

⁹² Peter Benson Miller, "'Des couleurs primitives': Miscegenation and French Painting of Algeria," *Visual Resources* 24.3: 287.

⁹³ Fromentin, *Correspondance*, 279-80.

operates against “the collective image from the given foreign milieu that impregnates the social imaginary”⁹⁴ in which “the abusive usage of neologisms and foreign sounds, and the heavy-handed effort at picturesque descriptions”⁹⁵ put the coherence of the narrative and composition at risk.

In his 1874 preface to the republication of *Un été dans le Sahara*, Fromentin balances a restriction of the picturesque and an acknowledgement of its potential virtues. He defines his travelogues within the category of picturesque literature. He admits that were his interest in republication of his work only that of remembering a place that charmed him and “le pittoresque des choses, hommes et lieux” [the picturesque aspects of things, people and places], then he would have no interest in the republication.⁹⁶ Then he outlines the history of picturesque literature, how it arose from “goûts et sensations modernes” [modern tastes and sensations], including for travel and “l’esprit de curiosité et d’universelle investigation qui s’était emparé de nous” [the spirit of curiosity and universal investigation in the world] (88). Fromentin mentions that at the time of his writing of his travelogues—the second half of the 1850s—he had heard, and himself believed, that there was a pre-existing limit and deficiency in the “narrowness” of the vocabulary for “les besoins nouveaux de la littérature pittoresque” [for the new needs of picturesque literature].⁹⁷ This narrowness is, for Fromentin, the restriction upon details for details’ sake with the picturesque’s rubric of conforming to a pre-existing, exoticizing image of the foreign. The Musée d’Orsay’s curatorial text on Fromentin’s “Chasse au faucon en Algérie” supports the idea of Fromentin’s art as anti-picturesque: “Le tableau

⁹⁴ Vladimir Kapor, *Pour une poétique de l’écriture exotique: les stratégies de l’écriture exotique dans les lettres françaises aux alentours de 1850* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 176.

⁹⁵ Vladimir Kapor, “La Couleur anti-locale d’Eugène Fromentin,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 34.1-2 (Fall-Winter 2005-6): 64.

⁹⁶ Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 86.

⁹⁷ Fromentin, preface to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 88.

de Fromentin, s'il se rattache à la tradition orientaliste romantique, ne cherche pas l'exactitude du détail pittoresque" [Fromentin's painting, although it belongs to the Romantic Orientalist tradition is not trying for exact picturesque detail]. This characterization implies the insufficiency, the deficiency, of the picturesque as a Romantic form of prizing of details and particularity, which, as Kapor writes, has for its ends the specious and superficial forms of intrigue that the likes of Pierre Loti seek to create in their readers.⁹⁸ Instead, the Musée writes, Fromentin offers us an "image idéalisée" [idealized image].⁹⁹

Fromentin explains his writing as a new form of picturesque literature, and since he produced his paintings through the same method, it applies to his art, as well. He attributes his ability to escape the generic dictates of Romantic picturesque descriptive writing to the fact that he wrote the books from memory. Beginning the first in the summer of 1856, three years since he had returned from his third and final Algerian trip, he had the necessary means to sieve the universal from the particular: "[La nécessité de les écrire à distance] me contraignait à chercher la vérité en dehors de l'exactitude, et la ressemblance en dehors de la copie conforme" [It forced me to look for truth outside of exactitude, and resemblance beyond the truthful copy].¹⁰⁰ He couches his new form of picturesque literature against a new pole, that of ethnography, though here the relation is defined as being largely negative: "L'exactitude poussée jusqu'au scrupule, une vertu capitale lorsqu'il s'agit de renseigner, d'instruire ou d'imiter, ne devenait plus qu'une qualité de second ordre, dans un ouvrage de ce genre" [Exactitude pushed toward

⁹⁸ In Loti's denial of intrigue, exotic literature's interest in intrigue can be parsed, "Il n'y a pas d'intrigue dans mes livres [...]" [There's no intrigue in my books]. Cited in Claude Martin, preface to *Aziyadé* suivi de *Fantôme d'Orient*, preface Claude Martin (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 28.

⁹⁹ Musée d'Orsay, "Eugène Fromentin, *Falconry in Algeria: the Spoils*," Accessed 9 May 2017, http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/chasse-au-faucon-en-algerie-244.html?no_cache=1&cHash=8558908624.

¹⁰⁰ Fromentin, preface to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 91.

scrupulousness, a capital virtue when it is about informing, instructing or imitating, became only a quality of the second order, in a work of this genre] (ibid.). His idea of the impression is becoming visible: exactitude is not enough, scrupulousness is not enough; art is not about information, instruction, or imitation. What is necessary is a bit of idealization, sublimation, and universalization—which Fromentin says comes about through the act of “writing at a distance”: “pour peu que la sincérité soit parfaite, qu’il s’y mêle un peu d’imagination, que le temps ait choisi les souvenirs, en un mot qu’un grain d’art s’y soit glissé” [because even it is done with perfect sincerity, there is still a little imagination, since time chooses memories, and, in a word, a grain of art slides in] (ibid.).

Fromentin’s critique of the decadent picturesque literature finds an echo in his critique of genre painting. In his 1845 Salon, published in a short-lived newspaper in La Rochelle, a young Fromentin takes exception to the newfound importance of genre painting in France: “Qu’il me soit permis néanmoins, au commencement de cet article, de protester, selon mes forces, contre l’importance exagérée qu’on accorde de nos jours à la peinture dite *de genre*” [Allow me to say at the beginning of this article, to protest as well as I can, against the exaggerated importance that we today grant to *genre* painting].¹⁰¹ The problem, as he sees it, is that genre painting “envahisse aujourd’hui, sans mesure, la grande peinture historique et religieuse; usurpant tous les sujets, non pour s’élever à leur taille, mais pour les rapetisser à la sienne” [invades without restraint both history painting and religious works, usurping all of their subjects, not to make genre works of equal majesty but to bring these subjects down to their lowly standards] (ibid.).

Previously a second-tier concern, genre painting started to encroach upon the “genre” system of Academic painting, with history and religious painting at the top as the

¹⁰¹ Fromentin, “Salon 1845,” *Œuvres complètes*, ed., notes, and intro. Guy Sagnes, La Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 891-2.

most prestigious. The expansion of genre painting was brought about by advances in painting technology, such as the 1841 invention and subsequent proliferation of tube oil paints, which eliminated two of the traditional constraints upon painting, namely, the skill needed in the difficult pursuit of mixing paints for the canvas, and also the practical and financial necessity to have space to paint, as tube paint allowed painters to leave the studio for *plein air* painting. Fromentin notes these changes in his 1845 Salon: “Les procédés matériels de la peinture ont été poussés si loin depuis une quinzaine d’années qu’il devient aussi vulgaire, aussi nécessaire aujourd’hui de bien peindre que de bien rimer” [The material advances of painting have been pushed so far in the last fifteen years or so that it has become it is necessary again to demand that people paint well, just like people rhyme well] (881). As painting became a pursuit more widely possible, it became, as Fromentin believed, diluted through amateurism. Thirty years later, he would echo these thoughts in *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*. Addressing landscape painting, he writes of the negative impact of the material changes to painting as a profession, both in regard to the expansion of the practice to include new populations and in regard to the breakdown of the Academic genre system through the widespread popularity of genre and landscape art.

He writes of the rafts of inferior Orientalist painters whom he suggests are “assez mal portants” [fairly unhealthy], saying that “[l]es voyages lointains ont tenté les peintres et changé bien des choses à la peinture” [travel to far-flung places has tempted painters and changed many things in painting].¹⁰² Specifically, the trend of landscape painting *en plein air* is to him regrettable since “[c]eux qui le pratiquent exclusivement n’en sont pas plus habiles” [those who practice it exclusively are not more skillful for their efforts] (717). He summarizes the importance, not justified to him, of landscape painting with words that echo his critique of genre painting thirty years earlier: “[...] le paysage a tout envahi

¹⁰² Fromentin, *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 716.

et que, chose singulière, en attendant qu'il ait rencontré sa propre formule, il a bouleversé toutes les formules, troublé beaucoup de clairs esprits et compromis quelques talents" [landscape has invaded everywhere, and that, remarkably, while still trying to find its proper footing, it has overturned all formulas, troubled many clear thinkers and compromised many talents] (ibid.)

Landscape and genre are the most important Orientalist genres, putting pressure on the Academic genre hierarchy, with history, religion, and portrait painting at the top, along with their implicit choice of European subject. According to Fromentin, genre painting, like the picturesque in general, creates the taste for the exotic details of foreign climes and their cultures: "La peinture de genre a-t-elle fait autre chose en France qu'inventer des scènes, compulsur l'histoire, illustrer les littératures, peindre le passé, un peu le présent, fort peu la France contemporaine, beaucoup les curiosités des mœurs ou des climats étrangers?" [Has French genre painting done anything but invent scenes, record history, illustrate literature, paint the past, a little of the present, and, while hardly anything of contemporary France, a lot of the curiosities of foreign customs and climates] (674). In the picturesque, he finds a "un nouvel art" [a new art] of "la double forme du livre et du tableau" [the double form of the book and the painting] (715).

In *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, Fromentin writes of the first French "maîtres paysagistes" [master landscape artists] in literature—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand, and Senancour. Despite the fact that Rousseau singlehandedly invented the "vocabulary" that writers continue to use, this first draft was just that, inadequate to contemporary demands because these writers only cast a "un coup d'œil d'ensemble" [broad glance over the world they saw] and "exprimaient en formules sommaires" [expressed themselves in summary formulas] (714). Just as this literature was "incomplete" and "limited" by this inadequacy, picturesque painting also "allaient se trouver à l'étroit dans le style et dans les méthodes étrangères" [soon found

itself in a fix in regards to style and unfamiliar methods] (714). Fromentin's critique of the decadent traditions of picturesque literature combines with his critique of genre and landscape art. He articulates this nexus because he practices these same genres, and yet he does not, evidently, criticize himself; his difference from his own critique must therefore be elucidated.

Emergence of "Ethnographic" Values in the Dutch Golden Age

What is clear is that the paradox of the similarity between the picturesque and ethnographic, the separation between his critique and his own practice, lies in his reflections upon the Dutch Golden Age where he articulates the same principle of representation—detail for detail's sake—but without the same critique. For what is the difference between ethnography and the picturesque if the principle of detail for detail's sake is the same? At that time, the two shared this principle of the excessive cleaving to particularity. But, as becoming clear, two things separate the emergent ethnographic from the passé picturesque: the postulation that ties skill in artistic depiction to a method of sincere, sedentary observation, and a similar argument that ties art to science and objectivity.

Fromentin criticizes the old generation of picturesque art as aiding and abetting a chaotic profusion of details that makes the viewer prurient, overly excited, and easily led astray: "L'œil devint plus curieux et plus précieux; la sensibilité, sans être plus vive, devint plus nerveuse [The eye becomes more curious and more precious; sensitivity, without being more lively, becomes more nervous] (714). This leads to a level of chaos, the problem that a new method of the picturesque representation must confront and solve: "le dessin fouilla davantage, les observations se multiplièrent, la nature, étudiée de plus près, fourmilla de détails, d'incidents, d'effets, de nuances; on lui demande mille secrets [draftsmanship is at loose ends, observations multiply, nature, studied more

closely, abounds with details, incidents, effects, nuances; we ask for it to reveal a thousand secrets] (ibid.). In effect, this profusion of details expresses the continuation of an Enlightenment epistemology and aesthetics identified by Lorraine Daston, which the modern episteme and its organizational prerogatives would bring to an end. In the encyclopedic rubric of Enlightenment science, particularly Enlightenment naturalists, “visually and intellectually, the observer pulverized the object into a mosaic of details, focusing first on one, then another” resulting in “an avalanche of descriptive detail, both visual and, especially, verbal” that presented “the challenge of the practices of synthesis.”¹⁰³ Fromentin continues, stating that the nervous curiosity that took hold in the old generation of picturesque art left the readers and spectators searching for the secret hidden within the details, if not because the details seemed jealous of this secret then “parce qu’on n’avait pas voulu l’interroger profondément sur tous ces points [because we did not want to investigate it more deeply on each and every point].”¹⁰⁴ Fromentin declares the need for “une langue pour exprimer cette multitude de sensations nouvelles [there must be a new language to express this multitude of new sensations] (ibid.). This new language would be inevitably shaped by the new forms of observation, organization, and expression that coincided with modernity, science, and its demands for objectivity.

Going back to the Dutch Golden Age, Fromentin finds examples of value capable of pointing in the direction of a new language and new methods fit for the demands of the time, which, whether he would explicitly state this in every instance or not, bear upon his own needs to explain his Orientalist art. The Dutch Golden Age did two important things. First, Fromentin reads it against Renaissance art as a turning from the sacred to the secular, from the holy to the mundane, from the godly to the desacralized human.

¹⁰³ Lorraine Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800,” in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ Fromentin, *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 714.

Renaissance art, for better or worse, is preoccupied with the so-called noble virtues of humanity—grace, power, nobility, beauty; since the human is the center of all artistic expression, these values become spread through nature—or the representation of nature—by the principle of diffusion (659). Due to its focus upon the human and its desire to elevate humanity to an inspirational plateau, Renaissance art is undercut, according to Fromentin, by a contradiction. If it is able to perceive nature accurately, it nevertheless does not represent it accurately: “Il existait une habitude de penser hautement, grandement, un art qui consistait à faire choix des choses, à les embellir, à les rectifier, qui vivait dans l’absolu plutôt que dans le relatif, apercevait la nature comme elle est, mais se plaisait à la montrer comme elle n’est pas” [There existed a habit of elevated thinking, grand thinking, an art that consisted of selecting things, of embellishing them, of correcting them, an art that lived in the absolute rather than in the relative, perceiving nature like it is, but being content to represent it like it is not] (ibid.). But the Dutch Golden Age paintings return us to earth, so to speak, and to refocus upon human life in its “relative” or flawed form: “Il s’agit de rendre à chaque chose son intérêt, de remettre l’homme à sa place et au besoin de se passer de lui” [It gives to each thing its interest, of putting humanity back in its place in order to see beyond it] (660).

Putting the human back into focus as a subject of relative interest, ungodly at times, flawed, and a part of nature and not transcendent *a priori* allows for the second important innovation in Dutch Golden Age art, according to Fromentin. It brings about a new interest, a new attention, to be expended when looking at society, culture, and the human, and, in fact, the birth of a new genre—genre art per se, which focuses upon human life on earth and in nature but as a natural subject and not an allegorical one: “Le moment est venu de penser moins, de viser moins haut, de regarder de plus près, d’observer mieux et de peindre aussi bien, mais autrement [The moment came to think less, to look less high, to look more closely, to observe better and to paint better as well

as but differently] (660). There would now be sympathy for all human life, as well as a bearing toward a curiosity that is not distracted but “attentive” and “patient.” Now, there is no scope for ideological, programmatic “self-improvements”: “Quant à embellir, jamais; à ennoblir, jamais; à châtier, jamais: autant de mensonges ou de peine inutile [Embellish? Never. Ennoble? Never. Chastise? Never. No more lies, no more useless austerity] (ibid.). A sort of realism is on offer. Fromentin’s critique repositions itself not only against the Renaissance but also against the old tradition of the picturesque: the Renaissance embellishes the human, the picturesque distracts us from attentive, patient study.

With this new attention are seen a new artistic style, a new task, a new principle, and a new virtue. The style will be plain and truthful—realistic, in short: “Le style aura donc la simplicité et la clarté du principe. Il a pour loi d’être sincère, pour obligation d’être véridique” [The style will demonstrate a simplicity and clarity of principle. It has sincerity for its law, truthfulness for its obligation] (662). Sincerity guides it, not a demand for the exultation of the human. The task will be a thorough and studious examination and observation: “Tout objet, grâce à l’intérêt qu’il offre, doit être examiné dans sa forme et dessiné avant d’être peint. [...] Tout cela fait au même titre partie de cet art égalitaire et jouit pour ainsi dire des mêmes droits devant le dessin” [Every object, thanks to the interest that it offers, must be examined in its form and drawn before being painted] (663). The principle at stake is that each object has its own source of interest for the lively human mind. The resultant artistic virtue is a championing of good draftsmanship: “La base de ce style sincère et le premier effet de cette probité, c’est le dessin, le parfait dessin” [The basis of this sincere style and the first effect of this probity is draftsmanship, perfect draftsmanship] (662). Only through perfect draftsmanship can this attention be put into evidence.

These are the key constructs around which Fromentin builds his theory of Orientalist art, and how it can escape the old picturesque style, sidestepping the problems brought about by the new artistic dilettantes. A truthful style inspired by sincerity to the subjects of observation; a studious, protracted and assiduous observational practice; an openness to the interest that all objects hold naturally within them; and a demand for quality draftsmanship, or skillful mimetic representation coalesce in his comments on the Dutch Golden Age paintings. This is also a program applicable to Orientalist art and that will separate Fromentin's own art from the decadent picturesque versions that he criticizes. It is evident, as well, that these are also elements of scientific belief and practice that when applied to non-European peoples should be considered ethnographic.

Art in the Orient: At the Limits of Description

What does the Orient do that is so frustrating to Fromentin's sense of aesthetic theory? In criticizing the decadent tradition of French picturesque literature and painting, Fromentin states that he is wary of succumbing to the mindless curiosity that promotes an artistic program of detail for detail's sake. In reference to the Dutch Golden Age paintings, he states that he is interested in the details of reality opened into a "relative" truth that no longer gathers its strength and interest in an allegorical relationship to the divine. He is also interested in the observational meticulousness that Dutch Golden Age paintings manifest, and in skillful craftsmanship. The Oriental scene provides a transposition in which these prerogatives, principles, and values are put to the test as an aesthetic theory. The Orient stands at the crux of his aesthetics of representation for three reasons. It raises the question of the status of reality, its importance as a base, and basis, of interpretation. Second, it raises the specter of how art risks becoming pedagogic and hence losing its status as art when the viewer's over-active curiosity—

hyper-curiosity—overwhelms an interest more specifically focused on aesthetics. And, last, it raises in a new and threatening way the question of the relation of science, or objectivity, to art.

Fromentin's "philosophy" of the impression, such as Christin calls it, is wedged between his desire to promote art (including his own) that moves past the tradition of the picturesque that he inherited and ethnography. In his oeuvre, there are three distinct uses of the word "impression." First, it is used to indicate the immediate imprint of experience and sense perception upon the mind, particularly the artist's mind. Here, it serves as a synonym for sensation.¹⁰⁵ In an early letter to his mother, Fromentin writes that he would love to travel with her because nothing in their interactions, though full of mutual sympathy, have never eclipsed a family setting, and "Quoi de plus doux à mettre en commun que les impressions d'un voyage!" [What could be more sweet than sharing the experiences of the road!].¹⁰⁶ The impression is gained through experience. The impression differs from a thought, however; that is definite. For Fromentin writes that "mes impressions et mes idées" [my impressions and my ideas], viewed as two distinct categories, combine to equal "les émanations de mon âme" [the emanations of my soul] (128).

In writing to his friend Armand du Mesnil, Fromentin indicates that through his letters he will keep his friend apprised of his adventures on his third and final journey to Algeria: "Ce sera le seul moyen de vivre près de toi, de t'avertir heure par heure de mes impressions et de te faire savoir, cher ami, à quel point tu assistes à mon travail" [It will be the only way to live close to you, to inform you hour by hour of my impressions and to

¹⁰⁵ The French dictionary has "impression" and "sensation" as synonyms. *Le Robert micro*, new ed. (Paris: Le Robert, 1998), 682,1224.

¹⁰⁶ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 186.

let you know, my dear friend, how you aide me in my work].¹⁰⁷ Here, again the word delves into the territory of experience and sense perception without clearly separating the two.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the impression conveys an immediacy of perception tied to first-hand experience. In writing about a similar use of the word in Lamartine's travel writing, Philippe Antoine describes the author's method as consisting of "présenter l'auteur en train de consigner ses impressions à mesure qu'il se déplace" [presenting the author in the course of recording his impressions at each step of his journey].¹⁰⁹ Jean-Pierre Richard notes both the immediacy of the Fromentinian impression and its relation to sense perception as he sees in Fromentin the value of "l'impression immédiate" [immediate impression].¹¹⁰ When Baudelaire describes the technique of Constantin Guys, another artist famous for after-the-fact recreations and a theory of art that justifies such a practice, he labels the first act that of recovering and recording "fidèlement ses propres impressions" [faithfully his own impressions].¹¹¹ The impression is what the artist first feels due to sensory contact with the world.

Second, in the artistic act, as theorized through the logic of the impression, sense data is filtered through the artist's consciousness and sensibility, "l'esprit qui la reçoit et

¹⁰⁷ Fromentin, *Correspondance*, 59.

¹⁰⁸ This use of the word follows one vein of contemporary usage. Lamartine uses the word 17 times in *Voyage en Orient*. For instance, when Lamartine's ship struggles through a storm to anchor off the shore of Sardinia, the author generalizes to say that the sound of the anchor's chain extending into the ocean is for the ship's captain, "une impression délicieuse" [a delicious impression]. See Alphonse de Lamartine, *Voyage en Orient: Souvenirs, Impressions, Pensées et Paysages*, rev. ed. (Paris: Pagnerre-Hachette-Fume, 1845), 38.

¹⁰⁹ Philippe Antoine, *Quand le voyage devient promenade: écritures du voyage au temps du romantisme* (Paris: PUPS, 2011), 61.

¹¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Richard, *Littérature et sensation: Stendhal, Flaubert*, rev. ed. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), 258.

¹¹¹ Charles Baudelaire, "L'art mnémonique," in *Critique d'art suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. Claude Pichois, intro. Claire Brunet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 358.

l'interprète" [the spirit that receives and interprets it].¹¹² In this step, the impression becomes transfigured into the universalized gain from sense perception, ascending from the "vrai relative" [relative truth] to "un ordre de véracité plus large" [a more vast order of truth] (From 183). The artist's sensibility and talent must transform or distill the first imprint and "spiritualize" it. Marie-Anne Eckstein writes in these terms of Fromentin's artistic practice of writing from "le vif souvenir" [lively memory] and reproducing his field sketches back in his French studio: "Spiritualiser la sensation, c'est la laisser se décanter en son intériorité et exprimer ce que le souvenir en restitue. Le souvenir est donc l'outil créateur qui épure tout naturellement la sensation en supprimant ce qui est superflu" [To spiritualize the sensation is to let it decant in its interiority and to express what memory leaves of it. Memory is the thus creative tool that purifies naturally the sensation while suppressing what is superfluous].¹¹³ Whereas the first use of the word "impression" is semi-empirical (and certainly can be accounted for within the expanded vocabulary of affect theory), this second usage has a distinctly metaphysical dimension. Christin accounts for Fromentin's logic of the impression by noting its ability to synthesize details: "L'impression, ce serait en somme la présence du souvenir, l'amalgame des données immédiates du réel avec les échos mémoriels que celles-ci ravivent ou suscitent, et où elles puissent à la fois leur harmonie et leur signification" [The impression would be, all in all, the presence of memory, the amalgamation of the immediate given of the real with the remembered echoes of the physical world revives or elicits and to which their owe their harmony and signification].¹¹⁴ An act of synthesis and

¹¹² Richard, *Littérature et sensation*, 258. Compare this to how Baudelaire writes that in Guys' work the viewer can see "avec netteté l'impression produite par les choses sur l'esprit [de l'artiste]" [clearly the impression produced by things on the spirit of the artist]. "L'art mnémonique," 358.

¹¹³ Marie-Anne Eckstein, *Le rôle du souvenir dans l'œuvre d'Eugène Fromentin* (Zurich: Juris Druck and Verlag Zürich, 1970), 76.

¹¹⁴ Christin, introduction to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 32-3.

distillation must occur for art to emerge, in which the physical world serves as the base and basis for art.

Memory, for Fromentin, is the transformative agent that takes sense perceptions and makes them art. Memory acts as the agent transforming experience into an artistic impression: “Plus [le souvenir] s’affaiblit d’ailleurs, plus il se transforme en devenant la propriété de ma mémoire [...] il en vient une autre, moitié réelle et moitié imaginaire, et que je crois préférable” [The more the specific memory weakens, the more it becomes transformed while becoming the property of memory per se ... it becomes something else, half real and half imagined, which I believe preferable].¹¹⁵ The impression, for Fromentin, is different from Baudelaire’s “memory artist,” whose ability to work after-the-fact relies upon the imagination, the “sixth sense,” “la reine des facultés” [the queen of the senses].¹¹⁶ Instead, Fromentin announces that he lacks imagination: “J’ai le sentiment des effets, mais je n’ai pas la mémoire des formes, et je n’ai pas l’imagination et la fantaisie qui vaut mieux que la mémoire” [I understand effects, but I do not remember forms and I do not have a good imagination, which is worth more than a good memory].¹¹⁷

Last, the impression is part of the final work of art. It is the synthetic, distinctive trace in the work of art that viewers or readers can identify and appreciate. Here, the artist’s original sense perception distilled or “spiritualized” is on display as a synthetic artistic effect. A painting is what is visible, and in that painting there is a trace of experience, of the physical world, transformed into art. Georges Lafenestre praises Fromentin’s “Une fantasia, Algérie” (1869), saying that Fromentin “excelle à rendre les

¹¹⁵ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 154-5.

¹¹⁶ Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859,” in *Critique d’art suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. Claude Pichois, intro. Claire Brunet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 279-283.

¹¹⁷ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 99.

brumes incertaines et les fines demi-teintes, toutes les impressions discrètes qu'en outre de la splendeur violente du soleil comporte le véritable Orient" [excels at depicting shifty fogs and fine half-tones, all the discrete impressions that beyond the violent splendor of the sun make up the true Orient].¹¹⁸ "Shifty fog" and "fine half-tones" are aspects of the final work; the impression at the level of the work of art is in evidence both in the parts and the whole, as indicated by the art critical vocabulary of the day. In the words of Roland Barthes, one can be interested in the subject of Orientalist art, thus forming a relation of *stadium* with a particular work of literature or art, but an artist's characteristic style affects the viewer through a relation of *punctum*—the impression, in fact—that carries with it an ineffable, yet precise expression.¹¹⁹ Style itself can be seen as the signature trace of the sensibility that transforms the parts of the physical world into the whole of the piece of art; in this context, style itself can be called an impression.

Stated just as such, his theory of art by itself might be called distinct inasmuch as Fromentin theorizes the use of memory as a tool of art. But, nevertheless, it is not so eccentric. Yet this outline of Fromentin's logic of the impression expresses only half of the conundrum. This definition of his method and the final work of art has within it a suspicion of the physical world as an end in and of itself: the physical world cannot by itself be art, and art cannot even be "true to life," as Baudelaire lambastes the "positivists" who attempt to paint "les choses telles qu'elles sont" [things just as they are].¹²⁰ But, in the case of Fromentin, the clarity of art's transcendence gives way to an anxiety about the details of Algeria, their status as the "données immédiates du réel" and the artist's relation to them. In fact, when Fromentin writes about the sensible world of North Africa, a perspective emerges to modulate his ruminations on the traditional

¹¹⁸ Fromentin, *Correspondance*, 218-219.

¹¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 42-3.

¹²⁰ Baudelaire, "Salon de 1859," 287.

doctrine of artistic privilege and artistic genius. While he maintains the need for the sublimation of the real, he also gives voice to a surprising valorization of the historical, the factual, and the objective. These are qualities of representation that are separate from the tradition of the picturesque, in which details exist as aesthetic decoration, producing “de véritables débauches descriptives” [full descriptive orgies].¹²¹ Rather, they are values owed to science. When these values are applied to the people of North Africa, an ethnographic style begins to be articulated.

The conundrum that exercises Fromentin’s critical faculties centers on the second step in the logic of the impression, the stage of transformation of the physical world. Two problems emerge. If the Orient exceeds known European laws of perception, organization, and aesthetics, it thus requires new methods of analysis, observation, and art. But if it is unknowable because of this difference, then how is European art to interpret it with any validity, and what basis in reality could this interpretation be said to have? Fromentin presents this conundrum through the case of a typical Orientalist scene, one similar to Decamps’ “Souvenir de la Turquie d’Asie: Enfants turques jouant avec un tortue” (1836) or Fromentin’s own “Les Enfants arabes” (1867). The problem centers upon whether the scene of boys playing in the street is conceived by the artist to be the subject of a genre painting or landscape. Fromentin notes how a landscape painter will treat the scene differently from a figure painter: “Dans le premier cas, c’est un tableau de figures où le paysage est considéré comme accessoire; dans le second, c’est un paysage où la figure humaine est subordonnée, mise au dernier plan, dans un rôle absolument sacrifié” [In the first case, it is a figure painting where the landscape is

¹²¹ Christin, introduction to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 7. Following Barthes’ reading, Naomi Schor restates that nineteenth-century French realism is more the effect of interwoven textual details as the surface of the real, the reality effect, than a direct relation to a non-textual, empirical reality. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 141.

considered an accessory; in the second, it is a landscape where the human figure is subordinated, put to the side, in a role absolutely negligible).¹²²

The question at stake involves the whole host of concerns outlined in this chapter. Primarily, through the lens of the picturesque that continues to define Orientalist art, the contrast of background and foreground takes precedence. Since there is no law to govern what to foreground, the choice points directly to the the “spiritual” question at the heart of artistic composition in which, in Fromentin’s lexicon, the artist must separate the “scène” [scene] from the “milieu” [milieu]: “Ce procédé de l’esprit qui consiste à choisir son point de vue, à déterminer la scène, à l’isoler du milieu qui l’absorbe [...]” [This testing of the spirit that consists of choosing a point of view, of determining the scene, of isolating the milieu that surrounds it] (183). This choice separates those details that must be explained (the foreground) from the details that must be left to the imagination to intuit (the background). This separation of details is, at heart, art because only through the act of judicious selection can the real be sublimated into art. Fromentin writes, “[Ce] grand art de se servir de la nature sans la stéréotyper, tantôt de la copier jusqu’à servilité, tantôt de la négliger jusqu’à l’oubli; ce difficile équilibre des vraisemblances qui oblige à demeurer vrai sans être exact [est] l’interprétation” [This great art of making use of nature without stereotyping it, sometimes copying it to the point of servility, sometimes neglecting it entirely; this difficult balance of likenesses that obliges the artist to be true without being exact [is called] interpretation] (184). Yet, just as important as the artist’s ability to select a subject, relegating details to the second tier, understanding what to explain and what to allow the spectator to imagine comes the ontological status of the world being represented. Painting is the opposite of describing, as the latter conduces to illusions and not to “impressions” that have their credibility fastened to the empirical world. The task is “à peindre et non pas à décrire, à donner

¹²² Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 182.

non pas les illusions, mais les impressions de la vie” [to paint and not to describe, to give not illusions but impressions of life] (ibid.). Art must provide something greater than one-to-one copies of reality, but its representations must nevertheless be tied in an integral fashion to reality.

While the art of selection sketched out above does not pose any insurmountable problem to art per se, since it is nothing other than a standard exemplification of the second stage of the logic of the impression—no less than the crux of artistic genius. But the Orient poses a new challenge of being out of the European context. The beauty of the Orient has within it something “d’exagéré [...] qui le rend excessif” [exaggerated ... that renders it excessive] (ibid.). By excessive, he means that this “ordre de beauté” [type of beauty] is entirely outside of the system of European aesthetics, without “précédents dans la littérature ancienne ni dans l’art” [precedents in literary history or in art] (ibid.). So the question of whether the Orient can be interpreted, whether it can be subjected to a decisive, judicious artistic act of selection, and whether its reality can be sublimated into art, pushes up against two difficulties, the first being that its beauty does not conform to precedent. The second is then the fact that its particularities, its details, and its facts are largely unknown to the European artist: “La question se réduit à savoir si l’Orient se prête à l’interprétation, dans quelle mesure il l’admet, et si l’interpréter n’est pas le détruire. [...] L’Orient est très particulier. Il a ce grand tort pour nous d’être inconnu et nouveau [...]” [The question becomes knowing whether the Orient can be interpreted, in which measure it admits it, and if interpreting it destroys it ... The Orient is very particular. It has this big fault for us of being unknown and new] (ibid.).

Interpretation on the artist’s part requires some familiarity. In an unknown land, the artist’s ability to interpret is questioned. Fromentin questions whether the sublimation through the spirit can in fact take place when reality is only slightly known. The lack of familiarity with North Africa is equally troublesome on the spectator’s part. It raises the

specter of how Orientalist art, theorized as having a necessary and integral relation to the empirical facts tacitly represented in its art, will be forced into a new conundrum, stationed between two impossibilities: on the one hand, a pedagogic role and, on the other hand, visual fodder for the viewer's over-active curiosity. I have already quoted Fromentin to the effect that he considers any sort of direct pedagogy a second-tier concern in art, but here, in the conundrum of the fact that the spectator does not know the facts of North Africa for being the facts they are, the inclusion of any subject, details tend "d'éveiller d'abord un sentiment étranger à l'art, le plus dangereux de tous, et que je voudrais proscrire: celui de la curiosité [to bring out first and foremost a sentiment foreign to art, the most dangerous of all, which I will name that of curiosity] (ibid.). Curiosity, Fromentin writes, is as deleterious a consequence for art as pedagogy; both displace aesthetics. Both misdirect the artist and viewer away from the more considerable and lasting concerns of the truth provided by universalized beauty.

The third challenge that the Orient provides for Fromentin's aesthetic theory of the impression comes in the conundrum that he faces in regard to the status, the very ontology, of North African empirical reality. Fromentin believes that art must have a sure grounding in empirical reality. Impressions have so substance, no reality, no chance to achieve an artistic, universal truth if they are not properly grounded in reality. Here, we see in him the emergence of a critical consciousness of modern principles of objectivity. Traces of Fromentin's awareness and acceptance of science come from various sources. From the first pages of *Une année dans le Sahel*, Fromentin acknowledges that he inhabits a new age: "Les choses restent, mais la mythologie des voyages a disparu" [Things remain, but the mythology of travel has disappeared] (35). In this newly empirical world, science and technology dominate: "La vitesse a supprimé jusqu'aux aventures [...] La science a détrôné la poésie [...] nous voyageons [...] dans la prose" [Speed has taken over adventures. Science has dethroned poetry. We travel in prose] (ibid.). This is a

stark acknowledgement. Later in the same text, Fromentin professes not to be a true “voyageur,” which he defines as a scientist. He is not a “voyageur” because he does not accrue scientific information: “[la] géographie, l’histoire et la science n’en obtiendraient pas un renseignement qui fût nouveau. Souvent le souvenir que je garde des choses est inénarrable, car, quoique très fidèle, il n’a jamais la certitude, admissible pour tous, d’un document” [Geography, history, and science will not be able to glean one new bit of information. Often my memory of things is idiosyncratic because while it is very faithful it does not have the certitude, admissible for all, of a document] (154-5). The word “document” in this context is conspicuous as it implies an objective quality of textuality that Fromentin knows art—*his* art—lacks. Fromentin postulates the existence of a “voyageur né” [born traveler] (156) and claims that this person is a scientist. Instead, it is the character Vandell, the “explorateur positiviste” [positivistic explorer]¹²³ against whose model Fromentin describes himself. The fact that, as Elisabeth Cardonne writes, “[l]e narrateur est en effet doublé” [the narrator is in fact doubled] (ibid.) is clear in *Une année dans le Sahel*; just as much, Vandell shows Fromentin’s awareness of the possibilities of intersection and antagonism between science and art.¹²⁴

A similar ambivalence defines Fromentin’s thumbnail definition for modern description in *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*: “Le terme est plus physionomique, l’observation plus rare [...] la construction même plus scrupuleuse. Tout semble [...] plus scientifiquement raisonné et calculé” [Vocabulary is more physiological, observation is more precise, construction is even more scrupulous. Everything seems more

¹²³Élisabeth Cardonne, introduction to *Une année dans le Sahel*, by Eugène Fromentin, intro. Élisabeth Cardonne, (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 21.

¹²⁴Vandell boasts of the scientific qualities of having “une mémoire encyclopédique” [an encyclopedic memory] and a “variété [des] connaissances” [range of knowledge]. *Une année dans le Sahel*, 118.

scientifically reasoned and calculated].¹²⁵ He is unwilling to say in this passage whether modern description, with its scientific characteristics, is better than that of the past, but the acknowledgement of the new age continues on the next page when he states that public taste in art is increasingly conditioned by “certaines études scientifiques dont les progrès ne s’obtiennent que par des courses autour du globe, autour des climats, autour des races” [certain scientific studies whose progress has come about only due to investigations around the world, its climates, and its races] (716). One of these sciences would be ethnography; it is, then, in his comments about how to negotiate the balance between representing North African reality and creating European art that his use of the phrase “ethnography” arrives.

For Fromentin, the Orient must be addressed in its entirety, and, moreover, with the motivation—and method—of being “true”: “Il faut donc l’admettre en son entier, et je défie qu’on échappe à cette nécessité d’être vrai [...]” [We must admit it in its entirety, and I defy anyone who tries to escape from this necessity of being truthful].¹²⁶ He sees this as incumbent upon artists, writers, and scientists because of the pressures of “du naturalisme et du fac-similé” [naturalism and the facsimile] but moreover due to a simple but judicious dose of sincerity, “d’être conduit par la logique même de la sincérité” [to be led by the very logic of sincerity]. This is a major statement that separates Fromentin’s aesthetics from the worst excesses of exoticism, the picturesque, and local color— aesthetic norms that allow highly partial, incomplete, and mangled visions of the world. Sincerity is a commitment to a more objective art. Naturalism and the “facsimile” orient the artist toward a thoroughgoing study of the people and places of Algeria. If Fromentin writes that the Orient “échappe aux lois générales, les seules qui soient bonnes à suivre” [escapes general laws, the only ones good to follow] (184), we see his desire to theorize

¹²⁵ Fromentin, *Les Maîtres d’autrefois*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 715.

¹²⁶ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 185.

a place for the abnormal—the “bizarre”—that the Orient cannot fail to be.¹²⁷ Algeria, for the French artist, was the deviation that art and science must newly account for.

Fromentin announces a new type of painter who has heeded this call, “[le] peintre qui bravement prendra le parti de se montrer véridique à tout prix” [the artist who bravely will take upon himself the task of being truthful to a fault]. This artist stands in contrast to those who choose selectively from the Baudelairian dictionary of nature.¹²⁸ This new artist “rapportera de ses voyages quelque chose de tellement inédit, de si difficile à déterminer” [will bring back from his trips something so original, so difficult to identify] that there is no vocabulary to account for the new type of text. Fromentin continues, “le dictionnaire *artistique* n’ayant pas de terme approprié à des œuvres de caractère si imprévu, j’appellerai cet ordre de sujets des *documents*” [the artistic dictionary not having the appropriate terms for works of art so unexpected, I will this order of subjects *documents*].¹²⁹ What the courageous artist creates is not just a genre, but rather a new “order of subjects,” truly, a new type of art—an art based on a fully mimetic principle. Yet a problem arises when this resolutely truthful and sincere approach intersects with a growing French curiosity for world peoples.

The “documentary” artist will provide “images minutieuses copiées avec la scrupuleuse authenticité d’un portrait” [images copied with precision with the scrupulous

¹²⁷ This thinking proves to be of a scientific vein when we realize that Francis Bacon, for one, wrote that science must include “*Deviating Instances*, that is, errors, vagaries, or prodigies of nature, wherein nature deviates and turns aside from her ordinary course.” Lorraine Daston, “Baconian Facts, Academic Civility, and the Prehistory of Objectivity,” in *Rethinking Objectivity*, ed. Allan Megill (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 44.

¹²⁸ Baudelaire claims that transcendent artists see nature as a dictionary from which they pick and choose: “Les peintres qui obéissent à l’imagination cherchent dans leur dictionnaire les éléments qui s’accordent à leur conception; encore, en les ajustant avec un certain art, leur donnent-ils une physionomie toute nouvelle. Ceux qui n’ont pas d’imagination copient le dictionnaire” [Painters who obey the imagination search in their dictionary for the elements that agree with their ideas; yet, while adjusting them with a certain art, they give them a physiognomy entirely new. Those who don’t have any imagination copy the dictionary]. “Salon de 1859,” 284-5.

¹²⁹ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 185. These are Fromentin’s italics.

authenticity of a portrait] in which it becomes absolutely clear “comment le peuple d’outre-mer s’habille, comment il se coiffe, comment il se chausse” [how people overseas dress, fashion their hair, and what they wear for shoes] (ibid.). These are objective, minute, and exact depictions of foreign peoples. They are nothing other than ethnographic descriptions. But their being closely tethered to the empirical conditions of North African life proves to be a necessary but only partial virtue for him: in fact, Fromentin identifies this as the fatal flaw of the document. Documentary art will only incite fervor for prurient, unintelligent curiosity for the bare and crude facts of life, and “[beaucoup de gens] voudront des tableaux composés comme un inventaire, et le goût de l’ethnographie finira par se confondre avec le sentiment du beau” [many people will want paintings composed like an inventory, and the taste for ethnography will finish by intermingling with the sense of beauty] (186).

It is a remarkable passage. He identifies the vein of the documentary, poses it as a possibility for artistic creation, then denies it that place because he believes it will threaten art per se. Being led by a modern sensibility away from the excesses of picturesque description, he comes to the brink of articulating a fully modern sensibility, but it was something that he could not stomach, and in fact it would take some seventy years for someone to articulate this aesthetic position—Michel Leiris to articulate in *L’Afrique fantôme*. Come to the edge of an aesthetic abyss, he retreats. At the end of his life, he merely repeats his caution, stated almost twenty years prior. In his 1876 Salon, he recapitulates his dilemma, reiterating his earlier points. He writes that for artists who “s’adressent à la curiosité plutôt qu’au sentiment du beau” [are concerned with curiosity rather than the sense of beauty],¹³⁰ there is nothing better than the Orient. The details of Oriental life are so captivating, that one could get lost in the a simple visual—but dumb, and anti-aesthetic—jouissance: “L’originalité des costumes, l’étrangeté des

¹³⁰ Fromentin, “1876 Salon,” in *Œuvres complètes*, 1226.

physionomies, la diversité des types, qui présentent une variété presque infinie [...] tout cela peut étonner et intéresser l'esprit" [The originality of dress, the strangeness of physiognomies, the diversity of types, in their almost infinite variety, all of this shocks and interests the spirit] (ibid.). But this is to fall prey for the Orient's "trap"; the Orient poses the problem of exciting curiosity that will repudiate art, and being led into jouissance of visual splendor has an orientation different from art: "Mais c'est là de l'ethnographie et non pas de l'art" [But this is ethnography and not art]. Painting is not describing, he says; he writes in 1859 that an ethnographic inventory is possible in a travel narrative. Here, he repeats that aphorism: "Un tableau ne doit être ni un recueil de documents, ni un récit de voyage" [A painting cannot be a collection of documents, nor a travel narrative] (ibid.). But, true to Fromentin's famous ambivalence, his "double manner" of mind as well as art, he reminds the reader how difficult it truly is to renounce Algeria's charms for the "more elevated" aims of art: "Pour celui qui se propose un but plus élevé, la richesse des accessoires, la nouveauté des types, au lieu d'être un secours, se tournent en difficultés presque insurmontables" [For the painter who proposes a more elevated goal, the richness of accessories, the newness of types, instead of being an aide, becomes a web of almost insurmountable difficulties] (ibid.)

Part III. Fromentin's Descriptive Practice in Literature

This chapter responds first and foremost to Thompson and Wright's call for a synthesis of Fromentin's "double manner," which I identify, following Roger Benjamin's suggestive lead, in his theory of Orientalist art, conceived of as a problematic question posed about the ethics and aesthetic method of representing Algerian peoples. By using the word "ethnography," Fromentin illuminates the contrast of epistemological claims of two styles of representation, the one decadent, Romantic and soon to be largely if not entirely eclipsed—the picturesque; and the second, full of a new modern vigor provided through

the possibility of objective observation and increasingly a documentary art. This second style is that of ethnography, when the observation and description applies to non-European peoples. Scholars have written on Fromentin's descriptive style, but his descriptions of people lack adequate commentary, and only Roger Benjamin and Sarga Moussa have remarked in passing that these descriptions have an ethnographic dimension.¹³¹ In passages from Fromentin's travelogues, we can find examples of two traits that contradict the implicit rubric of picturesque description and that find alternatives in objectivity and mimesis. These examples speak to an emergent ethnographic logic, namely, the practice integral to his descriptive technique of sedentary, distant observation—and the multiple layers of sketching this produces—and scrupulous portraiture.

Sedentary, Distant Observation

As we will see in Chapter Four, French cultural anthropology would develop a method for observation in the field quite belatedly, in the 1930s. At its center would stand a form of distanced, objective observation capable of producing scientific, ethnographic documents. Much before that, however, Fromentin reveals himself to understand intuitively the logic and benefits of these constraints for representing people in their actuality. Near the end of *Un été dans le Sahara*, he writes, “Il faut regarder ce peuple [arabe] à la distance où il lui convient de se montrer” [It is necessary to see these people from the distance that they choose to reveal themselves].¹³² While Delacroix was one of his heroes, he does not mix words when he criticizes that artist: “Décrire un appartement de femmes ou peindre les cérémonies du culte arabe, est à mon avis plus grave qu'une fraude: c'est commettre, sous le rapport d'art, une erreur de point de vue” [To describe

¹³¹ Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, 19. Sarga Moussa, *Le mythe bédouin*, 261-2.

¹³² Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 340.

women in their apartment, or to paint Arab religious ceremonies, is in my opinion worse than a fraud: it is to commit, using art as an excuse, an error of judgment] (ibid.). Fromentin explains that there exists an ethical stake in observation, and distance allows objectivity.

This is exemplified through two passages. Having arrived in his lodgings in Mustapha on the outskirts of Algiers, Fromentin documents his observational method. Instead of trying to see everything, to travel from place to place to take in the variety that a foreign country has to offer, Fromentin chooses to rest in place: “C’est à mon avis le meilleur moyen de beaucoup connaître en voyant peu, de bien voir en observant souvent” [It is, to my mind, the best way of learning a lot while seeing little, to see well while observing often].¹³³ This is a sedentary ethics of observation that allows an aesthetics of minute description. He develops daily habits that will allow him to attach himself to “l’intimité des lieux” [the intimacy of places] (ibid.). He describes an observational method premised upon marking off the boundaries of concern, through which “tout converge au centre que j’habite, et l’imprévu vient m’y chercher” [everything converges upon the center where I live, and the unforeseen seeks me out] (ibid.). It is almost a fetishized refrain in Fromentin that whenever his thinking extends well beyond—and most often with great insight—the norm, he questions himself. “Ai-je tort?” [Am I wrong?], he asks himself, rhetorically, it turns out, because he does not think so: “Je ne le crois pas, car cette méthode, raisonnable ou non, donne aussitôt le plus grand calme [...] et fait considérer les choses d’un regard paisible, plus attentif, pour ainsi dire accoutumé dès le premier jour” [I do not think so, because this method, reasonable or not, gives the greatest calm ... and I am able to consider things with a peaceful eye, more attentive, because accustomed to these surroundings from the first day] (40). The attentive, familiarized observation of equanimity is his method.

¹³³ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 39.

This method speaks to the empirical dictates of anthropology: observation in science must be intimate, specific, and concentrated; it must take place within the same conditions over time. Sedentariness is essential for an anthropologist in the field to learn about a society and its culture. Because of his sedentary practice of daily observation, Mustapha loses its luster of newness, and the anti-artistic allure of curiosity abates. Being “acculturated,” Fromentin can now see the scenes in front of him: Algerian life is no longer “inconnu” [unfamiliar/unknown]. In Fromentin’s method of observation, the dictates of the emergent scientific method in regards to the importance, quality, and required time of observation allows, in turn, a deeper theorization of the emergent ethnographic image that appears in Fromentin’s writing. The ethnographic image is, thus, a composite, layered construction in which style, content, theory, and practice coalesce to render a mosaic concept-image, a visible sign, of encoded cultural practice and perception.

Fromentin is interested in representing Algerian reality beyond the stereotypes of the picturesque. He describes a Friday get-together for women, an event that he witnesses frequently: “Il y a un jour par semaine, ce doit être le vendredi, où, sous prétexte de rendre hommage aux morts, les femmes d’Alger se font conduire en foule au cimetière” [One day each week, a Friday, when, under the pretext of honoring the dead, the women of Algiers go en masse to the cemetery] (83). In the subsequent lengthy description of the typical Friday scene, Fromentin gives conspicuous importance to his observational position: “J’assiste souvent à ce spectacle d’un peu loin, caché dans un observatoire ombreux que j’ai choisi exprès. Je vois tout, mais n’entends rien” [I often watch this spectacle from a ways away, hidden in a shadowy observatory that I have chosen just for this. I am often on hand to see everything, but I hear nothing] (84). His observatory is at a distance, so much so that he cannot hear what the women say. This is in keeping with his observational mantra—“les hommes de près, les femmes de loin”

[men up close, women from a far]¹³⁴—that argues that a European observer has an ethical responsibility to respect the boundaries of Algerian society. What the women might have thought about his observational distance remains unknown—perhaps his hideout would not have been seen to obey the rules of North African propriety. Yet the description, in this case as in every other case in his work, is not prurient and lacks the titillation of, for example, Dinet’s scopophilic, loosely pornographic paintings of half-nude Algerian women with their aesthetic of the peeping Tom.

Scrupulous Portraiture

On November 17, 1847, Fromentin writes a letter to the parents of his deceased friend, Emile Beltrémieux, in which he criticizes himself for how his studio work has indulged in approximations. He states how he wants to paint Algeria as a portrait, a “faithful impression,” a “specimen of the country.” He links this more scrupulous form of representation to the observational method described above: “Je m’efforce enfin, en consultant à chaque instant la nature, de me débarrasser de ces à *peu près* dont je n’aurais pu sortir dans mon atelier” [By referring constantly to nature, I am forcing myself to let go of the *almost right* that I could not avoid in my studio]. It is not merely a question of *plein air*, but rather the holding more absolutely to a mimetic principle: “Je veux que ce soit sinon un *portrait*, du moins une impression fidèle et comme un spécimen de pays” [I want [my painting] to be if not a *portrait*, then at least a faithful impression and like a specimen of the country].¹³⁵ This passage reveals Fromentin’s desires for a type of descriptive mimesis, and that he merges in his lexicon the scientific lexical item of “specimen de pays” with the category of art. It recalls the bric-a-brac shop at the start of Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* in which “[t]ous les pays de la terre semblaient avoir

¹³⁴ Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 340.

¹³⁵ Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*, 254.

apporté là quelque débris de leurs sciences, un échantillon de leurs arts” [All the countries of the world seemed to have brought there some residue of their sciences, a sample of their arts].¹³⁶ But, here, instead of the separation of arts and sciences in the terms of exemplification, we have their overlap in the use of the word “specimen” in reference to art.

Fromentin is often at pains to separate textual types—books and paintings—in his theory of representation. While he makes the point that a travelogue can accommodate ethnographic inventory and a documentary manner in a way that painting cannot, he does not abide by a clear separation of painting and literature as distinct textual texts capable of different forms of representation. As Laurent Darbellay has pointed out, a pictorial vocabulary infects Fromentin’s discussions of literary description in a way that imbricates textual types and nullifies any simple distinction between literary and painterly description.¹³⁷ For example, in describing at length the festival of Aïd-el-Fould, Fromentin begins his lengthy ethnographic description with an aside to the reader, begging the reader to allow him “de m’en tenir au récit de ce que j’ai vu. C’est un tableau fort original et très brillant [...]” [to hold to the narrative of what I saw. It is a very original and brilliant painting].¹³⁸ Here, he contends that he is merely copying details from life at the same time as that visual object is a “painting.” This enmeshing of vocabulary across literary and pictorial description is frequent, and it points to the conundrum at the heart of his theory of representation, namely, the extent to which reality should inhere in the artistic product, and the ambivalence that he feels about the ethical demands of a greater objective portraiture of Algerian peoples.

¹³⁶ Balzac, *La peau de chagrin*, (ebooksgratuits.ebooksfrance), 72.

¹³⁷ Laurent Darbellay, “Mémoire de la peinture et récit de voyage chez Fromentin: *Un été dans le Sahara et Une année dans le Sahel*,” in *Le voyage et la mémoire au XIX^e siècle*, ed. Sarga Moussa and Sylvain Venayre (Treillières: Le Govic, 2011), 285-301.

¹³⁸ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 157-8.

Fromentin writes that documentary portraits of Algerian subjects are nothing if not ethnographic. Though he states his objection to ethnographic portraiture as the end of art, he achieves an emergent form of the same, propelled toward this new type of modern, descriptive surface due to his repudiation of the picturesque. Fromentin, Labbé, and Salzmänn arrive at the tents of Si-Djilali-Bel-Hadj-Meloud, the chieftain of the Beni-Haçen tribe, who has arranged a banquet in their honor. The description of the chieftain contains four distinct parts. Fromentin begins his description by placing him as a prime example of an Algerian type of the mountain chieftain: “Quant à notre hôte, je retrouve en lui ces grands traits de montagnard que nous avons déjà pressentis à Medeah, et tant admirés, si tu t’en souviens, et, comme personnage de frontispice, il a déjà sa valeur” [As for our host, I found in him the general traits of the mountain man that we had glimpsed in Medeah, and, so admired, if you remember; and, as a person on a frontispiece, he already had value] (115). This part of the description refers exclusively to a typological form of objectivity. The typecasting here, as well as Fromentin’s use of the word “specimen” in his letters, points toward the influence of the emergent technologies of objectivity being used by Orientalist anthropologists in their efforts to catalogue human diversity. In this new research, photography had the pride of place; Eleanor High and Gary Sampson write that “[o]nce available in the mid-nineteenth century, photography was used extensively to create ‘type’ or specimen photographs in the newly developing science of biological or physical anthropology.”¹³⁹ Though Fromentin is explicitly opposed to the incursion of photography in the aesthetic realm, photographic realism, like ethnography, underwrites many of his ambivalent attitudes.

Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the French were standard bearers in the usage of accurate visual representation of people in the documentation and classification of

¹³⁹ Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, “Introduction: Photography, ‘race’, and post-colonial theory,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

human races. In 1839 the Société ethnologique sent its *Instruction générale adressée aux voyageurs, etc.* to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, a document that stressed “the importance of visual representation of races (preferably in full face and profile),” at the same time “soliciting ‘any drawings of Indian races’” which might be available.¹⁴⁰ The photographic collection in the anthropological gallery of the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris is another example, and the photographs of Deveria, Rousseau, and Jacquart were correctives against the way that European artists and engravers would Europeanize the physical features of world peoples (57).

The description continues. Fromentin describes the man’s physical attributes: “C’est une belle tête, fortement basanée, ardente et pleine de résolution, quoique souriante, avec de grands yeux doux et une bouche fréquemment entr’ouverte à la manière des enfants; cette habitude fait remarquer ses dents qui sont superbes” [He has a beautiful head, quite dark, soulful and full of resolve, somewhat jovial, with big soft eyes and a mouth that frequently hung open in the manner of children; this habit allowed us to see his superb teeth].¹⁴¹ This would be the second of the six forms of description that Jean-Marc Moura cites in *La Littérature des lointains* as typical of the nineteenth-century French tradition of travel writing—the “anthropological” description.¹⁴² While this physical description of the man does not by itself differentiate this description from those of the picturesque tradition—and, indeed, would seem to stumble into that territory with the derogatory comment that the chieftain’s mouth hangs open like a child’s—nevertheless, in the segue that follows to the description of his attire in which Fromentin

¹⁴⁰ John Falconer, “‘A Pure Labor of Love’: a publishing history of *The People of India*,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

¹⁴¹ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 115.

¹⁴² The other five types of description are topographies, prosographies (descriptions of attire), culinary description, customs and ritual descriptions including “éthopées.” Quoted in Kapur, *Pour une poétique*, 112.

furnishes an anthropological comparison that does absolutely separate the description as a whole from the picturesque: “Il porte deux burnouss, un noir par-dessus un blanc. Le burnouss noir, qu’on voit rarement dans les tribus du littoral et qui disparaît, m’a-t-on dit, dans le sud, semble être propre aux régions intermédiaires que je vais traverser de Medeah à D’jelfa” [He wore two burnouses, a black over a white one. The black one—seen but rarely worn among the coastal tribes and, I have been told, is disappearing in the south—is native to the intermediate regions in which I am traveling from Medeah to D’jelfa].¹⁴³ The specific details of sartorial habit and history, the contrast of different parts of the country, and the reference, if anonymous, to an expert source, instruct the reader on the reality of cultural difference within North Africa.

When writing about the scrupulous portraiture of the ethnographic documentary form, Fromentin writes with gusto that French audiences will know for once and for all what clothes are worn by people overseas, how these people style their hair, and what they wear for shoes. Fromentin’s own description will also provide these details, if the description of hairstyle can be exchanged for the description of the chieftain’s head. The description of the man’s dress is as extensive as it is minute. Fromentin describes the black burnouse: “Il est de grosse laine ou de poil de chameau; on dirait du feutre tant il est lourd, épais, rude au toucher [...] et tombe tout d’une pièce quand il est pendant; relevé sur l’épaule, il forme à peine un ou deux plis réguliers et cassants” [It is made of rough wool or camel hair; it’s so heavy and coarse that one would say it is made out of felt ... and all of it hangs as one piece when it is worn. Hoisted onto the shoulder, it folds into one or two pieces at regular, heavy creases] (ibid.). After a sentence in which he speaks of how the garments increase the majesty of any man who wears them, Fromentin concludes the description by mentioning everything else the man wears:

¹⁴³ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 115-6.

Ajoute à ce vêtement un peu monacal, qui tient de la chape par la roideur, et du froc par le capuchon rabattu dans le dos, des bottes rouges de cavalier, un chapelet de bois brun, une ceinture de maroquin bouclée à la taille, usée par le frottement des pistolets, enfin un long cordon d'amulettes de bois ou de sachets de cuir rouge descendant sur un *haïk djeridi* de fine laine lamée de soie, sans une ganse d'or, telle était la tenu sévère de notre hôte. (116)

[To this somewhat monkish cape, which looks like a cape due to its stiffness and a frock due to the hat on the back, add red riding boots, a rosary of brown wood, a leather belt buckled at his waist, worn down by the rubbing of his pistols, and, lastly, a long cord of wooden amulets and red leather sachets descending on a *haïk djeridi* of fine wool woven with silk, without a golden braid, such was the severe bearing of our host.]

The level of detail in the description of Si-Djilali-Bel-Hadj-Meloud makes this a portrait fit for the ethnographic museum. Fromentin's attempt to place the portrait within a typological casting of Algerian peoples, his intercultural comparisons of dressing habit, and his exhaustive inventory of the chieftain speak to the ethical claim of objectivity as a rationale and motivation for a new type of aesthetic, ethnographic description. As detailed by Christin, this description emerges from Fromentin's observational practices in the field: these descriptions—just like his voluminous sketches—are not merely “documents préparatoires” [preparatory documents] but “véritables ‘œuvres sources’” [true ‘source documents’].¹⁴⁴

To Fromentin, portraiture in literature poses the conundrum of how the portrait is shared as an artistic subgenre by painting and, increasingly, photography. Unlike

¹⁴⁴ Christin, introduction to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 55.

Delacroix, Fromentin never dabbled in photography. He was loath to admit it into his own artistic practice, and if his comments on photography are implicitly critical, they also show his usual acuity but without the hyperbolic language of Baudelaire's famous harangue. In *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, Fromentin writes that "[t]outes les fantaisies de l'imagination, ce que l'on appelait les mystères de la palette à l'époque où le mystère était un des attrait de la peinture, cèdent la place à l'amour du vrai absolu et du textuel" [All the fantasies of the imagination, what we used to call the mysteries of the palette, when mystery was one of the virtues of painting, cede place to a love for the absolute truth and for textuality].¹⁴⁵ The rational tone is noteworthy for its contrast to Baudelaire. Fromentin says that when it comes to the way that people see bodies, photography has changed "la plupart des manières de voir, de sentir, et de peindre" [the majority of ways of seeing, feeling, and painting] (ibid.). Photography's pressure upon painting—here, the painting of portraits—means that "la peinture n'est jamais assez claire, assez nette, assez formelle, assez crue" [painting is never clear enough, clean enough, formal enough, "real" enough] (ibid.). The change in sensibility means that the imagination recedes as an artistic prerogative, and the spirit loses its pride of place within the artistic act: "Tout ingénierie personnelle de la sensibilité est de trop. Ce que l'esprit imaginait est tenu pour artifice" [All personal touches of sensibility are too much. What the spirit imagined is now seen as artificial] (ibid.). The ideal no longer obtains; instead, it is the real, the mimetic, and the objective: "Choix des sujets, dessin, palette, tout participe à cette manière impersonnelle de voir les choses et de les traiter" [The choice of subjects, draftsmanship, color schemes, all follow this impersonal manner of seeing and representing] (ibid.). Fromentin's understanding of the situation is rich with irony and paradox. The Romantic past valued flights of fancy. But with the new public taste for "absolute truth," photography changed the basis of visual apperception, and so painters

¹⁴⁵ *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, 717.

had to follow suit, willingly or not. Stripped of its prerogative for representational idealism, portraiture in painting was a dead subject; instead, the “informational value” of paintings decreased to “stress the elements of color in the picture.”¹⁴⁶

After describing the daily interactions of the traveling camp’s three valets—the “fastidious” Ali, his brother Brahi and Sidi-Embareck—Fromentin writes about the problems of portraiture. First, he seems upset that he likes this subgenre of representation: “Je m’amuse à des portraits. Ai-je tort?” [I love doing these portraits. Am I wrong?]¹⁴⁷ In them, there is objectivity: “Je ne les choisis pas, je les copie” [I do not choose them, I copy them] (ibid.). This is the crux of portraiture: its enmeshing of ethnographic realism and artistic idealism. His portraits astonish him for being, on the one hand, contrary to the tradition of art and “si loin de l’idéal qu’on rêve” [so far from the dreamed-of ideal] and, on the other hand, pleasingly “divers” [diverse] (ibid.). Thinking about his portraits, Fromentin writes that the images reveal themselves through stages: first, the variety of costumes is all that is seen, making the person wearing them all but invisible; then the “traits caractéristiques de la race” [characteristic racial traits] become visible, and only after that “l’homme enfin apparaît sous les traits de l’Arabe, et montre qu’il a, comme nous, ses passions, ses difformités, ses ridicules” [the man finally appears beneath the Arab traits, and shows that he, like us, has passions, deformities, and aspects of the ridiculous] (ibid.). Fromentin wonders once again whether he has made a mistake, this time in trying to suggest an individual’s placement within a particular society: “Me trompé-je donc en introduisant la vie commune sous ces traits demeurés vagues et jusqu’à présent mal définis?” [Have I been wrong to introduce a social aspect when these traits remain vague and up till now so poorly defined?] (ibid.).

¹⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Roney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 100.

¹⁴⁷ Fromentin, *Un été dans le Sahara*, 181.

The confrontation between the individual and the social is nothing more than a crux at the root of cultural anthropology, which seeks to universalize the truths of an individual's experience as part of culture. But Fromentin does not think this critique is, in the end, legitimate, because another concerns intervene: "N'est-il pas temps de sortir du bas-relief, d'envisager, ces gens-là de face, et de reconstruire surtout des figures pensantes?" [Is it not time to leave the bas-relief, and to try to see these people as they are, and to present them as thinking beings?]. These words are profound, and, perhaps, unexpected harbingers of what we might even call a postcolonial mentality. Yet Fromentin retreats into his accustomed ambivalence and self-deprecation, stating, "Ce n'est pas moi qui réussirai dans ce que j'essaye" [It is not me who will succeed in what I am trying to do] (ibid.).

The painterly process, "to see, to feel, to paint," is now mottled, discolored, and distempered by the gifts of photographic realism. Painting would never be able to match photography's effects for clarity, form, and the "raw." Mechanical reproduction, such as in photography, would be, as far as Fromentin could tell, the new standard of experience and knowledge. In 1876, even the history of the 1830s—when the craze of bitumen swept through French art—seemed to Fromentin a past that could hardly be recalled with any nostalgia. If in Fromentin's writing there is no explicit tying together of photography and ethnographic description, the value system that ethnography would come to enforce as an aspiring modern science mirrors the terms described above.

Part IV. Conclusion

Maxime Du Camp writes of how the public demand for Fromentin's Algerian theme frustrated the artist. Du Camp invokes the public opinion and tells Fromentin to paint more white horses: "A toutes ses propositions on répondait: 'Non, faites-nous quelque chose d'algérien, vous savez, avec un de ces petits chevaux nacrés auxquels vous

excellez” [To each of his initiatives we replied: “No, do for us something Algerian, you know, with one of those little brilliant horses that you do so well].¹⁴⁸ Fromentin complies, with a noted degree of unwillingness: “Il pestait, et, pour la centième fois, il recommençait le petit cheval blanc, le petit ciel bleu, le petit gué argenté, le petit arbre sans nom dans la botanique et le petit Arabe aux bras nus” [He would curse, and, for the hundredth time, he would begin again a little white horse, with a little blue sky, a little silver stream, a little tree without a botanical name, and the little Arab with bare arms] (ibid.). His fate is not one that he embraces entirely: “Un jour qu’il venait de terminer une de ses jolies toiles, il me la montra, et, levant les épaules avec impatience, il me dit: ‘Je suis condamné à ça à perpétuité!’” [One day when he had just finished another of his splendid paintings, he showed it to me, and, shrugging his shoulders impatiently, he said, “I’m condemned to this in perpetuity!”] (ibid.). It is hard not to feel bad for Fromentin, or, at the very least, to see in this anecdote how Fromentin’s paintings were constrained more strictly by market demands than his writing, where he was more free express his opinions.

Three times Fromentin tried to escape the narrow confines of being an Orientalist artist: he presented centaurs during the Salon of 1868, paintings of Venice in 1872, and ones of Egypt in 1876. In the second attempt, Castagnary declared Orientalism dead: “[Il] est visible que l’orientalisme est mort. M. Fromentin délaissant l’Afrique pour venir prendre repos à Venise, c’est plus qu’une abdication, c’est la contestation d’un décès” [It is clear that Orientalism is dead. When Mr. Fromentin relinquishes Africa to go relax in Venice, it is more than an abdication, it is an affirmation of its decease].¹⁴⁹ These attempts at eluding fate are interesting because they provide the characteristic marks of ambivalence that dominate Fromentin’s thinking, an ambivalence that has made him a

¹⁴⁸ Maxime Du Camp, *Souvenirs littéraires, Tome II*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1906), 202.

¹⁴⁹ Castagnary, *Salons, II: 1872-1879*, 30-1.

difficult figure to fully comprehend. In his 1874 preface, he writes for the last time of the ambivalence he feels for Algeria: “J’avais visité l’Algérie à plusieurs reprises; je venais d’y pénétrer plus loin et de l’habiter posément. Une sorte d’acclimatation intime et définitive me la faisait accepter, sinon choisir, comme objet d’études et, très inopinément, décidait de ma carrière [...]” [I had visited Algeria several times; I penetrated further and further into the country and living there with sedentary calm. A sort of intimate and defining acclimatization forced me to accept it, if not choose it, as an object of study and, quite without my participation, it decided my career].¹⁵⁰ Having been to Algeria multiple times, having lived there “with sedentary calm,” having “acclimatized” or acculturated to its ways of life and visual forms, Fromentin does not speak of his relation to Algeria simply as an opportunist Orientalist. Nor is the Orient a counter he needed to know himself as a true, French subject and citizen. Nor does the rubric of official knowledge implicate Fromentin’s art in the same way that it does for Antoine-Jean Gros’ “Les Pestiférés de Jaffa” (1804), or other depictions of the French state.¹⁵¹ Algeria, or the Orient, was, rather, an unexpected boon for his early career, if in time, it hampered him so much that he came to regret its hold: “[L’Algérie] décidait de ma carrière, beaucoup plus que je ne l’imaginai alors et, l’avouerai-je? beaucoup plus que je n’aurais voulu” [Algeria decided my career, much more than I would ever have imagined, and can I admit it, much more than I would have wanted] (87).

The absence of Fromentin’s name from the list of major theorists of Orientalist thinking is problematic. Vincent Debaene’s *Far Afield* mentions Fromentin’s name in a

¹⁵⁰ Fromentin, preface to *Un été dans le Sahara*, 87.

¹⁵¹ Official knowledge is constructed through state patronage or through the organs, institutions, and other agencies for which the presentation of knowledge motivates or determines the construction of officially purveyed knowledge. Gros’ painting presents a limited, positive portrait of the French Empire. But Fromentin has little relation to any formation of official Orientalist knowledge. His travels to French North Africa were personal trips of pleasure and learning, and he did not receive state funds to defray costs. When Fromentin returned to Algeria during his honeymoon in 1852, he asked for a “commande de l’Etat/commande du gouvernement” through Maréchal Canrobert, but to he was not given one. *Correspondance*, 66.

parenthetical statement of the “principal figures” of writers the “great romantic voyage”¹⁵²—a motley list that includes Chateaubriand, Hugo, Nerval, Flaubert, and Gautier, a characterization that pushes Fromentin back into Romanticism. The noted historian Patricia Lorcin repeats this grouping, placing Fromentin with Flaubert, de Nerval, Daudet, Delacroix and Loti as the chief representatives of an artist credo for those “who flirted with the Oriental muse [and] the attraction for the exotic.”¹⁵³ This placement of Fromentin within Romanticism, or within the “Oriental” and “exotic” without acknowledging his difference, casts Fromentin’s thinking into an unfairly restrictive light. The lumping may be determined by a paradox within Said’s *Orientalism*, namely, that while being a work that sets a high standard for precise details and the specific facts of local histories, it nevertheless condenses such geographical and historical swathes and avoids certain differentiations that might, in the end, restrict its own claims. Indiscriminately placing Fromentin with other nineteenth-century French writers and artists has the effect of obscuring difference and forestalling alternative literary histories, such as the literary history of ethnography.

Applying Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as point of departure is problematic if not only for the fact that, as Said acknowledges, *Orientalism* does not address art.¹⁵⁴ Said’s third form of Orientalism emphasizes how discourse limits the thinking of even the “most imaginative” people (43). (He mentions Flaubert.) He points to the “constricted vocabulary” (44) that forced standardized descriptions of non-European places, ways of life, and cultures. These are the same terms that Fromentin uses to critique the

¹⁵² Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield*, trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 130.

¹⁵³ Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria*, 2nd ed., forward Hugh Roberts (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 78.

¹⁵⁴ “In the works of Delacroix and literally dozens of other French and British painters, the Oriental genre tableau carried representation into visual expression and a life of its own,” Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 118.

picturesque in his 1874 preface. Fromentin was perceptive enough, and critical enough, to understand how the literature of the picturesque voyage needed updating. Acknowledged by his contemporaries for his critical acumen, Fromentin was both deeply reflective and self-critical, “trop lucide, trop bon critique” [too lucid, too perceptive] for his own good.¹⁵⁵ Focusing on ethnographic description will help separate Fromentin from the over-generalizing lens of Orientalism.

His theory of good Orientalist art provides a difficult, tenuous compromise: to have the details, to engage in ethnographic description; but to relegate these details to the second-level of importance, ceding the primary position to imagination and its transformative act of sublimation, creating “impressions.” This, then, was to him the difference between art and ethnography. Art makes choices, it chooses how to represent the world, these choices effect a sublimation so as to arrive at universal truth, or beauty. Ethnography, though, simply replicates in a facsimile or document the “véridique” [truth] of bare life. Interesting, then, comes the fact that ethnography too, as understood in times to come, involves choices, and a sublimating act that reaches for the universality of scientific truth. Should that have been known to Fromentin, one can only wonder how that might have affected his ability to formulate a solution to his, and his time’s, conundrum.

His suspicion of ethnography reflects the anxiety of his times. Fromentin sees systems, traditions, and values—aesthetics—changing under the onslaught of new anthropological interests both in the general public and in intellectual and artistic circles. An astute reader of his times, his doubts about art demonstrate that his own production was not fully governed by the aesthetic laws that he argued for, and that quite against what he might have wanted, his spirit had already led him toward the thing against which he was arguing—the ethnographic. At the end of his long critique of Orientalist art in *Une*

¹⁵⁵ Foucart, introduction to *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, 10.

année dans le Sahel, he admits as much: “Il est possible aussi que, par une contradiction trop commune à beaucoup d’esprits, je sois entraîné précisément vers les curiosités que je condamne, que le penchant soit plus fort que les idées, et l’instinct plus impérieux que les théories” [It is possible as well that, by a contradiction too common to so many people, I am led exactly toward the curiosities that I condemn, that a person’s proclivities are stronger than their ideas, and that instinct is a stricter master than theory].¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 191.

CHAPTER TWO

Victor Segalen and the Semiotics of Non-Western Description

Any number of paradoxes could be said to shadow Victor Segalen's oeuvre and life. What Jorge Luis Borges writes of Segalen would seem to be all too true: "Do not live another month before you have read the entire oeuvre [...] You can read Segalen in less than a month, but it might take you the rest of your life to begin to understand him."¹⁵⁷ Since his rediscovery through Jean Malaurie's republication of *Les immémoriaux* in his prestigious Terre Humaine series at Plon (and then through Henry Bouillier's 1961 biography),¹⁵⁸ Segalen has been transformed from an almost entirely unappreciated writer during his lifetime to one equally appreciated by postcolonial writers and contemporary scholars alike for his "precursory status" for postcolonial studies.¹⁵⁹ Marie Dollé writes that "sa réflexion est comme toujours en avance sur son temps" [his thinking is as always ahead of his times],¹⁶⁰ and Edouard Glissant writes that he was "*en avant du monde*" [*ahead of the world*].¹⁶¹ Both ahead of his time and the world itself, Segalen represents the advent of postcolonial thinking long before it was acceptable to voice anti-imperial opinions and to attempt art that renounced ethnocentrism. As Charles Forsdick summarizes, Segalen is now turned to for his precocious "denunciation of the

¹⁵⁷Quoted in Andrew Harvey and Iain Watson, introduction to *Paintings* (London: Quartet Books, 1991), vii.

¹⁵⁸ Henry Bouillier's biography *Victor Segalen* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1961) was a second important moment for Segalen's literary rebirth.

¹⁵⁹ Charles Forsdick, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

¹⁶⁰ Marie Dollé, *Victor Segalen* (Saint-Gilles: Editions Aden, 2008), 133.

¹⁶¹ Edouard Glissant, *L'intention poétique*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 96. Christopher Bush and Timothy Billings reiterate this point in their introduction to their translation of *Stèles*, calling Segalen a "writer both ahead of his time and yet easily mistaken for one well behind it." Introduction to *Stèles* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 1.

uniformization of the world and the ravages of a civilization that destroys everything it touches.”¹⁶²

Segalen is a major early voice in twentieth-century literary history for the way that his writing places a value on cultural particularity. His theory of “exotisme au 2^e degré” [second-degree exoticism]—outlined in *Essai sur l'exotisme*¹⁶³ if never completed as a rigorous theory in its own right—extols an aesthetics of the diverse where difference arises as a term of significant interest. Segalen represents the inverse of the generalized form of exoticism promulgated by the likes of Pierre Loti—Segalen’s frequent straw man and whipping post. Loti’s exoticism is nefarious because it obscures the actual world with preconceptions, with “la visibilité trop grosse” [a too general vision] (100). Exoticism is a form of blindness, Segalen writes, a form of solipsism in which, in Loti’s works at least, “[l]’histoire est toujours la même, un officier vit un amour avec une belle étrangère [...]” [the story is always the same, an officer falls in love with a foreign belle], and “la narration, même si elle n’est pas dépourvue de charme, ne recèle aucune surprise” [the narration, while not being entirely without charm, leads to no surprise].¹⁶⁴ In this brand of literary exoticism, the other and the experience of the other is depicted through “les grossiers oripeaux” [hackneyed lies].¹⁶⁵ Segalen, on the other hand, champions diversity and the enjoyment of difference: “On ne voit, on ne sent, on ne déguste la nature avec une grande joie esthétique, que lorsqu’on s’en est un peu séparé, différencié” [We do not see, we do not feel, we do not appreciate nature with great aesthetic joy until we are separated, we are differentiated from it, a little] (56). As to the methodological literary difference that Segalen means to introduce, his entry in *Essai sur l'exotisme* from August

¹⁶² Dollé, *Segalen*, 133.

¹⁶³ Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, intro. Gilles Manceron, rev. ed. (Paris: Fata Morgana, 2009), 36.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶⁵ Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 100.

17, 1908 provides one clue: “Ne pas essayer de la décrire, mais l’indiquer à ceux qui sont aptes à la déguster avec ivresse...” [Do not try to describe [the sensation of Exoticism] but suggest it to those who are apt to appreciate it to the extreme] (37). Here, then, we see that the theorization of description is at stake, and that Segalen believes he uses techniques that could transform clichéd exotic description into something else.

One potential problem in Segalen’s thinking arises in the fact that he exalts cultural authenticity to the extent that he does. Forsdick writes that the author speaks to the “fear that [the] spread of assimilationist universality,” that Segalen articulates the “global spectre of imperial monoculture,” and that he writes against cultural “appropriation, procurement, and transformation.”¹⁶⁶ His theory of the diverse is both aesthetic and ethical; at one level, it is an epistemological refashioning that incites “le pouvoir de concevoir autre” [the power to think differently].¹⁶⁷ However, the predominance of affective terms in his theory of cultural encounter risks turning its ethical, epistemological goals into more narrow aesthetic ones. The encounter with the other is a “sensation” or a “choc” [shock] (36); such moments lead to a “saveur” [savor] (78) that one “tastes.” Then there is the consternating fact for a postcolonial reader wishing to find Forsdick’s encomium true at every juncture that in *Equipée* when the narrator reaches the most remote point of the voyage and finally encounters the other, it is none other than, oddly, a vision of himself: “Moi-même et l’Autre nous sommes rencontrés ici, au plus reculé du voyage [...] l’Autre était moi [...]” [Me and the Other, we encountered each other here, at the most remote point of the voyage ... the Other was me].¹⁶⁸ At crucial moments within his oeuvre, the ethical concerns that otherwise mark his difference from the tradition of French overseas writing seem to retreat behind

¹⁶⁶ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 41, 53, 104.

¹⁶⁷ Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 41.

¹⁶⁸ Victor Segalen, *Equipée: Voyage au pays du réel*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 118, 120.

merely aesthetic functions. The question persists as to whether cross-cultural encounter should lead ethically to a pursuit of knowledge and understanding, and to moving beyond preinscribed cultural limits or not, since only then would the encounter with the other seem to exceed in a crucial degree the sort of solipsism that he criticizes in the exotic literary tradition.

Segalen does not have an explicit answer for this inherent problematic. But this is the conundrum that this chapter hopes to tease out, and partially explain, if not fully solve. What is at stake is nothing less than a theory of the sign that will define and delimit the possibilities for description. I argue that in *Les immémoriaux* (1907)¹⁶⁹ and *Equipée* (1929), two crucial works for the study of description in Segalen's oeuvre, there is a common concern with using language to manifest some semblance of an indigenous worldview and, thus, to exceed or to deplace the default modern episteme and its theory of the sign. Whether through the quasi-ethnographic surface replete with Maori cultural details in *Les immémoriaux* or through a philosophic-literary template in *Equipée*, Segalen attempts to enter the imaginative space of the cultural other, taking on authentic elements of that culture's self-conception, trying to "indicate" without "describing" all the while not succumbing to impulse for a strictly documentary portraiture of that society.

Segalen's oeuvre is situated between two renunciations: one, a renunciation of Loti's form and style of the exotic; and, two, a renunciation of the empirical dictates of science. It is a precarious balance. He tries to find a space for himself between these two poles—the one literary but with its own worldview and epistemology inherent within it; and the second, the dominant modern episteme. This task of situating himself against these two poles asks him to define the real, and language's relationship to the real. In the cases of *Les immémoriaux* and *Equipée*, there is good evidence to suggest that

¹⁶⁹ Victor Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, rev. ed. (Paris: Plon, 1982).

tasks of semiotic redefinition result in non-Western, non-modern sign systems and, thus, new epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions for French literary description. Conceived within this dissertation's study of modern description in French literature, Segalen's maneuvers to create a sort of writing between solipsistic exoticism and ethnographic documentation produce, then, unique types of descriptive surfaces that are meant to present or instantiate non-European sign systems.

Part I. Ethnography and the Material Sign in *Les immémoriaux*

De plus en plus, en matière de religion, les *Mots sont les Dieux*: In principio erat verbum [...] Le mot engendre l'Idée" – Segalen, November 1904¹⁷⁰

[More and more, in religious matters, *Words are Gods*: In the beginning was the word ... The word engenders the Idea].

Toute la curiosité de notre pensée se loge maintenant dans la question: Qu'est-ce que le langage, comment le contourner pour le faire apparaître en lui-même et dans sa plénitude?¹⁷¹ – Foucault

[All the interest in our thinking is found now in the question, what is language, and how to manage it so that it is made to appear in itself and in its full strength.]

One question looms over *Les immémoriaux*, and that is the novel's epistemological and aesthetic relation to early modern forms of ethnography. It is at once a distraction and a

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Bouillier, *Victor Segalen*, 89.

¹⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 317.

conduit toward the novel's major intervention and investment, namely, the novel's attempt to provide not simply a non-Eurocentric view of the world but to articulate a non-Western sign system—that of the material sign of Tahitian/Maori culture. Based upon the remarks of literary critics and anthropologists, the novel scintillates upon a cord of relation between anthropology and literature, without the novel being exactly “un des rares romans ethnographiques de qualité” [one of the rare ethnographic novels of quality], as Malaurie introduced it in 1956.¹⁷² Abdelkébir Khatibi read this re-edition, and it was that experience that leads him to write that Segalen is “mon initiateur à une unification de l’ethnologie et de la littérature” [my guide to the unification of anthropology and literature].¹⁷³ Khatibi also says that the novel is “inclassable (ni romanesque, ni historique, ni ethnologique)” [unclassifiable (not really a novel, a history, or an ethnography)], and if Dollé avers that *Les immémoriaux* “constitue une entreprise sans exemple dans la littérature française” [constitutes an enterprise without example in French literature],¹⁷⁴ these statements generate confusion at the same time as reflect the novel's nettlesome yet ambivalent mix of anthropology and literature. Forsdick's statements on the generic status of the novel are more reserved: since he characterizes Segalen's entire career as being intent on producing “generic obfuscation,” thus, his novels are “deliberately heterogeneous, defying traditionally clear generic taxonomy.”¹⁷⁵

Through Malaurie's editing and scattering of scientific and artistic documents that conduce toward an ethnographic context, the novel becomes overdetermined, Forsdick argues, as ethnographic. Nevertheless, the novel cannot avoid its association with

¹⁷² Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, rev. ed. (Paris: Plon, 1982), 262.

¹⁷³ Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Le scribe et son ombre* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2008), 41. In 1984, Khatibi taught a seminar on Segalen at the Collège de Philosophie in Paris. See Jean Scemla, *Lecture critique* (Papeete: Haere po no Tahiti, 1986), 75. Khatibi also published an essay on the author, “Célébration de l'Exote,” in *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* (Paris: Denoël, 1987).

¹⁷⁴ Dollé, *Victor Segalen*, 78. Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger*, 26.

¹⁷⁵ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 113, 125.

anthropology, and that is realistically due in part to the “early accumulation of local detail via amateur fieldwork” that characterizes *Les immémoriaux*: Segalen’s extensive cultural and linguistic notes.¹⁷⁶ Jean Jamin believes it to be “positively ethnographic text.”¹⁷⁷ Clifford calls *Les immémoriaux* “the best-known but least characteristic” of his works, stating that the novel tries “realistically to evoke indigenous experience, what ethnographers of the time were beginning to call the native point of view.”¹⁷⁸ This contextualization implicitly treats the novel as having a strong ethnographic dimension. In the most detailed accounting of the text, Dollé returns to state the undeniable cross-purposing of anthropology and literature in the novel: “*Les immémoriaux* sont-ils un roman ethnographique? Il n’est pas nécessaire de différer notre réponse: c’est non [...] même si le livre n’est pas un roman ethnographique, sa dimension ethnographique ne peut être niée” [Is *Les immémoriaux* an ethnographic novel? It is not necessary to be coy: no ... Even if the book is not an ethnographic novel, its ethnographic dimension cannot be denied].¹⁷⁹

At the very least, ethnography was a point of reference for Segalen at the outset of his trip. Bouillier reminds us that Segalen’s steamship companion from Le Havre to New York was none other than Professor Lejeal who “avait conseillée à Segalen de faire des recherches ethnographiques” [had advised Segalen to conduct ethnographic research]. Bouillier contends that “ce projet purement scientifique” [this purely scientific project] seduced Segalen, and, furthermore, his medical school training “ne s’opposait

¹⁷⁶ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 105.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 18. Jean Jamin, “Une initiation au réel. A propos de Segalen,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 66 (1979): 125-139. See also Francis Affergan, *Exotisme et altérité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987).

¹⁷⁸ James Clifford, “A Poetics of Displacement,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 154.

¹⁷⁹ Marie Ollier, *L’écrit des dits perdus: L’invention des origines dans Les Immémoriaux de Victor Segalen* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 16.

en rien à des travaux de ce genre, elles les favorisent même” [did not contradict work of this sort; rather, it favored such work].¹⁸⁰ Yet, regardless of what his medical and scientific training may have prepared him to accept, or what imaginative pressure Professor Lejeal’s advice may have produced, Segalen himself did not have any avowed interest in the ethnographic methods of anthropology. The opposite is rather true. On at least two occasions, he separates his subject position and writing techniques from anthropological field tasks, stating, “On ne veut point cataloguer leurs armes ni leurs objets familiers; on ne mettra point leurs dieux en vitrines, et il ne sera pas, pour tout dire, question d’anthropologie [...] ou d’ethnographie polynésiennes” [I have no intention of cataloguing their weapons or everyday objects. I am not going to put their gods in showcases. In a word, it will not be a question of Polynesian anthropology or ethnography]?¹⁸¹ On another occasion, he denigrates “ethnographes grossiers, collectionneurs de fiches” [clumsy ethnographers, collectors of notecards].¹⁸² This repudiation is no doubt motivated by Segalen’s anti-imperial thinking, for, as he writes in *Briques et Tuiles*, his 1909-1910 travel notes during his first voyage in China, he believes that science facilitates colonial expansion and appropriation through its scientific methods of “définir, cataloguer, limiter, classer” [define, catalogue, limit, class]¹⁸³.

Segalen’s animosity toward science seems aimed at its epistemology. In the continuation of the passage just quoted, Segalen launches into a full-throated excoriation of the presumptions of scientific knowledge. Segalen has in mind the nominal

¹⁸⁰ Bouillier, *Victor Segalen*, 118.

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 102. See Segalen, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 163.

¹⁸² Victor Segalen, *Gauguin dans son dernier décor*, rev. ed. (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1975), 137.

¹⁸³ Victor Segalen, *Briques et Tuiles* (Paris: Editions Fata Morgana, 1975), 90.

European enemy—equally the social scientist and the cavalier literary travel writer: “Puis, cette obstination, après avoir (non pas sans profit ni finesse toujours) regardé le Chinois, cet entêtement à vouloir fixer à jamais, et ce qu’il est, et ce qu’il n’est pas! Stupidité audacieuse et boiteuse!” [Then, this stubbornness, after having seen (and not always without profit or finesse) the Chinese, this madness for wanting to fix them in place forever and ever: both what they are, and what they are not. It is an audacious and unsound stupidity!].¹⁸⁴ Logically, Segalen writes, one cannot write about the Chinese *en masse* because their diversity means that “tout affirmation Chinoise (ou autre, n’est-ce pas) appelle sa négation même...” [every affirmation of the Chinese (or otherwise) calls for its own negation] (ibid.). He finds it ridiculous “de conclure de milliers d’expériences, et de poser, avec un sérieux recueilli” [to summarize millions of experiences and to represent them in a serious collection] (91). The diversity of human experience cannot be summarized so. He cannot conceive of the goal of such depictions; he thinks of it as a “jeu” [game] for those who want to “say everything.” He takes aim at those who present “sous le simili falot d’un livre ‘documentaire’” [under the banner of a colorless imitation of a ‘documentary’ book] (ibid.). Instead, he insists that his writing will not fail in these ways. It will not be about what he thinks of the Chinese, because, “je n’en pense à vrai dire rien du tout” [I do not think much of them]; instead, his writing will avoid the pratfalls of the social scientist bent on capturing the essence of the Chinese through scientific methods because it will be about “ce que j’imagine d’eux-mêmes [...] sous la forme vive et réelle au-delà de tout réalité, de l’œuvre d’art” [what I imagine of them ... in the live and real form outside of all reality—the work of art] (ibid.).

But these comments must be kept within a delimited context, for applying them indiscriminately to his entire oeuvre will lead to the feeling that he is being disingenuous. That is, his self-styling as a literary author cannot deny his empirical, historical, and

¹⁸⁴ Segalen, *Briques et tuiles*, 90.

aesthetic knowledge on display in the important archaeological document *Chine. La grande statuaire*.¹⁸⁵ Are we to dismiss Dollé's belief that *Les immémoriaux*, generically speaking, is a "document-fiction"¹⁸⁶ with the first noun implying the book's pull toward the real, the empirical? Should Segalen's letters to his wife during his first Chinese voyage, in which, as Jean-Louis Bédouin notes, "on y trouvera, une vivante image de l'ancienne Chine" [we will find in them a living image of ancient China],¹⁸⁷ be dismissed as being sub-literary and so not pertinent to the literary domain that he stakes out as resolutely anti-imperial, anti-empirical, and anti-ethnographic?

Instead of being a vituperative attack upon the ethos of anthropology and disciplinary personality of anthropologists, Segalen's remarks relate to the competition between two forms of knowledge that have different theories, methods, and rubrics for textualizing the world—in short, different epistemologies. Anthropology fetishizes the real through its documentary textualization, collecting techniques, objective and distant observation, and analytical modes of interpretation: it produces the "real" when the real might not be even self-evident. But, for Segalen, the real—as a positivist, empirical category—can only ever speak to a portion of experience. The "fadeur du réel" [insipidness of the real]¹⁸⁸ does not mean to denigrate the physical, historical, and empirical aspects of the world and life *en toto*, but rather Segalen means to delimit the positivist epistemology of modern science that claims to be not merely the chronological successor to pre-Enlightenment theory of the sign, but also a teleological successor—an improvement, in short. A real "more real than reality" does not deny reality's first claim.

¹⁸⁵ Victor Segalen, *Chine, La Grande Statuaire*, ed. Annie Joly-Segalen, postface Vadime Elisseff (Paris: Flammarion, 1972).

¹⁸⁶ Dollé, *Segalen*, 78.

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Louis Bédouin, introduction to *Lettres de Chine*, by Victor Segalen (Paris: Plon, 1967), 7.

¹⁸⁸ Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 63.

Segalen would not say, for instance, that the world is *maya*, or illusion, as would one state in strict adherence to an Upanishadic/Hindu philosophy. Rather, the real that Segalen seeks is a metaphysical-empirical real, “englobant et dépassant les réalités fugaces et innombrables” [encircling and going beyond the fleeting and innumerable realities]. On the one hand, he avoids “l’absolu pétrifié des dogmes” [the petrified absolutism of dogma]; on the other hand, he avoids “la misérable satisfaction de ceux qui ne veulent pas voir plus loin que l’immédiat” [the miserable satisfaction of those who wish not to see beyond the immediate].¹⁸⁹ By finding a position between religious or literary dogma, and scientific empiricism, or merging these two as the situation requires, Segalen hopes to avoid the dangers, disappointments, and deficiencies he sees in both.

Forsdick writes that *Les immémoriaux* presents a “meeting of taxonomic and signifying systems, of mutually exclusive epistemological systems.”¹⁹⁰ In this meeting, there is for Segalen the sense of a difference in ethics. Segalen is keenly and precociously aware of how the concatenation of imperial economics, colonial and political domination, and modern science’s epistemology means that, as Jean Laude writes, “la toute-puissance de l’Occident est fatale à ceux-là sur lesquels elle s’exerce et d’abord, à leur identité culturelle. Il sait aussi qu’en insolente et fanatique conviction de l’universalité, du *catholicisme*, de ses valeurs, l’Occident n’en a cure” [that omnipotence of the West is fatal for those over which it is exercised and first, to their cultural identity. He knows as well that the insolent and fanatical conviction in it of universalism, of *Catholicism*, of its values means that this is no cure for the West].¹⁹¹ Segalen includes religion as part of the colonial complex of discursive forces. Writing to his wife from Han-K’euou, China on June 7, 1909, he cannot contain his disdain for Western missionaries:

¹⁸⁹ Bédouin, introduction, 13.

¹⁹⁰ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 105.

¹⁹¹ Jean Laude, introduction to *Briques et tuiles*, by Victor Segalen (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1975), 11.

“Partout où l’Europe traîne ses métissages, l’ignominie commence. L’église est une monstruosité et les chants un coassement infernal” [Everywhere that Europe mixes with other cultures, ignominy follows. The church is a monstrosity and its chants are an infernal croaking].¹⁹² Segalen’s condemnation of ethnocentric overwriting of non-European cultures extends to all the forces of imperial conquest.

Segalen asserts the deleterious consequences of attempting to understand non-European cultures through European means, or, in *Les immémoriaux*, the existential trauma inherent in the exchange of the material sign for the scientific, modern sign. Changing from one to the other changes fundamentally the nature of description and the living subject’s relationship to description, which is now a quasi-magical force within language to instantiate nature—to produce nature through its incantatory properties. Language is material and on par with the materiality of rocks, the sky, and the ocean. Segalen acknowledges in the novel that language and the sense of being are deeply entwined: “Car on sait qu’aux changements des êtres, afin que cela soit irrévocable, doit s’ajouter l’extermination des mots, et que les mots périssent en entraînant ceux qui les ont créés” [Because we know that to the changes of beings, so that they will be irrevocable, must be added the extermination of words, and that words perish along with the people who created them].¹⁹³ In Segalen’s novel, language houses a theory of the sign complete with an epistemology and aesthetics that defines the very relation of beings and external reality.

Foucault explains the history of the material sign’s transformation during the Enlightenment into a modern sign expressing a theory of representation. In pre-modern

¹⁹² Victor Segalen, *Lettres de Chine* (Paris: Plon, 1967), 52.

¹⁹³ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, 31.

European epistemology, the sign was “une figure du monde” [a figure of the world].¹⁹⁴ In medieval epistemology, for example, encyclopedia makers collected all “that was heard and seen” of a thing, without separating between an empirically confirmed detail or a mythic story. Language itself was a material participant in the world, “liée à ce qu’il marque par les liens solides et secrets de la ressemblance ou de l’affinité” [tied to that which it marks by solid and secret connections of resemblance and affinity] (ibid.) The presence, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics of such a material sign is that which Segalen attempts to validate in *Les immémoriaux*.

The novel begins with Térii, “Térii le Récitant,” as an apprentice sage, readying for a recitation: “L’heure était propice à répéter sans trêve, afin de n’en pas omettre un mot, les beaux parlers originels: où s’enferment, assurent les maîtres, l’éclosion des mondes, la naissance des étoiles, le façonnage des vivants, les ruts et les monstrueux labours des dieux Maori” [The hour was right to recite without break, without omitting a word, the beautiful original words: where were kept, assured the masters, the birth of worlds, of stars, and the making of all sentient beings, the ruts and monstrous labors of the Maori gods].¹⁹⁵ Forsdick and Agamben note how the novel’s focus on language presents colonialism as a material struggle between cultures,¹⁹⁶ and Durkheim also writes of the pre-modern, material sign as a spiritually significant epistemology: “Men owe to religion not only the content of their knowledge, in significant part, but also *the form* in which that knowledge is elaborated.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 72.

¹⁹⁵ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, rev. ed. (Paris: Plon, 1982), 9.

¹⁹⁶ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 53. Giorgio Agamben, “L’origine, et l’oubli: Parole du mythe et parole,” in *Regard, espaces, signes: Victor Segalen: colloque*, 169-179 (Paris: Asiathèque, 1979).

¹⁹⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. and intro. by Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 8. Italics are mine.

Foucault writes of the two ethics perceptible in Western theories of the sign, the ancient and the modern. The ancient ethics “s’articulait sur l’ordre du monde, en en découvrant la loi, elle pouvait en déduire le principe d’une sagesse [used to be articulated in accord with the world, in discovering in the world the law, ethics used to be able to deduce from it the principle of a form of wisdom].¹⁹⁸ This is the tie between language, law, the world, and the subject’s experience of the world that makes description not an act of representation—of presenting in simulacrum the world—but of participating magically in the world itself. This is relevant to the non-Western sign system of *Les immémoriaux*. The first scene of the novel continues, revealing that Térii dreams of becoming the highest rank of priest, the Arioï, the “Douze à la jambe-tatouée” [Twelve of the Tattooed Leg].¹⁹⁹ Were he to attain full possession of the needed linguistic and spiritual faculties, he would be able to recite by heart, when “les Dires consacrés se suivraient à la longue d’eux-mêmes, dans sa bouche, sans erreur et sans effort” [the consecrated Words would follow one after another in the mouth without error and without effort] (13). The word “Dires” [Words] is capitalized to suggest the way that they both live in the world as material constituents and also express the multiform realities—spiritual, material, historical—of the pre-modern sign.

The scene is significant for how it constructs language as on par with other forms of material culture. Here, Térii has to have a prop to help him remember the needed words, akin to beings with their own will—“les noms déçoivent autant que les dieux de bas ordre” [words deceive as much as the low rung of gods] (9). A long, detailed description of that prop follows:

¹⁹⁸ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 338.

¹⁹⁹ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, 12-3.

[...] ces faisceaux de cordelettes dont les brins, partant d'un nouet unique, s'écartent en longueurs diverses interrompues de nœuds réguliers. Les yeux clos, le récitant les égrenait entre ses doigts. Chacun des nœuds rappelait un nom de voyageur, de chef ou de dieu, et tous ensemble ils évoquaient d'interminables générations. Cette tresse, on la nommait 'Origine-du-verbe,' car elle semblait faire naître les paroles. (13)

[these string amulets whose threads, coming from a single mass, spread out in different lengths, interrupted by regular knots. With his eyes closed, the reciter would pass these through his fingers. Each of the knots stood for the name of a voyager, or a chief, or a god, and together they brought back generation after generation. This braided amulet was called the "Origin of the Verb," because words emerged from it.]

Though this spiritual prop in Maori ritual remains apocryphal,²⁰⁰ nevertheless, the ethnographically nuanced description is significant for the way that it attempts to represent for French readers the very different cultural materiality of Tahiti. Also, the name of the prop, the Origin-of-the-Verb, highlights how this talisman is tied to three separate domains: the present's experiential reality, the historical (yet living) contextualization of culture, and the material production of speech itself. These are enmeshed in an epistemology of the material sign.

In contrast to the sign system of the pre-modern, material sign, Foucault writes that the modern episteme has its own ethics: "la modern [...] ne formule aucune morale

²⁰⁰ Scemla writes that the phrase is a translation of the Marquesan phrase "tootetekao," and that Segalen observes the usage of such a prop [tresse] in the Marquesas Islands; whether the same word was matched to the same object in Tahiti is unproven, though similar devices were used. *Lecture critique des Immémoriaux*, 42.

[...] La pensée moderne n'a jamais pu, à vrai dire, proposer une morale" [the modern ... forms no moral ... Modern thought was never able, to be frank, to formulate a moral].²⁰¹ In his own fashion, Claude Lévi-Strauss confirms Foucault's theory of difference between the epistemological constraints and ethics of modern and pre-modern societies. For the anthropologist, two paradigms appear, first that of the "bricoleur" [bricoleur] and the "ingénieur" [engineer]: "l'ingénieur cherche toujours à s'ouvrir un passage et à se situer *au delà*, tandis que le bricoleur, de gré ou de force, demeure *en deçà*" [the engineer searches always to open up for himself a passage and to situate himself *beyond*, while the 'bricoleur', by hook or by crook, resides *within*].²⁰² The engineer is paradigmatically modern, situating his basis of knowledge objectively from outside the domain of the subject of study. Lévi-Strauss restates this difference through another paradigm, that of the sign and the concept: "[comment] le signe s'oppose au concept tient à ce que le second se veut intégralement transparent à la réalité, tandis que le premier accepte, et même exige, qu'une certain épaisseur d'humanité soit incorporée à cette réalité" [that the sign differs from the concept relates to how the second aspires to be entirely transparent of reality, while the first accepts, and even demands, that a certain heaviness of humanity is incorporated in this reality] (ibid.).

Scientific knowledge is moveable because it produces knowledge based upon or housed within the sign system that it creates: "la science [...] s'instaure, crée, sous forme d'événements, ses moyens et ses résultats, grâce aux structures qu'elle fabrique" [science ... initiates, creates, beneath the form of events, its means and its results, thanks to the structures that it devises].²⁰³ If scientific knowledge claims to have a system applicable to all of physical reality, then Segalen characterizes the Maori-

²⁰¹ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 339.

²⁰² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1963), 30.

²⁰³ Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 33.

Tahitian theory of the sign as entrenched within a single, unique reality, one that expresses a “certain heaviness of humanity.” That is, the knowledge contained within “mythic thought” is formed in direct relation to the physical, historical, and spiritual realities of a specific spiritual-geographical inheritance. Taxonomical categories deployed through scientific knowledge are self-referential and their validity is based upon their purported arbitrary yet universal applicability, yet in the pre-modern European episteme, and that which is depicted in *Les immémoriaux*, taxonomical categories “ont toujours le projet de rejoindre l’ordre naturel ou de le dissocier le moins possible” [always have the project of joining the natural order or of disassociating from it as little as possible].²⁰⁴ The quality of resemblance that the material sign expresses is determined in relation to the historical, geographical, and spiritual exigencies of the local—the “natural order” as so conceived through the cultural and geographical conditions.

Within this context, the act of description is an act of instantiation—of re-establishing the ethical connection between physical reality, spiritual tradition, and the affective, ecological, and discursive dimensions of human experience. The narrator describes from Térii’s perspective a portion of the island of Papee’te:

La même crête divise les espaces dans le ciel. Car les nuées chargées de pluie s’épanchent sur ses flancs sans jamais en passer le revers. Les petits enfants n’ignorent pas cela. Voici le parler connu seulement des prêtres: le pied du mont, creusé d’une grotte froide, suintante et sans fond, donne depuis trois lunaisons retraite à Tino, l’homme-inspiré. On le dit incarner des esprits variables, et parfois l’essence même de Oro. À tout hasard, on l’honore, à l’égal de ce dieu. La grotte est sainte ainsi qu’un maraè, et s’enveloppe d’un tapu sévère. Térii savait en plus que la montagne excavée figure: *Le trou dans le Tronc; le creux*

²⁰⁴ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 81.

dans la Colline; la caverne dans la Base, ainsi qu'il est dit aux chants Premiers.²⁰⁵

[The same peak divided the sky into parts. Because the clouds full of rain hung on its flanks without ever going backwards. Even little kids knew that. But this was known only by the priests: for three moons the shaman Tino had taken shelter at the foot of the mountain in a cold, deep cave that seeped with water. It was said that he could call up real spirits, and sometimes the very essence of Oro. Just in case, he was honored as the equal of this god. The cave was as holy as a maraë, and it was forbidden by a strong taboo. Térïï knew as well that the cavern in the mountain was called *The Hole in the Trunk, the Hole in the Hill, the Cavern at the Base*, as it was called in the First Songs.]

Today the Grotto Maraa is merely one of many points of interest for the Western eco-tourist in Tahiti, but in the novel, it is invested with spiritual significance: the temporary home for Tino, “un inspiré” [a shaman] (58). When taken over by spirits, Tino has the ability to speak the words of Oto, the highest god: “Il disait sans effort, avec les mots qu'on attribue aux dieux-supérieurs, d'admirables récits ignorés” [He said without effort—with words that were supposed to be those of the great gods—beautiful, forgotten stories] (ibid.). Land links to the gods through the materiality and spiritual conductivity of words.

The narrator writes, “[T]out est matière, sous le ciel Tahiti, à jouissances, à délices ...” [Everything is material, underneath the Tahitian sky, for pleasure, for delight] (107). But this is not strictly in conformity with the image of Gauguin, “Le Maître-du-jour” [The

²⁰⁵ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, 28.

Master of Pleasure],²⁰⁶ as an example of licentious sexual abandon. Rather, it speaks to the ability of Tahitians, living within their sign system, to find pleasure in life—jouissance—more broadly, a possibility acknowledged by Alfred North Whitehead who writes that “life implies a certain absoluteness of self-enjoyment [...] the occasion of experience is absolute in respect to its immediate self-enjoyment.”²⁰⁷ The novel implies that the entire sign system of Tahitians—the material sign—confirms the value of experience for Tahitians. Jouissance is tied to language; and language is described as a material force.

A ceremony of high priests takes place. The narrator describes the ritual appearance of the high priests, “les Douze à la Jambe-tatouée” [the Twelve of the Tattooed Leg]: “Ceinturés du maro blanc sacerdotal, poudrés de safran, ils marchaient peints de jaune, dans le soleil jaune qui ruisselait sur leurs peaux onctueuses” [Bound in white priestly maro, powdered with saffron, they walked painted in yellow, in the yellow sun that streamed over their oily skin].²⁰⁸ Then, their demeanors are described: “Leurs immobiles et paisibles regards contemplaient la mer-extérieure; des souffles passaient dans leurs cheveux luisants, et remuaient, sur leurs fronts, d’impalpables tatu [They fixed, peaceful glances looked over the open ocean; the breeze passed through their glimmering hair, and left on their foreheads imperceptible tattoos]. The sense of physical and mental ease continues: “Leurs poitrines, énormes comme il convient aux

²⁰⁶ Segalen wrote to Claude Debussy about how Gauguin would serve as the novel’s hero, a sort of counter-converter, or re-converter, of the native population to the natural joys of their pre-Christian lives: “Pour cela, il lui rendra ses dieux, dont il taillera les images; il rendra les jeux et l’enthousiasme païens; il tentera de ressouffler cette joie de vivre si éclatante avant l’arrivée des convertisseurs” [For that, he will give to him his gods, of whom he will whittle images; he will give games and pagan enthusiasm; he will attempt to revivify this joy of life that was so explosive before the arrival of the converters]. Quoted in Segalen, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 290.

²⁰⁷ Alfred North Whitehead’s *Modes of Thought*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1968), 150-1. Quoted in Steven Shavero, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 14.

²⁰⁸ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, 105.

puissants, vibraient de liesse et de force en jetant des paroles cadencées” [Their chests were enormous, as was befitting the powerful, and they vibrated with contentment and power while singing the song’s words] (ibid.). Language is innately pleasurable—it does not merely express the speaking subject’s pleasure, but it is impregnated with pleasure by itself: its materiality means that it has a sensuous nature appreciable through aesthetic sensitivity. Language is a means of inscribing the speaker on the same plane of existence with words as material objects and as the world beyond as material reality. This sense of the ability of language to consecrate nature, to invoke the connection between experience and the external world, repeats when, after an odyssey of twenty years (double Odysseus’s), when Térii finds himself back home, “[l]ui-même considérait le rivage d’un regard familier, se répétant, avec une joie des lèvres, les noms des vallées, des îlots sur le récif, des crêtes et des eaux courantes” [he looked across the shore with a nostalgic glance, repeating, with joy on his lips, the names of the valleys, the reefs, the peaks and the running waters] (143).

Foucault writes that the modern sign can only be conceived of as existing within “l’élément général de la représentation: le signifiant et le signifié ne sont liés que dans la mesure où l’un et l’autre sont [...] représentés, et où l’un représente actuellement l’autre [the general element of representation: the signifier and the signified are linked only in the measure that one and the other are represented, and in the measure that the one actually represents the other].²⁰⁹ Language within a system of the sign that is explicitly a theory of representation differs from a sign system of the material sign where “[il] s’agit d’abord de la nondistinction entre ce qu’on voit et ce qu’on dit, entre l’observé et le rapporté, donc de la constitution d’une nappe unique et lisse où le regard et le langage s’entrecroisent à l’infini” [there is a non-distinction between what is seen and what is read, between observation and relation, which results in the constitution of a single,

²⁰⁹ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 81.

unbroken surface in which observation and language intersect to infinity] (45). Forsdick cites how the novel shows a conflict of sign systems, and Segalen's perspective is necessarily ethical—he condemns the hubristic pretensions of the modern, Western sign system toward universal description. Forsdick concludes by saying that the novel “is an account of linguistic colonization, of assimilation of Tahitian orality by Western script.”²¹⁰ I argue one step further: that is is not merely orality and literacy that stand opposed (while the two do not constitute sign systems by themselves), but it is the material sign and the modern, amoral sign through which science emerged and that is indissociable from a theory of representation.

The numerous periphrastic descriptions of the written word should be considered as important within this context. Térii provides his perspective, effectively the Maorian perspective, on the written word as a symbol of the sign of scientific modernity: “Les étrangers blêmes, parfois si ridicules, ont beaucoup d’ingéniosité: ils tatouent leurs étoffes blanches de petits signes noirs qui marquent des noms, des rites, des nombres” [The pale strangers, often so ridiculous, are full of ingenuity: they stamp their white fabric with little black signs that mark names, rites, numbers].²¹¹ In fact, the logographic sign—the sign tied exclusively to the representation of rational communication—is one facet of colonial mastery. As Abdlekébir Khatibi writes, “L’Occident a lié son histoire (son épistémè) à une aventure logographique, refoulant ainsi toute écriture graphique irréductible à une telle empreise métaphysique” [The West ties its history (its episteme) to a logographic adventure, suppressing thus all graphic writing that conforms to such a metaphysical bias].²¹² Lévi-Strauss is yet more specific in his conclusions about the colonial deployment of logographic epistemology: “Si mon hypothèse est exacte, il faut

²¹⁰ Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, 125.

²¹¹ Segalen, *Les immémoriaux*, 125.

²¹² Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La Blessure du nom propre* (Paris: Denoël, 1974), 63.

admettre que la fonction primaire de la communication écrite est de faciliter l'asservissement [et la] lutte contre l'analphabétisme se confond ainsi avec le renforcement du contrôle des citoyens par le Pouvoir" [If my hypothesis is correct, we must admit that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate servitude and so the battle against illiteracy gets confused with the reinforcement of control of citizens by Power].²¹³

The novel's plot effectively begins when Térii forgets a name as part of the recitation of origins, the genealogy of the culture: "Un silence pesa, avec une petite angoisse. Aüé! que présageait l'oubli du nom? C'est mauvais signe lorsque les mots se refusent aux hommes que les dieux ont désignés pour être gardiens des mots!" [There was a weighty, anguished silence. Oh! What did forgetting a name presage? It's a bad sign when words refuse to come to those that the gods had entrusted to be the keeper of words!] (14). For someone entrusted with cultural memory, forgetting a word is tantamount to the erasure of an object, a thing—once an entity of a material culture is no longer present, its presence risks dissolving into immateriality. Térii is sensitive to how the displacement of the sign system of the material sign by the modern sign with its theory of representation is felt emotionally as a reduction, an impoverishment, and a shortchange: "Il sentait un autre homme surgir en lui, et se lamenter sans cesse: un homme malheureux et las" [He felt another man surge forward within himself, and he hated this unhappy and weak man] (76). Segalen articulates this sense of loss through the metaphor of how a culture mitigates worry, which is generally thought to be a part of religion's function, but more generally is a part of the ordering of the psychic world with the physical: "Auparavant, ses peines, il les recouvrait de pensers joyeux, et elles s'endormaient; ou bien elles mouraient d'elles-mêmes en son esprit. Maintenant son chagrin était plus tenace, ses regrets constants" [Formerly, his worries, he covered them

²¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), 354-5.

over with joyful thoughts, and they abated; or they actually lost their grip over his spirit. Now his unhappiness was more tenacious, and his regrets were constant] (ibid.). After Térii has converted to Christianity, conversion does not eliminate fear but refashions it: “Pour mieux chasser toutes ces vieilles peurs, les envoyés de Jésus, il est vrai, en avaient enseigné d’autres” [To chase away all the old fears, the envoys of Jesus, it is true, taught them others] (246). It reminds us of Foucault’s pronouncement that “la pensée moderne s’avance dans cette direction où l’Autre de l’homme doit devenir le Même que lui” [modern thought advances in this direction where the Other of man must become the Same as him].²¹⁴

That *Les Immémoriaux* has been called an “ethnographic” illuminates one last important point: were it an ethnographic novel, Segalen again would be participating in a project—Western social scientific classification, categorization, and delimitation—that he fundamentally rejects as ethically, aesthetically, and epistemologically invalid. As part of the legible surface of the text, the description in the novel resembles the proto-ethnographic description of the picturesque voyage and its customs and manners style: native words, and a focus on the religious rites and rituals of people (the Maori and the Christian, as well) do much to generate the quasi-empirical context of ethnographic observations of non-European society. But it is against the edge of ethnography’s epistemology and the ethnocentrism inherent in the modern, Western sign, with its pretensions toward social scientific universality, that Segalen writes. Adopting a narrative point of view that aligns with Térii, and so attempting to write through an insider’s perspective, points to a more extensive, intensive and difficult project: to try to write through the native sign system of the material sign, to try to give voice to the sensation of such semiotic difference, through “indicating” its clues to those who are apt to appreciate it. Segalen attempts to narrate the sensation of life lived inside a pre-modern

²¹⁴ Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 339.

epistemological framework in which the sign is material and language is invested with the power of instantiation, of presence in the world, “a figure of the world,” Foucault writes. Description operates in the sign system of the material sign as this calling forth, entering into, and positing as real—an embodiment of culture that has no separation from what in the modern episteme would be deemed the reality that it is meant to represent. The paradox of the novel remains that Segalen resorts partially to this style of proto-ethnographic description in order to attempt to convey his intuited sense of how language and description might work differently from the Western paradigms that he saw as predatory and harmful to non-European cultures.

Part II. Description in *Equipée*

Laude writes that Segalen “n’entre pas en Chine pour la connaître, ni pour connaître les Chinois” [does not go to China to understand it, or to get to know the Chinese],²¹⁵ and that instead of learning about the Chinese and China while in China, “Il lit la Chine, il ne la décrit pas, il écrit” [He reads China, he does not describe it, he writes it] (15). Laude states that Segalen’s Chinese oeuvre is not about China and not about knowledge of China, and this characterization does follow one line of Segalen’s own statements. “Au fond ce n’est ni l’Europe ni la Chine que je suis venu chercher ici, mais une vision de la Chine. Celle-là, je la tiens et j’y mords à pleines dents” [In the end, it is neither Europe nor China that I have come looking for here, but a vision of China. Now I have a vision to hold on to, and that I hold it squarely between my teeth], he writes to his friend Debussy on January 6, 1911.²¹⁶ Moreover, he is indifferent to the commoner in China. Areas of his journey in China, he writes in *Equipée*, will be populated by the country’s “vermine

²¹⁵ Laude, introduction to *Briques et Tuiles*, 12.

²¹⁶ Quoted in Mauricette Berne, ed. *Victor Segalen: Voyageur et Visionnaire* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1999), 86

sale, mais pensante, ses laboureurs et ses fonctionnaires” [dirty but thinking vermin, its laborers and functionaries].²¹⁷ His prejudices against the Chinese are revealed in *Voyage au pays du réel*, as well, where he is irked by the “l’abominable Chinois: Satellites et Mandarin du Prétoire” [the abominable Chinese: Satellites and Judge of the Court].²¹⁸ Yet were these statements exclusively true, then we would be left to wonder whether the ethical questions that Segalen lances at Loti are equally applicable to himself.

Of primary importance in this emergent paradox is the status of description. Laude states that Segalen does not “describe” China, and he implies that this is a self-conscious and efficacious decision on Segalen’s part. Segalen means to contradict those who would impose *their* knowledge upon the place, their categories of knowledge, their prejudices and predispositions: “Partons donc de cet aveu d’impénétrabilité. Ne nous flattons par d’assimiler les mœurs, les races, les nations, les autres” [Let us start with this vow of impenetrability. We do not lay claim to assimilating customs, races, nations, others].²¹⁹ Cultural difference is seen as infrangible, pure. Difference is a check upon universal knowledge. The culture on the other side of European understanding must be allowed to exist for itself: “pour l’Exotisme des Races et des Mœurs: m’en imbiber d’abord, puis m’en extraire, afin de les laisser dans tout leur saveur *objective*” [for an Exoticism of Race and Customs: to drink them in first, then to leave them, so as to leave to them their own *objective* savor].²²⁰ With the acknowledgement of this difference, then, intervene moments of pleasure: “éjouissons-nous [de cette différence]; nous réservant ainsi la perdurabilité du plaisir de sentir le Divers” [let us enjoy this

²¹⁷ Segalen, *Equipée: Voyage au pays du réel*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 15.

²¹⁸ Segalen, *Voyage au pays du réel* (Paris: Le nouveau commerce, 1980). 33. Simon Leys writes of other forms of Segalen’s indifference of ignorance of the Chinese. “Victor Segalen Revisited through his Complete Correspondance,” in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*, by Simon Leys, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 97.

²¹⁹ Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 44.

²²⁰ Segalen, *Briques et Tuiles*, 57.

difference; reserving for us thus the lasting quality of the pleasure of feeling Diversity].²²¹ We would seem to be at a crucial juncture in regard the question of the knowability of the other and Segalen's commitment to a form of writing that surpasses ethically the solipsism of Loti. For if he does not describe "China," and if China is not knowable, then how, in the end, are his texts different from Loti's (minus the gratuitous and fatuous romance)?

First, statements that Segalen does not describe China or the Chinese, and Segalen's own comments about how he is opposed to European attempts to know China and the Chinese must be parsed. Just as Dollé tells us that Segalen read everything he could find on Tahiti after returning to France and finalizing his manuscript of *Les immémoriaux*,²²² Segalen knew much about China. Philippe Postel enumerates all the essential works that Segalen had read, including works in the original Chinese that he read with a translator.²²³ Segalen's original preface to *Chine. La Grande Statuaire* attests to his knowledge about British and French Sinology. For instance, there he mentions the founding figures of Stephen W. Bushnell and Edouard Chavannes,²²⁴ and he emphasizes how Chavannes, considered "l'initiateur de la sinologie moderne" [the founder of modern Sinology],²²⁵ eclipsed his predecessors in getting off the Chinese coast and into the hinterland. In *Voyage au pays du réel*, Segalen also mentions Jacques Bacot, a linguist and ethnographer who studied the Mosuo people living in

²²¹ Segalen, *Equipée*, 44.

²²² Dollé, *Victor Segalen*, 75.

²²³ Philippe Postel, introduction to *Chine. La Grande Statuaire* in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. Philippe Postel (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 10-11.

²²⁴ Victor Segalen, preface to *Chine. La Grande Statuaire* in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. Philippe Postel (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 43, 46.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* Phillippe Postel, ft, 46.

Yunnan and Sichuan provinces near the border with Tibet.²²⁶ Furthermore, in preparation for Segalen, Auguste de Voisins, and Jean Lartigue's 1914 archaeological expedition, the team consults provincial Chinese chronicles in order to learn the likely location of interred ruins.²²⁷ Postel tells us that while some of the conclusions of *Chine. La Grande Statuaire* have been disproven in the century since its writing, it does nevertheless stand as a landmark in Chinese archaeology and is responsible for the unearthing of crucial monuments.²²⁸

Similar to Fromentin, Segalen wants social scientific knowledge, but he places it outside of the aesthetic object. In *Equipée*, the literary distillation of the notes he compiles in *Voyage au pays du réel*, he marks a fracture between his literary aesthetics of the exotic and the ethnographic imperative with its own “[esthétique] des climats et des races” [aesthetics of climates and races].²²⁹ His notebooks speak to his own ethnographic analyses—“directive ethnographique” [ethnographic directive], “Ethnographie: nombreuses maisons habitées [...]” [Ethnography: many inhabited houses], and “Ethnographie: quelques Lolos [...]” [Ethnography: some Lolos].²³⁰ But, for Segalen, the full literary text must process the variable minutia of Chinese reality into the eternal, cosmological Real. Thus, to state that Segalen's theory of exoticism does not allow for Western protocols of knowledge is short-sighted; rather, he argues for the importance of knowledge, even scientific knowledge, but also for its confinement within quite restricted geographies, institutions, and textual spaces.

²²⁶ Segalen does not mention Bacot's monograph by title, but the reference to his ethnography is clear. Jacques Bacot, *Les Mo-so. Ethnographie des Mo-so, leurs religions, leur langue et leur écriture*, with Edouard Chavannes (Leide: E.J. Brill, 1913).

²²⁷ Victor Segalen, preface to *Chine, la grande statuaire* suivi de *Les origines de la statuaire en Chine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 14.

²²⁸ Postel, introduction to *Chine*, 13.

²²⁹ Segalen, *Equipée*, 12.

²³⁰ Segalen, *Voyage au pays du réel*, 37, 50, 53.

Two interrelated questions remain. Again, how does Segalen's theory of the exotic as a writing practice exceed the solipsism characteristic of Loti? And, second, what is the epistemological status of description within Segalen's Chinese oeuvre? If in *Les immémoriaux*, Segalen makes an effort to adopt the pre-modern sign system of the Tahitian material sign, here he does something similar. Here, Segalen uses his knowledge about China—full of problems, shortcomings, and misperceptions, to be sure—to implement a “Chinese” philosophic-aesthetic system that determines literary form as well as descriptive rubrics. These literary, aesthetic, and philosophic structures determine a specific epistemology of description. They, in fact, constitute it. Segalen is suspicious of social scientific epistemology when applied to world peoples, and he is wary of literary description in the way that Western preconceptions—scientific, literary, or both—proliferate in a simulacrum through their texts. Turning his back on Western forms of literary and scientific description, then, he tries to take up “Chinese” ideals. While these ideals are ultimately essentialized Taoist symbols, he produces a form of symbolic and cosmological description in his Chinese oeuvre that is indeed invested with China, the Chinese, and some vestige of their culture. China per se appears refracted through some of its own philosophic and aesthetic categories. Such a practice is at the limit of description: the French literary tradition with its aesthetic and implicit epistemological and ethical perspectives meet with the same of the nominal Chinese tradition. Segalen writes at the end of *Voyage au pays du réel* that the pure literary work—*Equipée*—will be composed through a “hypothèse d'attitude littéraire” [literary hypothesis] (73). This is a winning phrase. In it, we find a trace sign of the inherent contention of his Chinese oeuvre, if not his entire production: literature can serve as a form of knowledge through the way that each work proposes its hypothesis (its form, its symbolic universe) and then strives to achieve that end through the experiment that the writing of the text itself represents.

Aesthetics and Epistemology of Description

Segalen demonstrates how when “rigid” European measures are applied to the non-European world, then the scientist will create one sort of map of the world. But Western measures of distance are not the only ones, and other systems of measurement, such as the Chinese *li*, can be said to have their own logic, which appears, through Segalen’s eyes, to be superior to Western measures: “Il ne peut être question de mesures rigides, ni de jalonner la route de segments équivalents. Le système occidental serait à la fois ici un manque de goût d’exotisme, et une raison d’erreurs locales” [There can be no question of rigid measure or of fixing the route in equal segments. The Western system would be both lacking in a taste for the exotic and it would produce local errors].²³¹ Instead of a strictly geometrical length, the *li* is a measure of time. Ten *li*, Segalen imparts to the reader, “c’est à peu près ce qu’un homme, ni hâtif ni lent, abat à son pas en une heure, dans la plaine” [it is usually what a man, neither fast nor slow, can traverse in an hour, on the plains] (24). This begets an aesthetics of walking, of the “étape” [stage of a journey]; it is responsive to the landscape and it has “une admirable grandeur” [an admirable girth] (ibid.). Ten miles is different from ten *li*, then, not only in the distance these measures mark but moreover in the conceptions of travel, of time, of the journey, and of the local human scale. This is one exemplification of the point that I mean to make: epistemological systems produce types of descriptions that necessarily convey their sponsoring logic, and these systems have their own aesthetics, as well.

In the poetry of *Stèles* modeled upon imperial Chinese stelai, Segalen states his desire to efface description because “[l]a Description tue le geste” [description kills the

²³¹ Segalen, *Equipée*, 23.

gesture].²³² In this poem, description's impact upon the gesture is the same as how "un air glacé tue le souffle" [a cold breeze kills the breath] (ibid.). Here, the "gesture" is not the act of gesticulation, but, as Postel explains, the "gesture" is movement per se.²³³ Moreover, in Taoist cosmology, the breath functions as a life-giving force. François Cheng writes that "Les Souffles vitaux" [the vital Breaths] inject space with "ki" [氣], or vital energy, transforming space.²³⁴ It is no longer a stationary, passive setting for the activity for human or animal life, but, in the "rêve taoïste" [Taoist dream], it is an "Espace vivant" [living Space] (ibid.). That poem commands us to forget "la description et sa main-d'œuvre" [description and its works].²³⁵ The difficulty of *Stèles*, then, lies in understanding the paradox of the aesthetics of movement and circulatory breath within the context of the poems' static, abstract surfaces. "Je ne la décris pas; je ne la livre pas; j'y accède par des voies inconnues" [I do not describe it; I do not hand it over; I access it by unknown ways] (284), Segalen writes in this collection, and it can feel at times as though the "unknown ways" are known only to Segalen.

Yet it is clear that those poems are written through a program that renounces mimetic, particularistic description, and it is clear that this program is sponsored in part by Confucian and Taoist cosmology as a Chinese platform. In *Equipée*, description must deal with a different generic context, namely, that of the travelogue. The fact that the work is a travelogue means that Segalen is forced to deal with the overlay of descriptive writing traditions that define the style of the French genre. Segalen will have to straddle the situational irony that he does not like travelogues and yet he is writing one, and that,

²³² Victor Segalen, *Stèles*, intro. and notes Christian Doumet, rev. ed. (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), 298.

²³³ Postel, introduction to *Chine*, 25.

²³⁴ François Cheng, *L'un vers l'autre: En voyage avec Victor Segalen* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), 30.

²³⁵ Segalen, *Stèles*, 298.

in some fashion, he means once again to renounce description while all the while engaging in description. He begins the travelogue, “J’ai toujours tenu pour suspects ou illusoire des récits de ce genre: récits d’aventures, feuilles de route, racontars—joufflus de mots sincères—d’actes qu’on affirmait avoir commis dans des lieux bien précisés, au long de jours catalogués” [I have always found narratives of this genre to be suspect or illusory: tales of adventure, travelogues, bits of gossip—brimming with sincere words—with acts that are said to have happened in specific places, during the long catalogue of days].²³⁶ This generic suspicion extends, or centers upon, description: “Je manquerais à tous les devoirs du voyageur si je ne décrivais pas des paysages. — Le genre est facile. C’est un exercice et un sport” [I would fail in all the essential points of a voyager if I did not describe landscapes] (103). He writes that the “principal argument du voyageur” [the principal argument of the voyager] is “la description” [description] (ibid.). Yet, if he states his objection to the genre’s rules for description, nevertheless, he does offer descriptions, and, indeed, a more accurate general statement would bear in mind that if “[la route] prend ce tour indescriptible qu’il faut décrire quand même” [The route takes this indescribable turn that nevertheless one must describe] (97).

Segalen finds in the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang the structural parameters through which his meta-travelogue will gain shape. Segalen enacts a partially Chinese aesthetics, and in this act, Segalen changes the possibilities for the limits of description within a French literary context. That is, he changes how we must think about the literary act, task, and textual site of description by forcing us to understand that literary description is forever linked to worldview and aesthetic indoctrination. In *Équipée*, Segalen explains the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang, and how he believes to have found in them a philosophic-aesthetic system to guide his composition: “Pour devise, j’ai cherché des mots expressifs, et le symbole de ce voyage double. J’ai cru les trouver

²³⁶ Segalen, *Équipée*, 11.

coexistants dans la Science Chinoise des Cachets, des Fleurons et des Caractères Sigillaires” [For legend, I searched for expressive words, and the symbol of this double voyage. I thought I found them together in the Chinese Science of Stamps, Rosettes, and Seals] (50). This Chinese system is revealed to be Taoism: “[...] l’enroulement réciproque des deux virgules du Tao, l’une blanche, l’autre noire, égales, symétriques, sans que l’une l’emporte jamais sur l’autre. Le Symbole a déjà beaucoup servi. La traduction commune en est ‘Ying et Yang’” [the reciprocal coiling of the two commas of the Tao, one white, the other black—equal, symmetrical, with neither dominating the other. The Symbol has already served me well. The translation of this is ‘Yin and Yang’] (ibid.) Segalen admits to be searching for a sign system to animate his work, and in Taoist iconography and symbolism, he finds a conceptualization of the world as being in binary symbiosis. This reciprocal, equal, symmetrical universe of symbols serves him well in his goal of creating a travelogue that takes place on earthly and cosmological levels, as these two terrains of experience can be refashioned through the specific situations of life.

Khatibi, Postel, Cheng, and Dollé cite Segalen’s links to Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, yet little scholarship, by and large, fastens upon the facets of how Segalen’s Chinese oeuvre, like his Tahitian novel, suggests a conflict of sign systems. Khatibi deals with the ways that *Équipée* articulates the Taoist philosophy-cum-aesthetics of Yin and Yang, by adumbrating the following diagram: “Yang/Yin; Mâle/Femelle; Dragon/Tigre; Imaginaire/Réel” [Yang/Yin; Male/Female; Dragon/Tiger; Imaginary/Reel].²³⁷ Yang is generally characterized as that which is “exposed to the sun,” whereas Yin is that which is “facing the opposite direction of the sun.”²³⁸ They

²³⁷ Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger*, 55.

²³⁸ Yang Wei, “The Yin and Yang Aspects of Language,” *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle of the University of Victoria* 13 (1996): 152.

divide the vital universal in a first division that, in turn, will foster further and further divisions to the extent that all of the earth's diversity can be attributed to one of these first energies. In his introduction to *Chine. La Grande Statuaire*, Postel writes extensively of Segalen's sensitivity to Chinese aesthetic theory and its categories. The first of his four framing categories is monumentality, comprised of force and movement. All three of these categories—monumentality, force, and movement—can be traced, then, to categories of traditional Chinese aesthetics.²³⁹ The inter-relational quality of monumentality that Segalen attributes to Chinese sculptures includes the human and the natural as joint, related (or relational) elements: "Les rapports d'élégance et d'harmonie doivent donc se considérer non seulement dans l'individualité du bloc sculpté, mais dans la juxtaposition de celui-ci, soit à une autre bloc sculpté, soit à tout le décor [et] même au cadre naturel de l'œuvre humaine: aux montagnes environnantes" [Elegance and harmony must be considered not only in the sculpture by itself but also in its juxtaposition against another sculpture or all of its surroundings and even to the natural frame to the human work: the surrounding mountains].²⁴⁰ Here, then, we see that the description of a sculpture, as per generalized Taoist philosophy and aesthetic, is not limited to the sculpture itself, but must include a larger frame of reference that exceeds the art object itself.

Difficult to parse immediately within a Taoist/Chinese aesthetics would be a stable or singular theory of words. In fact, scholars note that Taoist philosophy does not have a unified and consistent theory of the sign, seeing as how it directed "its foremost energies to questions of ethics and politics."²⁴¹ This interest provides no initial "rhetorical

²³⁹ Postel, introduction to *Chine*, 24.

²⁴⁰ Victor Segalen, *Chine. La Grande Statuaire*, in *Œuvres critiques*, vol. 3., ed. Philippe Postel (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011), 60.

²⁴¹ Daniel Fried, "What's in a *Dao*?: Ontology and Semiotics in Laozi and Zhuangzi," *Dao* 11 (2012): 420.

framework in which questions of ontology could even be clearly asked” (ibid.). Nevertheless, Daniel Fried writes, the “*dao* is fundamentally incompatible with language” (ibid.). In Taoism, language does not lead to reality, but rather it leads away from the *dao*, as a life force worthy of embodiment. The “*dao* [is] covered completely by language,” Fried writes, “and reveal[s] nothing of itself through that medium [...]” (427).²⁴² Early Taoism, such as that recorded in the *Tao Te Ching*, expresses supreme skepticism about the ends of language. Its basic attitude is that “we should resist [...] language” since this produces an “arbitrary way of making distinctions [which then] constrains our natural spontaneity and creates new, disruptive and usually competitive desires.”²⁴³

Equipée expresses a Tao-like skepticism of words, which are described in negative terms, from “imponderable” and “empty” to being unable to capture the essence of life. Dreaming of the envisioned trip, the narrator has been only a “conjureur de ces matériaux impondérables et gonflants, les mots” [conjuror of these imponderable and empty materials—words].²⁴⁴ In the imagination, words have reality in their “harmonie intime” [intimate harmony], but in the material circumstances of the world, words are pressed into finding “leur justification dans le résultat, dans le fait” [their justification in results, in materiality] (ibid.). Segalen describes language as being potentially hollow, and certainly subject to the verification of the physical world and the test of veracity of the physical journey. Maps—visual signs on par with language—forecast experience by

²⁴² As difficult as it is to reconstruct a single semiotics common to all Taoism, so too is the case with Buddhism. However, the similarities and differences between the two are instructive. The fourth-century *The Ornament of the Scriptures of the Great Vehicle*, one important Buddhist text, all phenomena are considered conceptual constructions. Hence, since there are no real objects, signs can refer to nothing, and “semiosis is itself understood to be one of the fundamental barriers [...] to awakening [...]” Mario D’Amato, “The semiotics of signlessness: A Buddhist doctrine of signs,” *Semiotica* 147 (2003): 200-1. In both examples, languages and sign systems are obfuscators and impediments to grasping metaphysical reality.

²⁴³ “Philosophy of Language in Classical China,” philosophy.hku.hk/ch/lang.html.

²⁴⁴ Segalen, *Equipée*, 19.

denoting the landforms through which a person must pass, but “derrière ces signes figurés [...] il me faudra deviner ce qui se trouve très réellement en volumes, en pierre et en terre, en montagnes et eaux [...]” [behind these figurative signs ... it is necessary to guess what is found very really in volumes—in stone and in earth, in mountains and in water].²⁴⁵ Words are impediments to the multidimensional Real that only physical experience and affective perception together can yield.

Here, Segalen is skeptical of language’s ability to reach the cosmological reality of Taoism. Joël Thoraval writes that Taoist cosmology holds implicitly to how “la sagesse s’adresse autant au ‘physique’ que ‘métaphysique’” [wisdom is as much about the ‘physical’ as the ‘metaphysical’] and that it is by “l’exercice portant sur le mental et le somatique que l’adhésion à la ‘voie’ [du Dao] peut être effectivement réalisée” [the exercise of the mental as well as the somatic that the adherence to the ‘way’ can be effectively realized].²⁴⁶ If the Tao is ultimately beyond words, it is not beyond the ability of humans to perceive it. The sense of a double journey in *Equipée*—“ce texte au jeu double” [this text at double play]²⁴⁷—relies upon a Taoist cosmological perspective that underwrites the binary complements of language and materiality; the imagination and physicality; a “way” that is both spiritual and physical. Indeed, as the word “dao” in ancient Chinese literature could mean walking, Anne Cheng points out that in Taoism, “l’important n’est pas tant d’atteindre le but que de savoir marcher” [the important thing is not so much to achieve an end so much as to learn to walk].²⁴⁸ As Segalen suggests through this text, you must go out and walk the road. “Je suis en route” [I have started

²⁴⁵ Segalen, *Equipée*, 21.

²⁴⁶ Joël Thoraval, “Sur la transformation de la pensée néo-confucéenne en discours philosophique moderne. Réflexions sur quelques apories du néo-confucianisme contemporain,” *Extrême Orient-Extrême Occident* 27 (2005): 101.

²⁴⁷ Segalen, *Equipée*, 104.

²⁴⁸ Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997), 35.

the journey],²⁴⁹ Segalen writes, and in that the realities of mind and body can be allowed to intermingle.

Defending the absence of landscape description in his “double” travelogue, Segalen writes of the problem of words in tasks of description. Again, the problem refers to the challenge that lived life—the physical, material conditions of life—presents to words, or other “figures,” fixed on the page. Segalen critiques the regulation of description by literary traditions and generic conventions. His passing criticism above of travel narratives is now unveiled more fully. “Le genre est facile” [It is an easy genre], he writes. The writer well acquainted with the literary tradition has already a bevy of examples that provide the easy means of description: “[L]’abondance même de ce qu’on a lu permet de passer facilement du souvenir visuel au ‘mot qui fait image’” [The very abundance of what one has read allows [the writer] to pass easily from visual memory to ‘the word that makes the image’] (103). It is the reproduction of generic forms of description; it is a literary world, not the world beyond the page. He explains that the lack of landscape description in his book is due to how experience overturns preconceptions, illusions of the mind linked to literary inheritance. That is, the lack of landscape descriptions is due to the indescribability of the world outside of the rote conventions of language and literature: “[J]’ai vu des étendues pleines d’espace, de dessins, de plans colorés, et d’autres choses, indicibles avec des mots” [I saw long stretches full of space, of curves, of color palettes, and of other things, indescribable in words] (104).

Chad Hansen characterizes the period in which the *Tao Te Ching* (fourth century BC) was written as the “antilanguage” period of Taoism.²⁵⁰ Its skepticism of language is integral to *Equipée* and forms its philosophical and aesthetic foundation. The *Tao Te*

²⁴⁹ Segalen, *Equipée*, 22.

²⁵⁰ Hansen argues against the notion of Taoism as being “anti-rational mysticism” and seeks to characterize the entire tradition as being concerned with logic. This reading makes Lao Tzu a logician more than a metaphysician. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26.

Ching begins, “The tao that can be told / is not the eternal Tao” (Chapter 1). Again, the double journey that Segalen undertakes is the path on earthly roads but also the path toward spiritual perception. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the concept of the name is focused upon since the name functions in a theory of representation as the main demonstration of language’s ability to represent (re-present) the world. Yet names are not to be trusted, as the cosmological real—the Tao—lies beyond names, signs, figures, and language: “The unnamable is the eternally real” (Chapter 1); “Seamless, unnamable, / it returns to the realm of nothing” (Chapter 14); “A good scientist has freed himself of concepts / and keeps his mind open to what is” (Chapter 27); “If you treat it like an object, you’ll lose it” (Chapter 29); “When you have names and forms, / know that they are provisional” (Chapter 32); “All things end in the Tao / as all rivers flow into the sea” (Chapter 32).²⁵¹ Naming, thus, is only ever “provisional.”²⁵²

Looking back upon Segalen’s language when describing above the qualities of the new landscapes that he has witnessed, we see that there is a marked absence of quasi-scientific particularity. Instead, he retreats into metaphors that, were they presented in a more conventional setting, would actually seem to prove the failure of Segalen’s techniques: “dessin” [drawing] and “plan” [map], were they being referred to as literal objects, are part of the sign system that he wants to avoid—figures of

²⁵¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992). This edition has no page numbers; I cite by chapter.

²⁵² *Stèles* deals more directly with the problem of language as being that of names. “Nom Caché,” the last poem in the 1916 limited-edition publication in China of *Stèles*, begins, “Le véritable Nom n’est pas celui qui dore les portiques, illustre les actes; ni que le peuple mâche de dépit” [The true Name is not the one that gilds porticos, illustrates acts; nor that the people chew in spite]. The poem’s second stanza reads, “Le véritable Nom n’est point lu dans le Palais même, ni aux jardins ni aux grottes, mais demeure caché par les eaux sous la voûte de l’aqueduc où je m’abreuve” [The true name is not to be read in the Palace, nor in the gardens, nor in the grottoes, but remains hidden by the waters under the vault of the aqueduct where I drink deep draughts]. *Stèles*. trans. and intro. Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush, foreword Haun Saussy (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 257. Christian Doumet comments on “Nom Caché,” the last “official” poem from *Stèles*, “C’est donc une théorie du signe qu’engage l’ultime poème ...” [It is, after all, a theory of the sign that the final poem centers upon] (293). *Stèles*. Intro. and notes Christian Doumet, rev. ed. (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), 293.

representation that precondition the traveler's expectations. Here, however, they are metaphors of general, almost abstract, quality. It is interesting, then, to consider the fact that metaphors are few in *Equipée*, but when they appear they are of this bland variety. In fact, in the last period of pre-imperial Taoist writing, the *I Ching* (late ninth century) allows the possibility of figurative language to be a functional bridge between the indescribable Tao and the need people have to attempt to describe it. Anne Cheng writes about that text's theory of language: "[L]e système figuratif qui s'élabore dans les *Mutations* fait fonction de médiateur entre le langage discursif et l'indicible" [The figurative system that the *I Ching* lays out proposes itself as a mediator between discursive language and the unspeakable].²⁵³ Figurative language is an end-around for the difficulty that the literary task of description presents. Segalen uses it in an interesting form above: as metaphorical language that does not indulge in the imagination to create wordy representations. Moreover, in the *I Ching*, the theory of the sign is not part of a theory of *representation* per se but it is seen as a part of an organic process of the object's emergence and of human recognition of it: "[L]a figure n'est pas la représentation ou la reproduction d'une chose, elle est un stade dans le processus de sa formation [...]" [figurative language is not the representation or the reproduction of a thing, it is a step in the process of [the object's] formation] (ibid.). Figurative language can potentially fill the breach between the unreachable, imperceptible Tao and the everyday routines of discursive language. Segalen uses symbols more than any other form of figurative language, transforming landforms into their cosmological doubles, transforming the rudiments of the journey, "la Sandale" [the Sandal] and "le Bâton" [the walking stick] (Chapter 12) into gestures toward the cosmological beyond.

Enmeshed Description

²⁵³ Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée*, 271.

In Segalen's descriptions in *Equipée*, there is also a noted quality of enmeshing that Segalen calls "monumentality": humans and nature are subsumed in a idea of "live" space, "non pas un espace en tant que cadre abstrait, mais un espace animé par les Souffles vitaux" [not space as an abstract frame, but space animated by the Vital Breaths].²⁵⁴ In Taoism, François Cheng reminds us, an "Espace originel" [original Space] doubles in "l'espace de la terre" [the space of the earth] (ibid.). This bears out in *Equipée*, and it is preceded historically by how Segalen's travel notes for his 1909-1910 voyage show his knowledge of Chinese cosmology.

In his Chinese travel notes *Briques et Tuiles*, Segalen writes how landforms relate to the body of Pangu, the originator of the universe in Chinese mythology—the mythic "l'universel" [the universal]. The waters, "ces ruisseaux rouges" [these red streams], come from the "veines palpitantes de Pan-K'ou" [the palpitating veins of Pangu].²⁵⁵ The plains are "les flancs de Pan-K'ou," the mountains are "[c]es os du monde" [the bones of the world], the sky is the exhalation of Pangu who brings to the world "brouillards, nues et tempêtes mêlés—dans son dernier souffle" [fog, clouds and storms], (62), and forests are what decorates the "chevelure touffue" [bushy hair] of Pangu. Segalen asks rhetorically, "Pan-K'ou, en te changeant en l'Univers, aurais-tu regretté de vivre toi-même?" [Pangu, while you changed yourself into the Universe, would you have preferred to live for yourself?] (ibid.). Evident both in geomancy (*feng shui*)²⁵⁶ and in aesthetics, the principles arising from Original Space's vital energies are projected onto landforms. But in this cosmology, vital energies can be mixed, as well.

²⁵⁴ Cheng, *L'un vers l'autre*, 30.

²⁵⁵ Segalen, *Briques et Tuiles*, 61.

²⁵⁶ *Feng shui* can be defined as "telluric 'energy' [...] which concentrates in lines and pools according to geological and geographical conditions [and] can be conducted and altered by the strategic placement of palaces, walls, houses, wells, monuments, tombs, shrines [...]." David A. Mason, *Spirit of the Mountains* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1999), 148

Rivers and mountains represent opposing energies that can nevertheless cross their primary symbolic identification to create hybrid, inter-related energies: “Si la montagne est foncièrement Yang et le fleuve Yin, ils sont attirés cependant l’un par l’autre, et entretiennent un rapport de devenir réciproque” [If the mountain is fundamentally Yang and the river, Yin, they are nevertheless attracted to each other, and they hold a reciprocal relation of becoming].²⁵⁷ Crossing over each other illustrates the interlacing of the immanent forces of the universe: “[L]es montagnes sont des vagues figées et les vagues d’un fleuve ne sont autres que des montagnes à l’état liquide” [mountains are waves frozen in time, and the waves of the river are nothing if not mountains in liquid state] (ibid.). In fact, the two combine to form the Chinese word for landscape: “*chanchouei* [...] Montagnes et Eaux” [Mountains and Waters].²⁵⁸ *Équipée*’s ninth chapter is dedicated to description of these landforms. The chapter begins, “Le fleuve dispute à la montagne d’avoir inspiré tant de poètes [...]” [The river is arguing with the mountain about which has inspired more poets].²⁵⁹ The river is sanctioned as the rival of the mountain, as each represents a different quality of nature: each has “son existence symbolique et sa personnalité” [its symbolic existence and its personality] (ibid.) as two of the “grands Eléments naturels” [basic Elements of Nature] (39).

In *Équipée*, the principles of Taoist cosmology structure the possibilities of description. Observational techniques themselves are determined by this theory of the sign: instead of observing an infinity of minutia, the observer tries to delineate how the objects of the world exude the principles of natural energy held within them. Their surfaces are, to a certain extent, superficial. Cosmological paradigms—and their symbols—reign. Segalen compares the Yellow and Blue (Yangzi) Rivers, noting how

²⁵⁷ Cheng, *L’un vers l’autre*, 32.

²⁵⁸ Segalen, *Voyage au pays du réel*, 70.

²⁵⁹ Segalen, *Équipée*, 36.

they separate from a common source in a hundred-mile stretch of mountains of central China. The Yellow turns “furieusement au nord, vers la Mongolie sibérienne” where in time it will nourish and water “les chevaux fougueux et puissants de la Grande Millénaire” [furiously to the north, toward Siberian Mongolia] only to finally peter out in “la mer Jaune” [The Yellow Sea] or “le golfe du Tche-li” [the Gulf of Bohai] (40). The calm Yangzi, by contrast, flows slowly to the tropics, a mercantile river, commodious, fit for ports, barges, boats, and “la proxénétisme marchand des villes à gros gains” [the mercantile pimping of wealthy cities] (ibid.).

These symbolic qualities do not mean that rivers, or any element of nature, is abstract or overly intellectualized. Rivers are experienced as vital, living forces. Segalen describes a experience navigating rapids, which are treacherous for hydrological and geological reasons when “le lit [du fleuve] étranglé se soulève, forme seuil et goulot plus étroit” [the suffocating riverbed rises up into a bottleneck] (41). But within a Taoist cosmology they also have the symbolic feature of being a crossing of male and female potentialities, of “éléments paradoxaux” [paradoxical elements] (ibid.) that create “contrecourants” [cross-currents] (42). The water is now more easily seen as being alive—“d’eau vive” [alive water]; experience enlivens in “l’expérience vive” [live experience] (ibid.). Nature, alive, is in movement: “Il y a tout cela, tous ces mouvements, et la communication directe des mouvements” [There is all of this, all these movements, and the direct communication of movements] (ibid.).

The narrator locates himself in the Sin-t’an rapids. The human is subsumed within the living forces of nature because “le rapport entre l’Homme et la Nature [est] un rapport de participation impliquant la complémentarité et la circularité” [the relation between the Human and Nature is that of participation, which suggests complementarity

and circularity].²⁶⁰ The scene begins with the description of three types of boats: the “jonque” [junk], the “sampan” [ship with three sails] and the “woupan” [ship with five “planks”]. The narrator and his companions transfer to a *woupan* with a crew of three, “pompeusement vêtu d’uniformes bleus à festons rouges” [ostentatiously dressed in blue uniforms with white ribbons] (44). As they approach the rapids, the captain of the ship happens to blind himself while mixing gunpowder. The narrator is thrust into the role of captain and chief navigator. A complicated nautical explanation of the *woupan*’s tiller—a “sao”—follows:

Le ‘sao’, son nom l’indique, balaie le fleuve, et c’est un admirable instrument. La traduction ‘godille’ est fautive, puisque le ‘sao’ n’aide pas à la propulsion, mais gouverne. Le mot gouvernail, ou ‘aviron de queue’, est insuffisant, car il est plus fort, plus équilibré par le caillou ficelé près du manche, plus long, plus énergique, plus sensible enfin que cet instrument. (45)

[The *sao*, as its name indicates, sweeps through the river, and it is an remarkable instrument. The translation ‘scull’ is not correct, since the *sao* does not propel the boat, it governs it. The word ‘rudder’, or the ‘rear oar,’ is insufficient, because it is stronger than that, more balanced than that, due to the rock hung by a rope nearby the shaft, longer, more energetic, with more touch than that instrument.]

This description by itself is remarkable for its knowledgeable explanation of the unique physical reality of the Chinese *woupan*. In their approach of the rapids, the narrator, then, recounts the rising tension: “Je suis donc debout, ‘au sao.’ [Je] ne vais rien perdre de tous les mouvements frémissants du fleuve. La ‘peau du fleuve’ ne frétille point, le

²⁶⁰ Cheng, *L’un vers l’autre*, 35.

fleuve sous le ventre du *wou-pan* ne se musclera point que je n'aie senti avant lui, au friselis léger de sa peau [...] [So I am standing at the *sao*. I will not lose track of any of the river's pulsating movements. The "skin of the river" will not quiver, the river beneath the belly of the *wou-pan* will not push and pull before I have felt it in the light shuddering of its skin] (ibid.).

The tension is due in part to the opposing forces: the river's naturally languid female quality, "le femelle abandon de tout son corps à quelque chose de plus grande que soi" [the female abandonment to all that is bigger than oneself] (38)—exists in the river rushing to the sea; and then the geological tightening, the male element, the reminder that a river runs across rocks, "the bones of the world." The scene describes the feeling of the female quality of the river that "par son existence fluidique, ordonnée, contenue, donnant l'impression de la Cause, du Désir" [with its fluid, disciplined, restrained existence, giving the impression of both Cause and Desire] (37). The river is fluid; mountains—stones—are stationary. But in the rapids, as Cheng reminds us, the co-existence of the two elements intermix: the stones become put in motion, the river starts to shudder.

The scene's climax takes place with the ship's near wreckage in the rapids, and the narrator's instinctive and logically inexplicable nautical impulse that saves the ship at the moment of fateful decision. The scene reaches its tense apex as the narrator barely manages to save himself, his companions, and the boat. What lesson is learned through this experience is interesting: "[J]'ai 'compris' que réciter l'apparis était la mort, qu'il fallait brusquer, inventer, même au prix d'une autre mort. Le passage était invisible, mais je jure avoir pressenti quelque chose [...] qu'il y avait mieux et plus inconnu à faire ..." [I understood that to invoke the known was death, that I had to risk something, to invent, even at the price of another death. The way through was unknown, but I swear I felt something ... there was something better and more unknown to do] (48). This passage

serves as commentary upon Segalen's own experiments in literary description: one must leave behind the tried and true, the known and overly known, in order to take on a risk that might be life-saving. In the Chinese oeuvre, Segalen does not merely intuit the right way through—the passage through the challenge of the rapids, improvising in concert with the local conditions; he also applies knowledge, half-hidden beneath the textual surface, to effect literary ends that give evidence to a new means of constructing descriptions that are enriched with another way of thinking—a way beyond the platitudes of the European colonial, exotic.

Part III. Conclusion

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in his introduction to *Les Philosophes célèbres* (1956) about how Western philosophers traditionally denigrated Chinese and Indian philosophy as being not sufficiently rigorous to be accredited with the term. Instead of “dominat[ing] existence,” as he says Western philosophers have tried to do, “Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried [...] to be the echo or the sounding board of our relationship to being.”²⁶¹ Not only does he say that Chinese and Indian philosophy must be given their due, but “Western philosophy can learn from them to rediscover the relationship to being [and] to estimate the possibilities we have shut ourselves off from [...]” (ibid.). In response to these comments, one can only nod in general agreement, and be chagrined that such a statement would have to be uttered again so late in history. Yet Merleau-Ponty's remarks do not end the problem of applying the term “philosophy” to the thought systems of the pre-modern and non-European worlds.²⁶² Not only is the term

²⁶¹ Quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Everywhere and Nowhere,” in *Signs*, trans. and intro. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 139.

²⁶² They also elide the fact that European Enlightenment philosophers did readily accredit Chinese philosophy. Anne Cheng, “‘La philosophie chinoise’ en Chine,” in *La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui*, ed. Anne Cheng (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 160.

“philosophy” contested among philosophers—for example, in the split between analytic and continental philosophy—but the ambiguity of the word and its systems of thought began, as Geoffrey Lloyd argues, as far back as the “discipline’s” very beginnings with the Greeks.²⁶³ Applying the word to the non-European world, then, comes necessarily with caveats and inaccuracies.

Vincent Goossaert defines modernity as “à la fois comme processus de globalisation économique et politique, et comme idéologie de progrès [qui] s’est caractérisée en Chine comme en d’autres pays par l’imposition de nouvelles catégories (religion, philosophie, science, art...) d’origine occidentale et la réorganisation des savoirs et des pratiques en fonction de ces catégories” [at once a process of economic and political globalization, and an ideology of progress that was characterized in China as elsewhere by the imposition of new, Western categories (religion, philosophy, science, art...) and by the reorganization of knowledge and practices as a result of these categories].²⁶⁴ In reference to this history, Segalen must be called anti-modernist as much as an anti-imperialist for the way that he wishes to elide these superimpositions and to perform a restructuring of description in French literature through non-Western sign systems.²⁶⁵ In fact, Segalen himself raised in *Briques et Tuiles* the question that Merleau-Ponty’s statement shows in less obvious guise, namely, are the categories of Western knowledge adaptable enough to reflect the existence and value of non-Western societies, their systems of thought, and their aesthetic invention? Segalen’s literary

²⁶³ Geoffrey Lloyd, “‘Philosophy’” what did the Greeks invent and is it relevant to China?” *Extrême-Orient Extrême Occident* 27 (2005): 151-8.

²⁶⁴ Vincent Goossaert, “L’invention des ‘religions’ en Chine modern,” in *La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui*, ed. Anne Cheng (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 185.

²⁶⁵ Haun Saussy writes that the West used China for devising its forms of modernism and vice versa, as “the literary exchanges between China and the West in the twentieth century are based on mutual misrecognition [...]” Foreword to *Stèles* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), xix. I read Segalen as an eccentric writer, and the conscious appropriation that Saussy suggests seems uncertain in Segalen’s case.

attempts to recreate sign systems of Tahitian and Chinese cultures are less problematic than efforts in discourses that aspire toward totality, universalism, absolute rigor, and science: literature, then, has a unique subject position through which the taxonomical categories of culture and identity can be constantly subjected to questioning.

Segalen's open-ended yet profound question about what goal European social scientists have when they record, classify, and categorize non-European cultures is echoed by Merleau-Ponty who questions how much "even this expatriate eye of ours can be trusted" when "the will to go abroad itself has its personal motives, which may distort the evidence."²⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty held hopes that increased and extended anthropological fieldwork outside of France would clarify for French researchers their own subject positions. He does not argue that social science should be turned into literature, but that anthropology's "uncertainty ends only if the man who speaks of man does not wear a mask himself" (ibid.). Today, however, there is little illusion that social science can shed the "uncertainty" whose presence impedes the construction of universal knowledge; quite the opposite, it is through the contingencies of "uncertainty," "l'inquiétude" [uneasiness], and "feelingful experience" that ethnographers now orient their methods and express their findings.²⁶⁷

Colonial anthropology and turn-of-the century literature provided enmeshed yet increasingly opposing paradigms for describing the non-European world. But for writers trying to describe the world and its cultures, literature has the advantage that it does not claim to be true, or to present the truth in its totality. In *Les immémoriaux*, Segalen's

²⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 120.

²⁶⁷ Didier Fassin collects essays on the status of ethnographic practice around the virtue of uneasiness. Didier Fassin, introduction to *Les politiques de l'enquête: épreuves ethnographiques*, ed. Didier Fassin and Alban Bensa (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 7-15. Steven Feld uses the term "feelingful experience" to transcend the overly logocentric and distanced methods of modern anthropology. *Sound and sentiment: birds, weeping, poetics, and song in Kaluli expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 113.

description of Tahitian culture through that culture's own rubrics provides one type of resistance to the imperial thrust of Western categories of knowledge. If ethnography in the second half of the twentieth century would abandon "les certitudes structuralistes pour prendre au sérieux les catégories indigènes" [structuralist certitudes in order to take seriously indigenous categories],²⁶⁸ we can see that Segalen may have got there first. His Chinese oeuvre offers another type of resistance to the Western system of the sign and its templates of secular, scientific naming. In the Taoist cosmology that he superimposes upon the French travelogue, Segalen builds systems of representation that begin with an "indigenous" epistemology and aesthetics, deploys these through particular observational foci and techniques, and then renders these visible through textual descriptive surfaces. In Segalen's work, we see a "hypothesis of literary bent," which, though as flawed as it may well be, is preferable to the imperial logic of the Western modern sign and its imperative toward universalized knowledge. In both cases, description as a literary act changes in nature. In *Les immémoriaux*, description becomes an instantiation of the world—a physical act as much as anything in which the word has a material reality beyond any value attributed to language of a theory of representation. In the grounding Taoist cosmology that characterizes *Equipée*, the observational task inherent in description encourages a principled symbolic reading of nature, and turns attention to the human and natural as being subjected to and constituted through the same cosmological forces.

Segalen wondered about the ends of world travel. From 1917 onward, the end of world travel was all but a reality: just as the possibility of unimpeded world travel was sighted on the horizon, the possibility of the existential journey without end across space was extinguished: "Le Divers décroît. Là est le grand danger terrestre. C'est donc contre

²⁶⁸ Florence Weber, introduction to *Essai sur le don*, by Marcel Mauss (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 10.

cette déchéance qu'il faut lutter [...] [Diversity shrinks. That is the great earthly danger. It is against this decay that we must fight].²⁶⁹ Segalen's words forecast Lévi-Strauss' prognosis in *Tristes Tropiques* where he laments the contemporary reality that "[l]humanité s'installe dans la monoculture; elle s'apprête à produire la civilisation en masse [...]" [humanity has spread in monoculture; it begins to produce civilization en masse].²⁷⁰ Segalen attempts to find a way out of the stylistic clichés of his time in regard to travel writing and the language of the exotic, but also the epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical limitations of Eurocentric thinking in its literary and anthropological dimensions. If we are condemned to a future of monoculture, in which international travel is so banal that the existential, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of the "voyage" are entirely lost upon us, and if that future was already written through the insight of Segalen's pen, then at this moment of early awareness of a future without end, Segalen tried to do what few since him have tried—to write into the French literary tradition a non-European sign system, through which are fostered the epistemological, aesthetic, ethical qualities of difference, as well as the descriptive textures through which this difference can be apperceived.

²⁶⁹ Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 95.

²⁷⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 36-7.

CHAPTER THREE

André Gide's African Travelogues and the Paradoxes of Description

Je ne vous y promets pas d'extraordinaires aventures; vous n'y trouverez point le charme du désert ni celui d'Islam qui vous a tout séduit. Mais il a de la ligne et de la couleur. Quand vous l'avez un peu parcouru, vous avez, je crois, du vertu africain primitif une vue très exacte et très pure. Ce n'est point le bled, ce n'est point la forêt, mais une lande, boisée par endroits de grands arbres, arrosée de beaux fleuves, habitée par une race splendide et nue que notre civilisation occidentale n'a pas encore salie.²⁷¹

[I do not promise extraordinary adventures; you will not find the charm of the desert or that of Islam, which has seduced everyone. But there is contour and color. When you have traveled here a little, you gain, I believe, a very exact and pure view of primitive Africa. It's not the North African village, it is not the forest, but it is a land, wooded in places with large trees, watered by beautiful rivers, inhabited by a splendid naked race that our Western civilization has not yet sullied.]

On January 16, 1925, Marcel de Coppet, a French colonial officer stationed at Fort Archambault near Lake Chad, wrote to André Gide about his upcoming visit. Through their mutual friend Roger Martin du Gard, Gide had met Coppet in Paris in 1920. The fact that Coppet had been stationed at Fort Archambault for four years by the time that Gide and Marc Allégret began to plan their trip to Africa provided the traveling duo with a natural turn-around point for their voyage through French Equatorial Africa. Coppet

²⁷¹ Marcel de Coppet, Letter to André Gide, 16 Jan 1925, Accession # Y228-3 (Paris: Bibliothèque littéraire de Jacques Doucet).

writes ahead to his new friend that there will not be adventures; at Fort Archambault, there will also not be “charming” desert scenes or those of Islam, the staples of late nineteenth-century Orientalist representations of Africa and the Middle East. Instead of these classic exotic scenes, Gide would be able to witness the “real” Africa, primitive Africa, that Africa inhabited by a “splendid naked race” that existed beyond the sullyng touch of Western civilization. This is the vision of Africa that elicits the name Congo as a blanket term meant to describe sub-Saharan Africa—black Africa—as a primal zone of origin, originality, and infrangible authenticity, available still for discovery to the intrepid European traveler. In short, this is Africanist discourse, which also happens to be the primary lens through which Gide’s African travelogues have been read since the advent of postcolonial studies.²⁷²

Coppet’s letter is remarkable evidence of the thinking of the time, as well as the literary style of which Gide himself might stand as the best representative—a style that increasingly would come to stand for the best and worst of the French tradition, elegant and formal, contemplative and yet displaying a racial, if not racist, worldview. Coppet’s letter shows us the blurred line dividing descriptions of nature with descriptions of people and culture. *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and *Le Retour du Tchad* (1928)²⁷³—the one charting the course to Fort Lamy, and the next, the return to the coast—reveal both the continuity and the discontinuity of textual histories that determine description as a textual surface. In particular, the first book shows in its beginnings the traditions of thinking and representation that characterize a premodern, exotic form of naturalist narration, and,

²⁷² James Clifford notes that the term “Africanism” came into circulation following the creation of the *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* in 1931. See *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 61. Christopher L. Miller coined the term “Africanist” in the context of French academic studies to describe how nineteenth-century French discourse typified Africa as a zone of pre-civilized primitive originality. See Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Edward Said helped popularize the term in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

²⁷³ André Gide, *Voyage au Congo suivi de Le retour du Tchad* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

then, quickly, a rupture intervenes whereby a new tradition only partially limned—a scientific tradition of representation—becomes evident in the books' descriptions.

The status of ethnographic description is of consequence to this change in ethos in the double book's descriptive textures because Gide's rise in consciousness about the travails and suffering of African peoples subjected to French colonialism propels forward the change in description in these books. The new awareness of African peoples as not only real and on par in their reality with his own means that they come to foreground of his narrative as actors, agents, and subjects of representation; nature, correspondingly, is relegated to the background, or the setting, in which people exist and act.²⁷⁴ Gide makes foregrounding people an end in itself: people are "studied" with new observational practices and heightened attention. Description, seen as act of textualization, then comes to be more than a writerly, aesthetic task; it also formalizes and supplies the evidence of these forms of attention and of practice. Ethnographic description, then, viewed as a surface phenomenon of rendering a worldview visible, must be thought of part of a multi-faceted system of descriptive practices.

In sub-Saharan Africa, description presents challenges to Gide. These challenges are ones particular to the task at hand—describing his experiences and perceptions in Africa. But they also return him to one basic problem for all literary writing. If we take literature to be that form of writing that attempts to put into words the experiences of life in all of its dimensions and variety, then ultimately literature aims to do the unthinkable, to articulate the indescribable—to go beyond the pedestrian, quotidian dimensions of life to touch something essential, if only partially sensed and little understood. The question arises: how do you describe what you do not understand?

²⁷⁴ This reading would contradict Foucault's belief about the importance of anthropology: for him, its interest lay in exceeding the details of the individual for the bond inherent in society between nature and culture. But Gide was by no means beholden to Foucault's 1960's obsessions with the forms of structuralism. See Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 391.

For Gide, that question is doubly pertinent as, soon after arriving in sub-Saharan Africa, he finds himself at a loss for words, realizing that the difference of life in its simplest details—the physical things around him—makes describing them of an entirely different order of difficulty. What words do you use when the words you have used to describe the world are no longer sufficient to the properness, the particularity, of the new world you see? How do you perceive landscape and people when they do not seem governed by the aesthetic regime that you have imposed on all landscapes and people previously?

There is some surprise to find these questions being posed by someone as central to the French metropolitan tradition as Gide, and not only posed, but presented in complicated ways that disavow easy resolution. The uncertain intellectual moorings of his long-awaited colonial adventure, the flexible textual space of the genre of the travel narrative, and Gide's intuitive yet rigorous desire for descriptive accuracy—tied to his growing desire to speak on the behalf of oppressed African colonial subjects—leads him to important aesthetic innovations. He breaks partially with a belles-lettristic tradition whose undergirding epistemology can no longer match the organization of life in Africa. In the place of what I call the “tableau,” or the traditional belles-lettristic description emphasizing an aesthetic image or picture, the form of the quasi-scientific, objective note arises in his attempts to put down in words the reality before him. Gide's desire to shape representations that exceed a merely transcriptional accuracy makes the note form aesthetic, as well: it signals the emergence of a new type of description capable of greater ethical circumspection than the descriptive traditions before him.

The first part of this chapter will put into context Gide's travelogues from the vantage of Gide's own statements about his voyage. These statements will help build the context for my argument about how Gide's descriptions increasingly deviate from tradition. Gide's statements show that the double books are largely free of single-minded, or arbitrarily pronounced, textual or literary goals. The second part presents the contrast

of the tableau and the note and their epistemological difference. It will briefly trace the overlap of natural history and ethnographic descriptive traditions, and I will document the emergence of the note under the pressure of ethnographic realism. Lastly, I will argue that the sort of objectivity that emerges in the contrasts of Gide's descriptive forms speaks to the literary end of lucidity, which exceeds a simplistic paradigm of objectivity and subjectivity. In the last instance, I also argue that we must expand our understanding of Gide's trip to think of it as a type of joint fieldwork expedition in which the artistic output of his traveling companion Marc Allégret is viewed as integral to the travelling team's overall production. Allégret's film "Voyage au Congo" (1927) and his belatedly published travelogue *Carnets du Congo, Voyage avec Gide* (1987) provide important and contrastive details and, read integrally with Gide's texts, show the team's overall preoccupation with ethnography, or the description of people and culture through increasingly scientific parameters.²⁷⁵ In sum, this chapter asks us to consider Gide's *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*, two texts not normally read for their similarity to the ethnographic monograph and its descriptive practices, as not only liminal examples of such but also as texts that point in their paradoxes to the challenge of textual practices that aim to combine ethnography and aesthetics through a literary paradigm.

Part I. Uncertain Design, Open Form

Gide's double book oscillates between Gide's remarks about the circumstances of the traveling team's progress through sub-Saharan Africa and his notes about his reading, brought with him from France. The objects of observation toggle between those of the natural world and the human world. Most importantly, though, the descriptive style is

²⁷⁵ Marc Allégret, "Voyage au Congo," 1927; Marc Allégret, *Carnets du Congo: Voyage avec Gide*, introduction by Daniel Durosay (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1987).

heterogeneous, lacking the consistency and polish that Gide's texts generally evince and that assert his consolidated literary style. The texts also include the author's brief reflections on his unexpected uncertainty of purpose, and the double book can be read as well as his protracted, almost subconscious, attempts at pinpointing the reason for his trip. In fact, my reading presents these two aspects in tandem: his uncertainty of purpose on both the personal and the literary levels allows a writing practice to emerge organically in which the task of description takes on an experimental dimension.

The very first paragraph of *Voyage au Congo* suggests an uncertainty of purpose. Gide describes the feeling of boat travel on the open seas: "Indicible langueur. Heures sans contenu ni contour" [Unspeakable languor. Hours without content or contour].²⁷⁶ These words reflect his state of mind at the beginning of the trip. They represent the open-ended mentality that would shortly free him to experiment with new descriptive and formal possibilities. Looking over his co-travelers, Gide categorizes them as French colonial administrators or businessmen; he notes the oddity of his status as a pleasure traveler amid such a crowd: "Compagnons de traverse: administrateurs et commerçants. Je crois bien que nous sommes les seuls à voyager 'pour le plaisir'" [Traveling companions: administrators and businessmen. It is quite clear that we are the only ones who are traveling 'for pleasure'] (13). The category of pleasure travelers describes them as existing outside the typical categories of the times. In the rubric of colonial administration and the imperial economy, a "pleasure trip" indicates the formless, unprecedented endeavor they had embarked upon.

If Victor Segalen, a more seasoned traveler than Gide, writes in *Equipée* (1916) that all travel needs a good plan to set it in motion,²⁷⁷ such good advice does not seem

²⁷⁶ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 13.

²⁷⁷ Segalen writes, "Ce n'est point au hasard que doit se dessiner le voyage" [It is not randomly that a voyage must be sketched out]. Segalen, *Equipée* [1916] (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 14.

to worry Gide. Rather, a set of motivating factors can be seen, both ones propelling him to leave France and others drawing him to sub-Saharan Africa. According to Gabriel Michaud, Gide, at fifty-six, was beginning to feel the first onslaught of old age.²⁷⁸ On January 23, 1925, Gide writes in his diary about his state of mind and health, “Sans force, sans appétit, sans joie. –Très loin du ciel, et même simplement, de la terre” [Without energy, without appetite, without joy. –Very far from the heavens, and, just as much, from the earth].²⁷⁹ {FT} He hopes that his voyage would revive his spirits, and yet this hope seems to flag near the end of May: “Morne pensum, mais qui convient à mon apathie. Je ne compte plus que sur le Congo pour m’en sortir. La préparation de ce voyage et l’attente des pays nouveaux a désenchanté le présent” [Morbid thoughts, which match my apathy. I no longer expect that the Congo will serve to free me from them. The preparations for the trip and the waiting for new lands have made the present tiresome] (806). Thus, tired of brooding over the intricate details of *Les faux-monnayeurs*, which he would complete on June 8th, a little more than a month before their departure for French Equatorial Africa; having been obsessed for decades by the idea of returning to Africa; hoping to take advantage of what he thought of as perhaps his last chance to embark on a vast African adventure into “the heart of darkness”; and having received an invitation from Coppet, Gide sets off with Allégret in tow, as physical and emotional bulwark against the challenges he was to face.

Scholars have pointed out that Africa represented to Gide something like a free zone for homosexual pedophilic desires, ever since he met Oscar Wilde in Algiers in 1895, a trip during which he had his first African sexual adventures.²⁸⁰ This hypothesis

²⁷⁸ Gabriel Michaud, *Gide et l’Afrique* (Paris: Scorpion, 1961), 81.

²⁷⁹ André Gide, *Journal, 1889-1939*, La Pléiade, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 803.

²⁸⁰ André Gide, *If It Die ... an autobiography* [1920], translated by Dorothy Bussy (New York: Vintage, 1957), 272-292.

deserves more attention here. Michaud writes that Oscar Wilde influenced Gide on the latter writer's second trip to Africa, when Gide began to see how Africa might fulfill more easily than France his desire for boys: "Chaque nouveau départ vers l'Afrique conduira Gide à la recherche de quelque aventure, homosexuelle" [Each new departure to Africa drove Gide to some homosexual adventure].²⁸¹ More specifically, the sexual license that he sought had as its object young boys: "Avant tout Gide est un homosexuel pédophile, dont le désir n'est éveillé que par des jeunes garçons sortis de l'enfance mais n'ayant pas encore subi les transformations de la puberté. Il préfère ceux qui sont dans la fleur de l'adolescence [...]" [In the end, Gide was a pedophile for whom desire was awoken only by young boys still undergoing the changes wrought by puberty] (42).

Yet despite what circumstantial evidence may exist, there is nothing to suggest that sex was a goal of Gide's trip with Allégret to sub-Saharan Africa. Though he and Allégret had been intimate companions since May 1917,²⁸² *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* offer no details of shared sexual activity. Searching the text for sexual thoughts about pubescent boys, we might be tempted to read his sad farewell to Adoum, one of the traveling team's two young assistants, as something more than amicably tender, but we have no proof of any sexual encounter. In fact, reading carefully Gide's separation from Adoum, we find that the emphasis lies not solely upon Gide's feelings for the boy but for how letting Adoum return home represents for Gide the team's failure of understanding the "beauty" and "value" of their African companions: "Il va falloir nous séparer d'Adoum. [...] Mais le cœur me manque à l'idée de me séparer de ce brave garçon. [...] À travers lui, je sens toute une humanité souffrante, une pauvre race opprimée, dont nous avons mal su comprendre la beauté, la valeur [...] que je voudrais pouvoir ne plus quitter" [We will have to let Adoum go. [...] But I'm heartbroken at the

²⁸¹ Michaud, *Gide et l'Afrique*, 41.

²⁸² Frank Lestringant, *André Gide L'inquisiteur* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011), 901.

idea of leaving this fine boy [...] Through him, I sense the suffering of a whole group of people, a poor oppressed race, whose beauty and value we have not been able to understand [...] and that I wish I could know forever.]²⁸³

In fact, *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* are completely without reference to sexual encounters, as well as what might be more loosely described as sexuality per se.²⁸⁴ In fact, all sexual references were emended due to the increasing interest Gide took in the politically critical dimensions of his manuscript. Daniel Durosay notes the importance of these excisions for Gide: “De manière générale, les suppressions effectuées par Gide à partir du manuscrit gomme les [...] confidences érotiques, qui risquaient de prêter le flanc à la critique” [In a general manner, the suppressions effected by Gide in the manuscript erased erotic confessions [...], which risked leaving himself open to critique].²⁸⁵ The act of suppressing any mention of sexuality speaks to the level of importance that Gide assigned to his manuscript’s potential to help remedy the colonial excesses he witnesses, or imagined for his own ability to intervene when back in France as a witness to these horrors. This ethical concern is central to these travel narratives, but, more so than that, following the lead of several scholars, I would like to underline how this ethical awareness is characteristic of aspects of Gide’s entire oeuvre. That is, we see in these double books once again the way that sexuality and ethics are intertwined: Gide’s struggles to recognize his homosexuality and to overcome what he would either call “le protestant puritan” [Puritanical Protestant] or “le christianisme” [Christian beliefs] lie as integral facets of his

²⁸³ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 399-400.

²⁸⁴ This is not true of Allégret’s travelogue. Sex is on Allégret’s mind while at Ft. Lamy, from January 26-30, 1926. See Allégret, *Carnets du Congo*, 174-6.

²⁸⁵ André Gide, *Souvenirs et Voyages*, edited by Durosay and Martine Sagaert (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2001), 1212.

socio-political and literary-aesthetic consciousness, the two developing in tandem.²⁸⁶ Ethics, for Gide, must arrive from a situation that exceeds a strictly ideological framework, such as the inheritance of religious dogma. As Frank Lestringant writes, explaining Gide's turn of mind after the personal success of *Si le grain ne meurt*, where Gide is able to turn aside the worst of his Puritanical moral claustrophobia: "C'est à chacun qu'il appartient de s'affranchir du carcan des dogmes et des morales convenues, pour refonder à partir de soi, de ses appétits ou de ses aspirations, sa propre éthique, irréductible à toute autre" [It is for each person to find their way clear of the shackles of dogmas and conventional morality, to find again their from own sense of self, appetites, and aspirations, their own form of ethics, unique to themselves] (892). Lestringant makes clear that Gide's career can be profitably read through the single lens of his being a "disturber" of conventionality, "un trouble-fête, un empêcheur de tourner en rond [...] celui qui empêche la société de s'endormir, en la provoquant" [a troublemaker, a disturber [...] someone who provokes society so as to keep it from falling asleep] (11).

Michael Lucey, too, argues for continuity in understanding Gide's writing career, stating that Gide's queer lifestyle was fundamental to his sense of politics: "Gide's texts refuse to separate personal expression from social thought, sexuality from politics [...]."²⁸⁷ Moreover, Lucey includes in sexuality and politics an aesthetic platform: "As Gide [...] would have it, then, the sexual and aesthetic advances [he was] striving should be considered inextricable."²⁸⁸ When analyzing Gide's African travelogues, Lucey writes about Gide's frequent sense of frustration, and how "every time that frustration is

²⁸⁶ Lestringant, *André Gide L'inquisiteur*, 892. Monique Nemer, *Cordyon Citoyen: Essai sur André Gide et l'homosexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 27.

²⁸⁷ Michael Lucey, *Gide's Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

²⁸⁸ Michel Lucey, "Practices of Posterity: Gide and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality," in *André Gide's Politics: Rebellion and Ambivalence*, ed. Tom Conner (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 56.

generated, one hears echoes on both a political and a personal plane, finally forcing us to consider that one of the characteristics of Gide's writing is to insist on a perception of these two planes as *having always been* inextricable" (170). Lucey writes against the narrative that Gide was preoccupied by sexual mores in the early decades of his life and that his political and more broadly social consciousness was born only through witnessing colonial abuses in French Equatorial Africa. Instead, he claims that Gide's efforts to free sexual mores from Victorian Puritanism are by themselves demonstrative of political investment. The elision of sexual references in *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* takes on added significance when we recall that Gide published *Corydon* (1924), the first piece of "coming out" literature, the year before he left for Africa.²⁸⁹ That is, we must put aside any thought that Gide was reluctant to mention homosexuality per se; instead, the absence speaks to how the text has other goals, such as the integrated and simultaneous task of ethical and aesthetic questioning and innovation.

It is true, however, that the political potential of the voyage reveals itself to Gide but gradually, and the first pages of *Voyage au Congo* are marked instead by Gide's doubts surrounding his reasons for traveling. Could a bourgeois French subject in 1925 realistically claim to travel "for pleasure" to French Equatorial Africa? It is a meaningless and ironic phrase. Its lack of real meaning becomes clearer in hindsight: after their return to Paris, Gide would write an article in the *Revue de Paris* in which he apes these words, only in reverse logic, stating, "one does not travel to the Congo for one's pleasure."²⁹⁰ Gide's search for the appropriate frame through which to view his travel appears time and again throughout the first third of the narrative. The ironic tone of the phrase

²⁸⁹ Nemer, *Corydon Citoyen*, 10.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in Walter Putnam, "Writing the Wrongs of French Colonial Africa: *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*," in *André Gide's Politics: Rebellion and Ambivalence*, ed. Tom Conner (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 97.

“pleasure seekers” modulates into uncertainty. On board the steamer “L’Asie,” Gide answers the question of what he is hoping to find in Africa with the bald statement, “J’attends d’être là-bas pour le savoir” [I wait to arrive in order to understand].²⁹¹ He imagines himself to be like Roman hero Marcus Curtius who throws himself into a chasm that spontaneously opens in the Forum in order to appease the gods of hell, thus saving Rome from ruin. Gide’s delusions of grandeur are legible in his flippant statement, but otherwise the comparison emphasizes the inevitability of his course of action, and how he feels compelled to travel to sub-Saharan Africa by a sort of “fatalité ineluctable” [ineluctable fatality] (ibid.)—which is to say, by a youthful dream that has captivated him for thirty-six years.

Once in Africa, he soon complains to himself that he has not been able to see the function of his traveling notes beyond serving the compunction, or compulsion, of a writer to always write. He laments upon the solipsism of the task, saying, “Je prends ces notes trop ‘pour moi’” [I write these notes too much ‘for me’] (30). This admission is followed by a subsequent one: he lacks the vocabulary to describe the novelty of Brazzaville. Consequently, the stupefaction that novelty produces leads him to conclude that he lacks the necessary precision (of familiarity, of knowledge) to perceive his surroundings:

[J]e m’aperçois que je n’ai pas décrit Brazzaville. Tout m’y charmait d’abord : la nouveauté du climat, de la lumière, des feuillages, des parfums, du chant des oiseaux, et de moi-même aussi parmi cela, de sorte que par excès d’étonnement, je ne trouvais plus rien à dire. Je ne savais le nom de rien. J’admirais indistinctement. On n’écrit pas bien dans l’ivresse. J’étais grisé. (ibid.)

²⁹¹ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 14.

[I see that I did not describe Brazzaville. It charmed me at first: the novelty of the climate, the light, the vegetation, the scents, the birdsong, and of finding myself there; by a sort of excessive of astonishment, I found that I had nothing to say. I did not know the name of anything. I admired vaguely. You cannot write well when drunk. I was drunk.]

Though he is yet to find the political engagement that would give him the reassurance of having some “real” purpose, he does understand that his writing should be at some level dedicated both to reality but also to description as a function of precise, and sober observation—and thus, to descriptions that reveal the climate, the light, the vegetation, the scents, and the songs of birds.

The tension between the psychological and lexical requirements of the descriptive task on the one hand, and the force of wonder and exhilaration on the other hand that renders that task all but impossible appears throughout the manuscript. Gide thinks that because of the uncertain design of his journey, or the fact that he is “voyageant en simple touriste” [traveling as a tourist], he is able to see and hear things that were he a governor, for instance, he would never notice (111). Certainly, a freedom from the mundane affair of endless handshaking allows him the time and latitude to note details. Yet up to the end of the manuscript, Gide struggles with the seeming impossibility of the task of description, which he believes central to his unfolding document’s ethos. On March 25, 1926, he writes, “Hier je me suis efforcé bien absurdement de décrire ce paysage” [Yesterday I absurdly forced myself to describe the landscape] (398). His entry on April 8, 1926 describes in detail the entourage of the sultan Reï Bouba. Yet Gide feels as though this entry has done little in reality, and he writes, “Inutile de continuer; ces descriptions ne font rien voir” [Useless to continue; these descriptions do not make anything visible] (439). In this case, astonishment is not

the cause of the problem. Instead, Gide depreciates the description's ability to fulfill its implicit aim of bringing to visual life a person or a place. Textualization is thus the focus of his disappointment: both the problem of representing details that are essentially foreign to the French reader (and to himself) and the difficulty of evoking the world through words.

Gide's doubts about description continue. On April 13, 1926, a sudden rainstorm raises the question again of the psychological and lexical forces constraining description: "Ineffable détente: de la pluie, un essai d'orage" [Ineffable lightening: rain, and then a thunderstorm] (455). Like the narrative's first word—"indicable" [indescribable]—here there is a feeling of release that, to Gide, is "ineffable." But why? The first shows the limits of perception or knowledge, and the second, the limits of language: to be ineffable is to be impossible to put into words; for words to fail as a mechanism for expressing the sensation of living itself. For Gide, these moments of affective paroxysm suspend the descriptive potential of writing. In the scene above, the season's first rainstorm leads to the growth of vegetal life that is "stupéfiante" [stupefying]. His experience in Africa amounts to an "[i]vresse de se trouver dans l'inconnu" [drunkenness at finding oneself in the unknown] (460). Note again that drunkenness is a primary obstacle to description. Then, back in France, Gide continues to be sensitive to the descriptive conundrum. Wishing to highlight his work's socio-political testimony, he struggles to reconcile that goal with the text's descriptive prodigality. In his journal from June 15, 1926, he writes, "Revu une partie de mes notes de voyage. Si je donne sous forme continue mon *Journal*, les parties tragiques, qu'il sied de mettre en valeur, seront noyées dans l'abondance des descriptions, etc. Je ne sais quel parti prendre" [Looked over a part of my travel notes. If I present my *Journal* in a continuous form, the tragic parts, which

should be emphasized, will be drown in the abundance of descriptions, etc. I do not know what to do].²⁹²

Gide had mixed motives for traveling to French Equatorial Africa. In the course of writing, the potentially contradictory nature of his two major goals—natural and cultural description on the one hand, and socio-political advocacy on the other—becomes apparent to him. Durosay notes how these unresolved issues lead to formal indeterminateness in Gide’s double book, wherein “la liberté spontanée du journal initial et le besoin de concentration, de synthèse” [the spontaneous liberty of the initial journal and the need for concentration, for synthesis] for his increasingly political ends create an “irrémissible contradiction” [irremediable contradiction] within this “texte en mouvement” [changing text].²⁹³ But instead of suggesting that *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* lack the consistency of purpose, style, or design of a significant literary work, I argue that the travel narratives embody tensions at the very center of Gide’s oeuvre, at the intersection of natural history and ethnographic writing, and at the textual site of description where the ethical imperative at stake in the representation of non-European people channels aesthetic innovation in Gide. Through his attempts at ethnographic description, Gide separates himself from Africanist accounts of sub-Saharan Africa, and his texts bring to light how epistemology and aesthetic cohere and conflict in description as a forum of representation.

Part II. The Tableau and The Note—An Epistemic Difference

The problem that these travelogues pose is related in part to the question of what specific perspective a writer can offer. In retrospect, Gide would acknowledge that lack of certainty in his purpose was related to lacking a particular, professional point of view,

²⁹² Gide, *Souvenirs et Voyages*, 1212.

²⁹³ Durosay, ed. *Souvenirs et Voyages*, 1211.

insomuch as he, as a literary writer, arrived in Africa without a clearly focused research or writing agenda. Professional points of view are important for description because each profession or discipline has both a well-defined visual terrain to describe; and a traditional method for describing that terrain. This is true as well for travelers, too; a particular point of view simplifies and coheres the visual world. A footnote that Gide adds in Paris reveals the conundrum of description for the literary writer who finds himself outside of France, outside of his normal context, and outside of a clear aesthetic or ideological program:

Pour le voyageur nouveau venu dans un pays où pour lui tout est neuf, une indécision l'arrête. S'intéressant à tout également, il ne peut suffire et d'abord il ne note rien, faute de pouvoir tout noter. Heureux le sociologue qui ne s'intéresse qu'aux mœurs; le peintre qui ne consent à voir du pays que l'aspect; le naturaliste qui choisit de ne s'occuper que des insectes ou que des plantes ; heureux le spécialiste! [...] Que l'on m'excuse donc si je ne savais encore poser sur tout ce que m'offrait la nouveauté, qu'un regard incertain et vague.²⁹⁴

[For the traveler who has come for the first time to a country where for him everything is new, indecision wracks him. As interesting as everything is, it is not enough, and at first he writes nothing down, due to the fact that he notices everything. Happy the sociologist who takes an interest only in customs; the painter who only wishes to see the external reality of the country; the naturalist who chooses to busy himself only with insects and plants; happy the specialist! [...] You will have to excuse me for having achieved a perspective over all the newness on display that is both uncertain and vague.]

²⁹⁴ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 31.

But must a writer do all badly because he has no professional perspective? Gide laments that he is not a sociologist, painter, or naturalist, and he begs the reader to excuse his clumsiness of depiction, yet at the same time in not having such a professionalized perspective, the literary writer maintains freedom from institutionally mandated ideologies, their rubrics for visibility (and opacity), and their mandates for restricting experiments at the limits of the known. In fact, Gide's travelogues combine aspects of the professional disciplines that he lists above; this overlap not only indicates the shared textual histories of these disciplines, but it also serves as one mechanism by which the difficulty of visibility per se—and its textual afterlife as lucidity—can be approached through the end-around of creative-critical literary thinking.

Largely free from narrative, plot-related concerns, *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* can be read as a series of observations. These studies are both of place and people, nature and culture, geography and society. That the scientific vocabulary of Gide's time was more developed in the former case is clear: in the 1920s, the last decade before the full institutionalization and professionalization of French anthropology as a discipline, with ethnography as its foremost methodology, the natural sciences had a more developed lexicon. Yet, as I hope to show, the texts make clear a gradual but distinct break in Gide's descriptions of people, moving from a naturalist, exotic template in which non-European people exist on the same plane of existence as nature per se to a more modern, scientific rubric in which people are largely disentangled from nature and thereby placed in the foreground where a new type of attention and a more meticulous practice of observation reveal details with greater lucidity and a heightened sense of the ethical contrast between the two descriptive traditions.

The Exoticist Tradition and the Emergence of Ethnography

The first generation of English-language scholars to write about *Voyage* lavished attention upon Gide's descriptive forays into the realm of natural history. In 1948, Klaus Mann compared Gide to Goethe, taking this tack no doubt because of the fact that Gide had selected to take on his trip Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, which he read during long stretches of the trip. "Especially when it comes to botanical observations, the French explorer appears almost as competent as the illustrious botanist of Weimar," Mann writes.²⁹⁵ But Gide's text is hardly a treatise on natural history, and the first paradox presents itself here: descriptions are not just those of natural history but those of ethnography as well.

Passages from the very beginning of the travelogues present an overly generalized human landscape, although this genre of essentializing racial description disappears quickly. The first pages of *Voyage* paint crudely the scope of human life in Brazzaville. Africans are not differentiated as citizens of cities or countries, or as members of tribes, linguistic groups, or other social groups; but instead they represent baldly the "black" condition:

Dans une minuscule pirogue, un nègre isolé chasse l'eau envahissante, d'un claquement de jambe contre la coque. [...] Sur le wharf, un fourmillement de noirs poussent des wagonnets. [...] Les nègres nus crient, rient et se querellent en montrant des dents de cannibales. (18)

[In a tiny canoe, a single black chases the disappearing water, with a banging of his leg against the hull. [...] On the wharf, a swarm of blacks pushing small

²⁹⁵ Klaus Mann, *André Gide: And the Crisis of Modern Thought* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1948), 137.

wagons. [...] The naked blacks shout out, laugh, and argue with one another, showing their cannibal-like teeth.]

Beauté sauvage de ce chant semi-triste; allégresse musculaire; enthousiasme farouche. [...] Pointe-Noire. — Ville à l'état larvaire, qui semble encore dans le sous-sol. (22)

[Savage beauty of this melancholic song; muscular swiftness; fierce enthusiasm. [...] Pointe-Noire. — City in a larval state, seemingly underground.]

In the exotic travel writing, people are part of the background, which they share with nature per se. Here, the wildness that characterizes the African landscape also characterizes the people. Phyllis Clark Taoua critiques the appearance of such exoticism in Gide's travelogues. She notes how the description of people functions as a facet of landscape description, and "[w]hat the Frenchman perceives as a primitive backwardness in many of the various peoples he encounters, he projects onto the natural landscapes which he endows with cultural and historical agency in his descriptions."²⁹⁶ Yet it is hard to wholly disambiguate such racist, exoticist typifications from the larger textual history that could be said to produce models for the same. The slippage between nature and human is more generally illustrative of the overlap that exists between natural history and ethnography, and could also be said to speak to conventions of the naturalist novel.

Mary Louise Pratt writes that the earlier development by Carl Linné (Linnaeus) of a classificatory system for the analysis of plants, was important to the wider practice of

²⁹⁶ Phyllis Clark Taoua, "Gide's Africa" in *South Central Review* 14.1 (Spring 1997), 64.

travel writing.²⁹⁷ Linneaus' *Systema Naturae*, published in 1735, would seem to be behind the remark of Marcel Griaule in which he explicitly sets up ethnography's standards against such zoological works: "On doit mettre dans la recherche du fait social quel qu'il soit et dans la connaissance de toutes les sociétés humaines la même ardeur que font les naturalistes à établir une liste exhaustive des insectes et des plantes" [We must put in social scientific research of every sort, and we must put in knowledge of all human societies the same ardor that the naturalists in establishing an exhaustive list of insects and plants].²⁹⁸ Though Gide's projection of the qualities of landscape onto the human does function as one type of Orientalist typecast and exotic presumption, it would also be worth considering whether reading an immanent, spiritual relation between place and people is necessarily any different from naturalistic description in the novel. Émile Zola, for instance, writes that people are visible in their native qualities only within their milieu:

L'homme ne peut être séparé de son milieu, qu'il est complété par son vêtement, par sa maison, par sa ville, par sa province; et, dès lors, nous ne noterons pas un seul phénomène de son cerveau et de son Cœur, sans en chercher les causes ou le contrecoup dans le milieu. De là ce qu'on appelle nos éternelles descriptions.

[Man cannot be separated from his milieu, which is finalized by his clothes, his house, his town, his province; and, accordingly, it is impossible to notice a single

²⁹⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

²⁹⁸ Marcel Griaule, *Méthode de l'ethnographie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 4.

phenomenon of his mind and his Heart that does not find a cause or reaction in his milieu. This is what we call our eternal descriptions.]²⁹⁹

Were this describing a theory of representation of non-European peoples, Zola would seem to be accrediting the theory of being—the ontology—of even Gide's first, crude sketches of African peoples: the tradition of describing people if not exactly in harmony with their environment than defined by it and vice versa.

If Gide's first attempts at describing Africa rely upon panoramic portraiture where the viewer's attention goes from the large-scale to the small, this style does not characterize the books as a whole. The way that Gide does not differentiate strongly enough between the natural and the social means that he cannot avoid bathos. The first instance is particularly regrettable, as it is from Gide's initial testimonial about the abuses of French colonial power in Africa:

Durant la troisième et dernière séance de ce triste procès, un très beau papillon est venu voler dans la salle d'audience, dont toutes les fenêtres sont ouvertes. Après de nombreux tours, il s'est inespérément posé sur le pupitre devant lequel j'étais assis, où je parviens à le saisir sans l'abîmer.

[During the third and last session of this sad trial, a very beautiful butterfly came to fly in the hall, where all the windows were open. After numerous turns, it landed hopelessly on the chair in front of me, where I was able to capture it without ruining it.]³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Cited in François Laplantine, *La description ethnographique* (Paris: Nathan, 1996), 71, from Zola's *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 10 (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-70), 1299-1300.

³⁰⁰ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 29.

The unmanaged toggle between nature and people produces bathos, or tragicomedy. Is the butterfly the unwitting victim of colonial violence in the same way as the natives who were victims of the rages of Sambry and that is why Gide decides to include the detail? Another instance occurs when Gide describes in rapid succession the unattractive skin quality of some Africans and his joy at seeing for the first time a type of native fruit: “Les indigènes sont tous galeux ou teigneux, ou rogneux; pas un n’a la peau nette et saine. Vu pour la première fois l’extraordinaire fruit des ‘barbadines’ (passiflores)” [The natives were all pocked and speckled, or craggy; not a one has clean, healthy skin. Saw for the first time the extraordinary fruit of the giant tumbo (passiflora)] (36-7). Are natives to be viewed at the same focal length as giant tropical fruit?

Clark Taoua believes *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* are typical examples of the genre of the exotic quest. Walter Putnam suggests the same. In such colonial travel writing, Putnam writes, “landscapes are devoid of most human content”; instead of describing the people who live on the land, landscape is reserved for “naturalistic pleasure.”³⁰¹ Yet two things must be considered. First, we must reevaluate Gide’s travelogues to see to what degree the descriptive material of the books are “devoid of most human content.” Second, the manner in which landscape is described must matter, particularly the specificity of nouns.

Scenes in which people are not clearly separated from the landscape become fewer, and the emphasis on the particularities of people starts to grow. Descriptions of people emerge early on, as well. Gide begins to see people through the category of tribe: “Les indigènes de race Modjembo, sont plus sains, plus robustes, plus beaux” [the

³⁰¹ Putnam, “Writing the Wrongs,” 98-99.

natives, of the Modjembo race, are more healthy, stronger, prettier].³⁰² It is not merely that his harsh judgment has relented, but it is that he uses grammatical apposition to specify which sort of people he is describing—the Modjembo. As they approach Bangui on September 28th, less than two months into their trip, Gide records in meticulous detail how the village women prepare palm oil:

[D]’abord il s’agit de séparer [l’huile] de la pulpe qui l’enveloppe. Pour cela l’on fait bouillir la graine, puis on la pile dans un mortier, avec le manche du pilon qui offre si peu de surface que la coque dure fuit de côté tandis que son enveloppe froissée se détache. Elle forme bientôt une étoupe couleur safran qui, pressée entre les doigts, laisse échapper son huile. Les femmes qui se livrent à ce travail se récompensent en chiquant le tourteau. (63)

[First, one has to separate the oil from the pulp that surrounds it. To do this, one boils the fruit, then pounds it in a mortar, with a pestle that offers so little surface that the hard shell separates while its crumbled envelope detaches. It forms a loose composition of fiber the color of saffron that, when pressed through the fingers, expels its oil. The women who are tasked with this job reward themselves by chewing on the fibers.]

When his descriptions turn toward people, they have the same force of attention allotted to descriptions of nature. Moreover, the descriptions of quotidian routine, activity, and circumstance are not spun, as in bourgeois novel, into reflecting the interiority and fate of characters: human life is not moralized in that way. If there is moralizing judgment in Gide’s travelogues, it is explicit. The quote above provides the details of a mundane

³⁰² Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 58.

activity not so that the reader can impute something about the women making palm oil, but because Gide is fascinated with the process, even if he laments how his words fail to match his interest: “Tout cela n’est pas bien intéressant à dire (encore que fort intéressant à observer); j’abandonne le reste aux manuels” [All of this is not very interesting to say (though it is very interesting to observe); I leave the rest to manuals] (63). Gide’s routine lack of satisfaction with his ability to describe something is a remarkable feature of these two books. Here, the object of observation is ethnographic. This fact by itself allows us to see how this sort of description—people-oriented, non-moralistic, scrupulous, and quotidian—presents to him. The remark indicates Gide’s deprecating attitude toward documentary writing at the same time as he provides a ready example of the same and thus proves, paradoxically, his interest in it.³⁰³

Then, by the time that the traveling party meets Coppet at Fort Archambault in late December, descriptions of people of this order—that is to say, ethnographic descriptions—outnumber those of natural history. In my account of the second two-thirds of Gide’s double book from their arrival in Fort Archambault to their return to the coast, I count roughly fifty distinct moments where Gide engages in ethnographic description. Featured in this are remarks or descriptions about sociology and customs (seventeen times), appearance and dress (eleven times), architecture (ten times), as well as

³⁰³ His quip that he will “leave the rest to manuals” is curious because of the uncertain reference of the word “manual.” What knowledge Gide had of Marcel Mauss’s erudite manuals of instruction for travelers and early ethnographers remains unclear. In 1900, Mauss wrote “instructions” on the behalf of the Ecole Française de l’Extrême Orient for “colonial officers, missionaries from different denominations, doctors, colonial civil servants and ‘indigenous savants.’” First addressed to travelers to French Indonesia, similar documents followed for Korea and West Africa. See Nélia Dias, “From French Indochina to Paris and back again: The Circulation of Objects, People, and Information, 1900-1932,” *Museum & Society* 13.1 (Jan. 2015): 9-10. In 1926, Mauss began teaching his method of ethnography in 1926. His classroom instruction from 1926-1939 was then collected, collated, and edited in 1947 by Denise Paulme-Schaeffner and published by Payot under the title *Manuel d’ethnographie*. See Pierre Métails’s review of that publication in *Journal de la Société des océanistes* 3.3 (1947): 155-6. A review of the 1969 republication gives more information. See item 231 in *Archive de sociologie des religions* 28.1 (1969): 223-4. There is also some chance that Gide refers to a more general sort of tourist guidebook, the “manual-guide,” which in the hands of the “touristes dociles” was caricaturized as far back as 1858 in Hippolyte Taine’s *Voyage aux Pyrénées*. See Taine, *Voyage aux Pyrénées*, [1858] (Paris: Hachette, 1873), 446.

descriptions of food and animal husbandry (six times), textiles (twice), and transport (once).

The following description will exemplify what I call the ethnographic description: a description of non-European people and their cultures that has an ethical sensibility that acknowledges from the outset the reality and difference of their lives and the difficulty of overcoming European aesthetics to capture this reality; an objective quality of attention, observation, and study; and lastly forms of description that attempt to represent these ethical, aesthetic, and observational concerns. Ethnographic description resists the moralizing frames of bourgeois description in the naturalist novel; instead, typical activities of human social life are portrayed as important and interesting in and of themselves. The scene describes the construction of a decorative band or anklet that the Massa women wear during a ceremonial dance:

J'ai vu travailler à la confection d'un de ces cornets dont je parlais hier. Un homme assujettissait les extrémités des joncs et fermait la pointe du cornet dans un travail de fil natté. Il procédait avec un poinçon qui soulevait légèrement les autres fils et permettait d'insinuer le fil qui devait relier l'ensemble. Celui-ci était enfilé à une longue aiguille. Je n'imaginai pas qu'il y eût plusieurs façons d'enfiler une aiguille. Mais celle-ci n'a pas de chas. C'est seulement un éclat très fin et long d'une plante textile très résistante. L'extrémité opposée à la pointe est assouplie, décomposée en filaments, qui, tressés avec le fil, l'entraînent à la suite de l'aiguille.³⁰⁴

[I saw being made one of the baskets that I spoke of yesterday. A man bent the ends of the reeds and closed the end of the basket in an enlacing of threads. He

³⁰⁴ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 314-5.

proceeded with an awl that raised lightly the other threads and permitted him to insinuate the thread that had to be linked to the others. This one was threaded through a long needle. I never imagined that there were several ways of threading a needle. But this one did not have an eye. It is only a very thin and long part of a very resistant textile plant. The end opposite the point is supple, fraying into filaments, which, woven with the thread, bring the thread after the needle.]

The dance, or “tam-tam,” of the previous day, requested by the traveling party, might well be a stereotypical part of the colonial demand for the performance of primitive Africa, but the detail with which Gide describes the making of the dancing accouterment is ethnographic in its attempt to represent accurately the reality of the material aspects of the Massa culture as well as the quotidian aspects of action and experience. Daily life, dance, and textiles—three earmarks of premodern ethnography—are all evident. Gide’s description emphasizes the utility of the African technique and, referring back to the interest he took in the “baskets” during the dance, the artistry to which they contribute when put into cultural practice.

Upon further inspection, we see that Gide has expended an effort to try to arrive at the right wording for what he sees. The previous day when Gide describes the leg ornament for the first time, he calls it a “crotale,” with the word in scare quotes. *Le Petit Robert* indicates that a “crotale” is a “sorte de cliquette employée dans le culte de Cybèle et pour accompagner la danse” [a type of a clacker used in the cult of Cybele and to accompany dance]. The dictionary also gives a reference to Gustave Flaubert’s short story “Hérodias” (1877), where the author uses the word.³⁰⁵ In that first attempt to

³⁰⁵ “Crotale,” *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1992), 429.

describe the object, Gide quickly recants, writing, “J’ai dit ‘crotale’ par simplicité” [I said ‘clackers’ for simplicity’s sake].³⁰⁶ Then he describes their material construction:

[E]n réalité ce sont des cornets de jonc treillissé, fermés à la pointe par une natte de fil. La base du cornet est relié à un disque de bois mince et sonore sur lequel retombent à chaque secousse une poignée de petits graviers engagés. Ce cornet est de proportions à épouser exactement le gras du mollet sur lequel il s’applique. C’est d’un travail charmant, aussi net que de la vannerie japonaise. (313)

[In reality they are baskets of woven reeds, closed at their top by matted threads. The bottom of the basket is fixed upon a thin, resonant wooden disk upon which a handful of engaged gravel falls at each jostling. This basket is fit proportionately to the dimensions of the calf muscle to which it is tied. It is a charming piece of craftsmanship, as accomplished as Japanese basketry.]

In first using an obscure word alluding to a nature goddess worshipped in orgiastic rites, Gide reveals that he is steeped in European traditions of learnedness. But he replaces that, admitting only to have used it because it was a simple allusion, a ready term, if imprecise due to its specific cultural associations. By giving a material description, Gide arrives closer to the African context and its “réalité” [reality]. While the cross-cultural comparison suggests, at its level of generality, an almost random and unguided associative leap that would not be permitted in a specifically modern form of ethnography, nevertheless, the comparison to a thoroughly modern, technological culture of decorum and refinement undermines the description’s potential for being read as an example of European wonderment in face of the technology of so-called primitive

³⁰⁶ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 313.

peoples. The comparison to Japanese culture extracts the technology from a strictly Africanist, exotic context to present it merely as clever technology on par with any other.

But when does Gide find the time to inspect these instruments so carefully? How is he able to produce such a finely drawn portrait of the dancing ornaments and their construction? The journal's description of the dance performances does not allow such detail. What is obscured in a quick reading of the scene becomes clear when turning to Allégret's travelogue. Gide's description is nebulously dated, taking place in a long section marked February 26 *or* 27, followed by geographical headings, Mossougoum and Mala. Reading these dates in Allégret shows that Gide and Allégret saw these ornamental instruments twice before the dance, where Gide presents the "baskets" as though for the first time. On February 26, Gide and Allégret enter the houses of the first Massa village. There they see the instruments. Allégret writes, "Quelques femmes ont attaché à leurs jambes de petits paniers coniques, contenant une vingtaine de petits cailloux, pour faire castagnettes" [Several women attached to their legs little conical baskets, containing twenty or so pebbles, used as castanets].³⁰⁷ As their inspection continues, Allégret notices the same instruments in other living quarters: "Aux murs sont accrochés des filets, de petits paniers remplis de cailloux pour la danse, des épis de mil dans un ballot de paille tressée" [Hung from the walls were nets, the little baskets full of pebbles for dancing, corncobs knotted together by dried husks] (213). By the time that the dance commences, for Allégret, then, these baskets are so common that he feels obliged to note that he has already seen them: "D'abord quelques gosses, puis des fillettes avec, aux jambes, les petits paniers remplis de cailloux que nous avons vus déjà" [First, several kids, then young girls with, on their legs, the small baskets filled with pebbles that we had already seen] (215). Gide's scrupulous description of these

³⁰⁷ Allégret, *Carnets du Congo*, 211.

accouterments, then, shows itself not to be the spontaneous improvisation of a moment but a sort of objective study that has taken place over several days.

Literary scholars have not read Gide's double book for its surprising examples of ethnographic description. Despite noting that Gide's official request to the Minister of the Colonies that requested permission to travel to French Equatorial Africa was "patently ethnographic," Putnam disavows ethnography as a motivating intellectual seed, stating that "Gide clearly did not have the ethnographic bent, and he intuitively steered away from the temptation to develop it during his Congo journey."³⁰⁸ Yet this characterization simplifies the lengthy and variegated double book without noting where Gide does indeed engage in ethnographic description. That Gide and Allégret move quickly along the roads, paths, and rivers to Fort Lamy and back means for Putnam that they have little "sustained cultural exchange" (ibid.) is undeniable. But cultural exchange itself does not serve as a quality of ethnography. If exchange were a measure of ethnography, then Gide's championing in Paris of the abused chief Samba N'Goto and adumbrating for the French public the litany of abuses of the French concessionary companies would make his interactions with Africans more "ethnographic" than those of most ethnographers.

Focusing on Allégret's more obviously ethnographic agenda, Jeffrey Geiger also forecloses on Gide's ethnographic possibility, writing that Gide refuses "to 'participate' or to authorize an exhaustive ethnographic or scientific account of his travels."³⁰⁹ Geiger points to the opening pages to prove Gide's desire to renounce the possibility of cultural contact, a moment at which the writer tends to indulge in portraying "the merits of landscape, on the configuration and aesthetic impact of villages and towns, and on his 'scientific' mission of chasing down and cataloguing exotic butterflies" (ibid.). Yet Geiger

³⁰⁸ Putnam, "Writing the Wrongs," 96, 93.

³⁰⁹ Jeffrey Geiger, "Sightseeing: *Voyage au Congo* and the Ethnographic Spectacle," in *André Gide's Politics: Rebellion and Ambivalence*, ed. Tom Conner (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 112.

avoids quoting from the whole text, and, in wishing to deal with Gide's colonial politics, he focuses instead upon the ambiguously visual term "ethnographic spectacle" (117) to suggest, like Putnam, that ethnography is an experience not measured first in words.

But Putnam's comments point to a more significant paradox in reading Gide's texts. It is true that ethnography encourages observation that takes place over many days, if not months and years, in order to understand what the ethnographer observes; and it is also true that Gide and Allégret were not sedentary in that sense. But both produce detailed descriptions of the sort that I call ethnographic, and while no one is claiming that Gide and Allégret were modern scientists, it is nevertheless true that a fruitful ambiguity exists within ethnography as a science: that is, ethnography refers both to the modern method of cultural anthropology in the field and to the textual form that it produces. In this doubling, nevertheless, the ethnography as a textual form is more important: knowledge is produced, shared, and evaluated through texts. The premodern history of ethnography shows that travel writing, missionary accounts, and natural history records overlap with ethnographic descriptions.³¹⁰ The para-literary genres of premodern ethnography are liminally literary and usually constructed through lax and scientific standards, as well as outside of the dictates of institutional restrictions (whether literary or scientific) operating in metropolitan France. Searching Gide's texts for traces of ethnography should not necessarily lead to considerations of biography as a record of knowledge and experience; the texts either do or do not produce examples of ethnographic description. The overlap between ethnography and other textual forms allows the possibility that writers produce ethnography by forms of textual repetition, emulation, and copying. We do not need to call Gide an ethnographer in order to find ethnographic description within them. This emphasis on the textual life of ethnography

³¹⁰ Robert J. Thornton, "Narrative Ethnography in Africa, 1850-1920: The Creation and Capture of an Appropriate Domain for Anthropology," in *Man* 18.3 (Sept. 1983): 503.

might seem counterintuitive due to the restrictions of modern ethnography, such as the case of Michel Leiris' experience in Africa to be detailed in Chapter Four. But only a portion—and relatively small portion—of ethnography, seen as a long history of observational practices, foci, and textual practices, with a wide variety of textual types, is defined by a high modern obsession with objectivity and the precision of rules for the ethnographer in the field. The critique of this dated and ultimately unprofitable obsession has defined and continues to define contemporary trends in ethnography, such as reflexive ethnography and auto-ethnography.³¹¹

The Tableau and the Note

Gide's descriptive style is not uniform. Far from it, in the ways that Gide's descriptive style varies, there is evidence of tension between two competing paradigms: the belletristic tradition of European art, and the discrete, seemingly spontaneous, note characteristic of a more delimited, scientific presentation. Both styles are mimetic. Leiris criticizes this mimetic impulse in Gide's travelogue, stating categorically that "[o]n ne peut retracer un paysage, mais tout au plus le *recréer*; au condition, alors, de n'essayer

³¹¹ The layers to self-critique in contemporary ethnography are many. Even reflexive ethnography, meant to critique the basic scientific presumption encoded within the scientist-human object of study relationship, has been subjected to extensive critique. One account of reflexive anthropology, Charlotte Aull Davies' *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others* (London: Routledge, 1999), points to the importance of the "nature, circumstances, and quality of the observation" and not any degree of embeddedness within a community as the first measure of value in an ethnography. A quality of observation must be matched by "reflexive observation—that is, the ethnographer needs to be sensitive to the nature of, and conditions governing, their own participation as a part of their developing understanding of the people they study" (73). Yet, reflexive ethnography, seen as a necessary antidote to the "disembodied narrative" seen in the texts under study by Thornton in "Narrative Ethnography," has itself been criticized for not fundamentally changing the role of ethnography as a scientific text. Sjoerd R. Jaarsma and Marta A. Rohatynskij emphasize how "ethnographic description and analysis" is an "artifact that concretizes a set of social relationships" (7); their volume places an emphasis on reaching a greater understanding of how ethnographic texts or "artifacts" are used in the world to construct, deconstruct, uphold or challenge power relations between peoples. See Jaarsma and Rohatynskij, editors, *Ethnographic Artifacts: Challenges to a Reflexive Anthropology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000). It would be safe to say that ethnography has become one of the most self-reflexive and self-critiqued forms of anthropological inquiry, as it wrestles to distance itself from its assumptions, subject position, and relations to colonial power structures.

aucunement de décrire” [one cannot redraw a landscape; at most one can *recreate it*, provided, then, that no attempt at all will be made to describe it].³¹² Whatever Leiris may exactly mean through this odd comparison of verbs, Gide’s descriptions in both styles nevertheless do not attempt to exceed the objective world, but they mean rather to carefully circumscribe it. Their different aesthetics point to contrasting epistemologies. The belles-lettrist style describes objects or experiences because they are beautiful, or ugly, which operates through contrast to help further define beauty. The style itself is meant to amplify this beauty, or, in any event, to capture it pictorially.

A typical passage of this sort is Gide’s description of the touring party on the Congo River near the village of Bolobo. At daybreak, Gide and team enters the “pool de Bolobo” [Bolobo pool] and are greeted immediately by “le spectacle le plus magnifique” [the most magnificent spectacle]³¹³:

Le soleil se lève tandis que nous entrons dans le pool de Bolobo. Sur l’immense élargissement de la nappe d’eau, pas une ride, pas même un froissement léger qui puisse en ternir un peu la surface; c’est une écaille intacte, où rit le très pur reflet du ciel pur. À l’orient quelques nuages longs que le soleil empourpre. Vers l’ouest, ciel et lac sont d’une même couleur de perle, un gris d’une délicatesse attendrie, nacre exquise où tous les tons mêlés dorment encore, mais où déjà frémit la promesse de la riche diaprure du jour. Au loin, quelques îlots très bas flottent impondérablement sur une matière fluide...

[The sun rises while we enter the pool of Bolobo. On the immense opening of the water’s spread, not one wrinkle, not one single agitation that could tarnish the

³¹² Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 1934 (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 248.

³¹³ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 39.

surface; it is an unbroken shell, where the very pure reflection of the pure sky laughs. To the east, several long clouds that the sun casts in purple light. To the west, sky and lake are of the same pearl color, a gray of an attenuated delicateness, an exquisite nacre where all the mixed tones sleep together, but where already trembles the promise of the rich lighting of the day. In the distance, several very low islands float unimaginably on the watery terrain...]

The travel party enters the pool from the narrower stretches of the Congo River. Two weeks before, Gide accuses Joseph Conrad of hyperbolic description of in *Typhoon*, wishing he had stopped his description before the worst ravages of the storm and thus “laisser à l’imagination du lecteur libre jeu” [leaving to the imagination of the reader some room] (27). He blames him for “croire que la sublimité de la peinture tient à l’énormité du sujet” [thinking that the sublimity of the painting comes from the enormity of the subject,” stating that “[l]’art comporte une tempérance et répugne l’énormité” [art is temperate and repudiates enormity] (ibid.). Yet now he has no quibbles describing the pool in excessive terms—“the most magnificent,” “the immense opening,” “the very pure reflection of the pure sky,” “exquisite nacre,” and “the rich lighting of day.”

Gide’s description of the Bolobo pool is the long form of the belles-lettres tradition, “la prose classique” [classic prose]. Whether he means to create strictly a beautiful description meant to induce a “pleasant sensation [that is smiling and joyous” or a sublime description meant to “arouse enjoyment but with horror”³¹⁴ must be left suspended. In fact, that this passage attests to the breakdown of aesthetic categories that organize Gide’s visual world, such as the beautiful and the sublime. The ending of the passage presents an additional unexpected turn that creates in visibility a

³¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960), 47.

conundrum. Gide writes that the scene is not an ordinary one, but a charmed one, a mystical one: “L’enchantement de ce paysage mystique ne dure que quelques instants; bientôt les contours s’affirment, les lignes se précisent; on est sur terre de nouveau” [The enchantment of the mystic landscape lasts only several instants; then the scene recomposes itself, the lines sharpen; we are on earth again] (39). Excess, majesty, and enormity would normally propel the reader and implicit viewer toward the sublime. Africa would seem to be a fit locale for such a European aesthetic due to its vastness, the “grandeur in nature” that, Longinus writes, is second nature for humans to admire, along with “precision in art.”³¹⁵ But what is the relation between unimaginable enchantment and the sort of “drunkenness” that Gide has already denounced, the non-rational mindset of novelty and wonder that frustrates all attempts at description? The scene presents the conundrum of the relation between perception, organization, and beauty, both in experience and in the literary text. The scene suggests that Gide is trying to parse this conundrum: on the one hand, there are the beautiful and the sublime, European aesthetic categories; and on the other hand there is an emergent sense of what we might call an African aesthetics. In the first two sorts of beauty exist, there is organization: sentences map transparently onto nature through the organization that nature itself proposes. The second, African aesthetics is less well defined; it is only hinted at, through the awkward annulment of Gide’s critique of Conrad, and through Gide’s own contradictory position on how wonder destroys the chances of description.

Yet the problems of the organization of the visible and its relation to beauty are indeed central themes for Gide. His recurrent asides about the difficulty of describing his surroundings because of their lack of organization means, as well, that he understands at some level that he is at a crossroads of a history of aesthetic perception. Due to the

³¹⁵ Longinus, *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, trans. and intro. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 48.

difficulty of perception, the failure of beauty, and Gide's conundrum at being thrust into a domain of visibility that he cannot shape to aesthetic ends, Gide develops the quasi-scientific note, which presents a documentary aesthetics—hardly yet seen as such by Gide himself—that renounces the literary aesthetics of the belles-lettristic tradition, their organizational requirements, and their need for beauty. In the quasi-scientific form of the note, literary aesthetics and the forms of organization they require do not obtain.

The problem of perception, organization, and beauty appears in the very first paragraph of *Voyage au Congo*: “Heures sans contenu ni contour” [Hours without content or form] (13). Then, the effect is stupefaction. When visiting the Congo rapids for the first time, Gide writes, “Aucun rythme; et je m’explique mal ces inégalités du courant” [No rhythm; and I explain poorly these inequalities of the current] (27). Perception searches for organization in order to allow description. Gide faces a forest; he faces his own epistemological limitations for relating perception and aesthetics: “la forêt est de nouveau des plus étranges et des plus belles. [...] car le paysage vient-il à cesser d’être *étrange*, il rappelle aussitôt quelque paysage européen, et le souvenir qu’il évoque est toujours à son désavantage” [Passed the river (the Bodangue?), for a kilometer or two the forest is again full of the most strange and beautiful things. In this journal, I associate these two terms freely, because as the landscape stops being *strange*, the more it reminds me of some European landscape, and the memory that it evokes is always to its disadvantage] (118). Africa allows the beauty of the strange, but because it is not rational or historical, it is not, properly speaking, aesthetic. When the African landscape becomes more organized, when it evokes something in France, then the African landscape can but only appear to its disadvantage because Europe is more highly organized, and thus more typically beautiful.

The disorganization of Africa frustrates Gide: “Pays démesuré, rien ne fait centre; les lignes fuient éperdument dans tous les sens; tout est illimité” [Immeasurable country,

with no center; lines flee blindly in all directions; everything is without limit] (150). There is no center. In Africa, lines, taken to be a core element of the European organization of social life, cities, and art alike, do not register design, they do not signify pattern and intention, but they disappear without reason. Houses seem to be arranged randomly: “Les cases [...] se groupent au gracieux hasard, sans plan aucun, sans rue, sans alignement, ni circulairement autour d’aucune place” [The houses forms groups randomly, without any plan, any street, any alignment, nor in circles around a courtyard] (162). The arrangement of houses does not conform either to the rectilinear or the pattern of concentric circles. The fundamental lack of organization and arrangement in Africa means that this continent cannot compare with France in aesthetic terms: “Chaque fois que le paysage se forme, se limite et tente de s’organiser un peu, il évoque en mon esprit quelque coin de France; mais le paysage de France est toujours mieux construit, mieux dessiné et d’une plus particulière élégance” [Each time that the landscape gains shape, limits itself and begins to organize itself a little, it reminds me of some corner of France; but the French landscape is always better constructed, better drawn out, and of a more particular elegance] (193).

The problem of perception, organization, and beauty might also be posed as the problem of limits. Gide comes to a conclusion about the aesthetics of Africa. It is not European aesthetics of limit in which the definition of an object, its definitive beginning and end, obtains. Rather, it is the aesthetics of tepidness, of the lukewarm, an aesthetic of intermediateness and imbrication: “Quelle tiédeur exquise enveloppe tout l’être et le pénètre de volupté! [...] Cette notion de la différenciation, que j’acquiers ici, d’où dépend à la fois l’exquis et le rare, est si importante qu’elle me paraît le principal enseignement à remporter de ce pays” [What exquisite lukewarmness surrounds all of being and penetrates it so fully! [...] This notion of differentiation, which I have picked up while

here, from which are defined the exquisite and the rare, and is so important that it seems the principal teaching to take home from this country] (195-6).

Gide's statements about the "lukewarm" nature of Africa becomes defined as a *mélange*, an interpenetration, or a "blending": "le plus étrange mélange" [the most strange mixing] signals a deeper principle of "cette énormité, cette infirmité, cette indécision, cette absence de parti pris, de dessin, d'organisation qui m'affectait à l'excès" [this enormity, this infirmity, this indecision, this lack of definition, outline, and organization that has affected me exceedingly] (240-1). This is the epistemic and aesthetic comingling that he calls "*blending*" [blending]. The limit of the belles-lettristic style is not just a formal limit in which a style of sentence will break down. Rather, its limit is a perceptual and organizational one: the sense that beauty emerges out of organization produces in Gide's thinking an African aesthetics of blending. Failing to perceive Africa as organized in the ways of Europe, Gide struggles to frame a new sort of organization, which he roughly, and ambiguously, does in the aesthetics of blending. But, ultimately, Gide will find a more effective way to organize Africa when he turns to the quasi-scientific note as a new form of epistemology and aesthetics.

A tension exists between two elements of Gide's thinking. One dimension is conservative, European, and traditional, and so reproduces the predispositions of metropolitan aesthetics. But this side is in tension without another side exemplified in the textual form of the note. If literature, as an aesthetic category, must necessarily revolve in the ambit of the beautiful and the ugly, and if belles-lettristic writing demands more than anything the assertions of a mind capable of distinguishing and representing beauty, then the scientific note does not follow these imperatives. Instead of aspiring toward the recognition of beauty and its encoding in prose of beautiful design and execution, the note has its own relation to knowledge. The note addresses the ordinary in its scientific impulse toward accuracy. What had to be defined as strange wonderment

or indistinguishable and frustrating blending within the tableau can now be seen to be different, ordinary, and geared toward a different goal of representation.

The idea, or form, of the note is immanent to the texts. Gide himself calls his entries “notes” from time to time. The forced labor of writing his notes at the end of the day seems often to tire him. He writes on March 30, 1926: “À peine trouvé-je la force de prendre ces quelques notes informes” [I hardly had the strength to set down these brief notes] (410). Gide develops a variety of notational forms. Not only does Gide refer to the manuscript as his “notes” in the first notable example recounted earlier in this chapter and then on at least four other occasions (161, 175, 294, 498), but the notational forms are distinct from the composed scene of belles-lettres and appear in different guises: the list, the incomplete sentence, and the use of grammatical positions or clauses of descriptive content stacked through punctuation. These forms aim to achieve the immediacy of accurate observation unfiltered by the need for aesthetic standards of elegance and grammatical fluency. Through the immediacy that they attempt to provide, they can also be read to contain a quasi-scientific spontaneity. Observation seems to transpire in real time without selection, preparation, or after-the-fact editing.³¹⁶

The note emerges as more than a hurried shorthand. It is rather a means for describing without the incessant recourse to normative Eurocentric aesthetic criteria as mediating lenses. The note bypasses those criteria that inscribe difference merely within the strange. Take, for instance, Gide’s description of the American mission at Tchoumbiri on September 5 and 6, 1925: “palmiers, bananiers abondants, les plus beaux que j’aie vus jusqu’ici, ananas, et ces grands arums à rhizomes comestibles (taros). L’aspect de la prospérité” [palms, banana trees in number, the most beautiful

³¹⁶ Gide’s commitment to spontaneous note-taking is evident when he criticizes Allégret for his heavy-handed directorial presence that does not let scenes develop “par un heureux hasard” [by a happy chance] to show life “ininventable and irrefaisable” [uninventable and unrepeatable]. See Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 374.

that I've seen to here, pineapples, and these big arum plants with edible roots (taros). The look of prosperity] (38). It is a brief, a digest; its compact form suggests that Gide is noting these observations while walking. Villages are often described in quick capsules: "Très grand village ceinturant le poste sanitaire au bord du fleuve. Sordide. Quantité de maisons effondrées; les cours de ces maisons ruinées sont remplies de toutes sortes d'immondices. Saleté des rues" [Very large village encircling the health clinic at the river's edge. Sordid. A number of dilapidated houses; the courtyards of these deserted houses are full of all sorts of filth. The dirtiness of the streets] (333). Here, not only does the quickness of the description create the affects of disgust and horror, but, perhaps due to these emotions, the scene is dismissed abruptly. It must be moved on from; such ugliness is too much for Gide to bear—in the note's epistemology, with its orientation toward the scientific, ugliness does not presume to teach the opposite of beauty. Rather, it is just ugliness.

An architectural passage notes details free of fussy, aesthetic commentary: "Maisons assez hautes; tantôt rondes, tantôt cubiques, entassés sans ordre aucun; ruelles tortueuses, petites places irrégulières, et tout à coup un arbre énorme abritant un petit marché" [Rather tall houses; sometimes round, something cubic, strewn about without any order; tortuous paths, little irregular squares, and suddenly an enormous tree sheltering a little market] (296). The note gives the quick succession of details. Gide reveals the sense of aesthetic confusion that he experiences as he looks at a visual terrain that lacks the type of organization through which he would normally gain his bearings. "Winding" paths can only give onto "irregular" squares. Nevertheless, the tendency present in belles-lettristic description to offer moralizing commentary or hierarchized aesthetic rubrics is absent. Winding paths are winding paths; irregular squares do not, in the note form, produce the need for on-the-spot aesthetic theorization.

The note complicates the belles-lettres' tradition. It indicates the insufficiency of the perspectives that traditional aesthetic thinking can sponsor.

Lucidity, Literariness, and the Contrast of Allégret

How does the literary author create the sensation of reality in a representation of life that is from the outset necessarily more subjective, and thus less “real” in the sense that scientific knowledge derives its authority from the general factuality of its citations, sources, and cases? In general, literature develops authority through style. For a text to be convincing for a reader, its style—which is to say its particular enmeshing of perspective or worldview with the gait, form, and substance of its sentences—must convince. In a different context, James Clifford calls this quality a text’s “controlling mode of authority.”³¹⁷

Literature has no explicit goals of objectivity, at least not in the same sense that science does. Clarity of expression, or lucidity, may or may not be a goal of an individual literary writer; yet objectivity as a scientific prerogative remains outside the bounds of literature. Literature *expresses* a subjective experience of the world, while science *captures* its objective fact, the adage might be. Yet, this too must be subjected to questioning, especially in a genre of literature such as the travel narrative, premised upon reporting or recording accuracy. The travel narrative seems to be one of the least mediated of literary genres in its desire for a transparent, one-to-one mimetic relation to the facts of the world. Its central writerly tasks are often not narrative but rather observational in nature; and, thus, while its scope and accuracy are limited in the way that all observations are (due to the limits of education, perception, and expertise of each and every individual writer, whether literary “author” or professional “scientist”), the

³¹⁷ Clifford, *Predicament*, 54.

purported ontological difference between literature and science seems less fixed when the travel narrative is considered.

Any presupposed distinction between the subjective literary and the objective scientific fails to categorize these works. Mann writes that Gide's travelogues are "[p]acked with factual material, unemotional and undramatic,"³¹⁸ and yet Clark Taoua asserts the falseness of Gide's "dream of neutrality and objective perception."³¹⁹ Which is it? I would say that Gide's writing is lucid without invoking a sharp distinction between subjective and objective. Moreover, as Gide moves toward ethnographic description and the form of the note, he eclipses the known limits of belles-lettristic writing and traditional aesthetics. The conundrum that Gide tries to solve involves two basic dimensions: how Africa creates for Gide the half-hidden problem of perception, organization, and aesthetics; and, otherwise, the colonial critique that ties the description of non-European people to ethical considerations. Also, I argue, the fact that Gide writes literature makes these complex concerns, linked at different levels, evident. Literature's open-ended templates for thinking and creation allow the production of new ideas integrally related to the process of textualization: that is, the process of textualization is still one of *creating* (much as Leiris says) and not merely transcribing or reproducing, which do not, as activities, have the same potential for discovery. That Gide writes a travel narrative helps as well to reveal these subtending and preoccupying concerns since a travel narrative itself is relatively free of plot-oriented concerns, thereby allowing different forms of textual reflection. Gide's status as a "life-long disrupter" and an eccentric nomad contribute as well to producing a mental structure of indeterminate openness and pesky questioning.

³¹⁸ Mann, *André Gide*, 138.

³¹⁹ Clark Taoua, "Gide's Africa," 65.

The importance of the literariness of Gide's texts as a conduit for thinking is made further evident when comparing *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* with Allégret's artistic and cultural productions during and after the trip. Certainly, the aspirations of Gide and Allégret were different: Gide was at the height of his literary career, and Allégret did not yet know what exactly he wanted from life. Durosay writes that Allégret's journal played the dual role of being a datebook, or agenda in which he noted the dates, places, and facts of their travels,³²⁰ and a journal, often dealing in one way or another with Allégret's photography and cinematography. Moreover, Gide tasked Allégret with a stenographic role; Gide was to use Allégret's notes for details and information to fold into his own writing when needed (43, ft. 86). As such, *Carnets du Congo* is not literary, but is "sans couture ni reprise" [without haughtiness or afterthought] (32). Durosay labors to find the right words to label Allégret's laconic text: "témoignage brut" [raw witnessing] (43, 86), reportage (32), scientific observation at the microscopic level (37), a documentary (40, 51), a chronicle (51), or "ethnologie sauvage" [untrained anthropology] (41). These terms, taken as a whole, conduce to describe the text as contrasting greatly with Gide's.

Allégret's ethnographic interest in *Carnets du Congo*, in his several hundred photographs from the trip, and in his film, remains a consistent and defining aspect of the journey. That interest pre-dated the expedition's arrival in Africa. It was Allégret who performed the major research for their trip, visiting the Geographical Society where he consulted various manuscripts including ethnographic ones (24). Comparing Allégret's *Carnets* against Gide's double book, Durosay finds three times as many names for tribes in Allégret's text (40). Beyond a consistency in the text's interests, Allégret's style, as well, is marked by its characteristic conciseness that borders on the scientific in its lack of adornment and embellishment. His sentences are shorter, more grammatically simple;

³²⁰ Durosay, Introduction, 30.

the vocabulary is either of a simpler French or, otherwise, inclusive of African words; and the amount of adjectival or adverbial modification is much less.

On February 6, 1926, the travellers visit Iba Dalla and Iba Kemé, two villages near Fort Lamy. Seven paragraphs describe the scene in ethnographic detail focusing on the material artifacts and habits of daily life: animal husbandry, household items, musical instruments, accouterments of war, means of transport, women's appearance, and children's appearance. Except for the second paragraph, each paragraph begins with a definite article. The effect of anaphora here is not poetic or lyrical; rather, it is empirical and methodical. The justification for this text lies in the ethnographic imperative—these topics are suitable for observation and recounting through description because they provide ethnographic snapshots of the people and their culture. There are no cultured allusions, no efforts at embellishment. Paragraph four describes traditional shields: “Les anciens boucliers sont en bois d'*ambadj* courbé, assemblé avec des lanières de cuir, bordé de cuir, et le centre doublé d'une peau de bœuf” [The old shields are made of curved balsa wood, with leather straps, trimmed in leather, and the center is reinforced with cowhide].³²¹ Canoes are then described with the same descriptive rigor and objective framing.

Then Allégret describes the appearance of the women: “Les femmes ont de grands anneaux aux oreilles. Ils passent dans le lobe, mais comme le poids déformerait l'oreille, elles soutiennent l'anneau avec une lanière de cuir qui entoure la tête et fait bandeau sur le front” [The women have big rings in their ears. They rest in their earlobes, but since their weight deforms their ears, they support the rings with a leather strip that circles the head that meets on the forehead] (ibid.). Then he describes the dress of the boys and girls: “Les fillettes ont des tabliers de coquillages. Les jeunes garçons sont nus ou ont un vieux boubou blanc qu'iles rejettent par derrière, se

³²¹ Allégret, *Carnets du Congo*, 193.

découvrant complètement par devant. Sandales en bois d'*ambad*” [The girls have shell aprons. The young boys are naked and have old white boubous that they throw over their shoulders, leaving their fronts exposed. Balsa wood sandals] (ibid.). The language is stripped down to its descriptive minimum, and nouns predominate.

Allégret’s “Note sur les Massa-Mousgoum,” then, functions as a sort of ethnographic rough draft for a scientific text that would never materialize: aside from an extract on Massa children published in the journal *Le monde colonial illustré* in May 1927,³²² Allégret never chose to publish these notes. “Note sur les Massa-Mousgoum” extends to twenty-one pages as an addendum to *Carnets du Congo*. Durosay mentions that it is likely that this detailed “note” was possible only because Gide and Allégret encounter the Massa-Mousgoum peoples twice during their journey (42). The text reproduces in the main the major tropes of ethnographic description as practiced before and after 1926. Its sections show the unsystematic but legible deployment of ethnographic logic, starting with its root concept, the particularity of a people upon a definite, transhistorical piece of land. The section heads are as follows: geographical situation, “aspect du pays” [lay of the land]; family organization, relations between the husband and the parents of his wife, rights held by the father over his married daughter, rights of the woman in the family, note on polygamy in Massa society, marriage dowry, marriage, movement to marriage house; during pregnancy, the ceremony that precedes childbearing, childbearing; after birth, name, names, stillbirths, children; meals, education, relations between boys and girls before marriage, chiefs; laws and customs, including theft, punishment for murder, adultery, war hostages; ceremonies, material life, drink, tobacco, clothing, hair, ornaments, fetishes, cleanliness, mutilations, art, times of day, numbers, funeral rites, and sorcery. These categories are ethnographic mainstays.

³²² Durosay, Introduction, 41.

Reading Allégret's travelogue today makes it hard to imagine that ethnographic concerns were, in fact, very far from Gide's mind. Allégret's written record shows how often he is engaged in documentary pursuits with technological media—the camera and the movie camera. He notes his attempts at capturing images and their often ambiguous results. On November 8, 1925, Allégret notes with frustration that when he takes his movie camera to film in the village of Monboundija, he finds most of the village gone to the fields, and he is left with taking photographs with his Plaubel.³²³ On November 26, 1925, he takes photographs of men eating manioc, lamenting that the images are “loin de valoir ce que l'on peut voir d'autres jours” [far less valuable than what one can see on other days] (116). On February 4, 1926, he wants to film villagers swimming, but he fails due to a “crise de pudeur” [crisis of prudery] (186). These are typical of his entries, and they are typical of an ethnographic framing.

Part of the cliché of ethnographic filmmaking is that the film's scenes represent in their compilation the totality of the situation under study. Despite the fact that, as Ali Behdad points out, colonial photography—including ethnographic photography—remained deeply indebted to Orientalist romantic paintings and their depictions of non-Western societies for their choice of subjects and framing,³²⁴ ethnographic image making, whether in film or photographs, relies upon the presumed wholeness of its ensemble to claim its authenticity as an objective document. That is, as anthropology developed, classification was increasingly required. New “theoretically informed” documents could apply “universal systems of classification” to the vagaries of “human behavior and environment.”³²⁵ The aspirations of ethnographers toward science meant

³²³ Allégret, *Carnets du Congo*, 104.

³²⁴ Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalist: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 25.

³²⁵ Thornton, “Narrative Ethnography,” 503.

that their descriptions of non-Western cultures must be systematic and guided by universal principles. Since the ethnographer finds him- or herself in a very specific cultural milieu in the field, the crux is to produce universal truths out of cultural particulars; this is for the emergence of the ethnographic method “a crisis of validity arising directly from this conflict.” Details, or the “particularities of perception,” are organized within the schematizing logic of universal categories such as economy, animism, and social structure (517). Ethnography is undergirded by an imperative to view the cultural particulars of integral parts of a whole. This is, in Thornton’s lingo, ethnographic “holism” for which the imagination plays a crucial role: “Since writing is a work of imagination, it is in the imagination that the crucial synthesis between the microcosm and the macrocosm takes place.”³²⁶ Clifford, too, writes about the various methods that modern ethnographers have used of “building up social wholes [...] through a concentration on significant elements”: key institutions, totalizing cultural performances, privileged “armatures,” and initiatory knowledge all aim to “grasp synthetically an overdetermined cultural reality.”³²⁷ Allégret’s films, then, present vignettes, anecdotes, and cultural snapshots, but they rely upon their collective presentation to affirm the documentary portraiture of the social whole, the “des faits sociaux totaux.”³²⁸

Allégret’s photographs and film also derive their authority as part of an ethnographic documentary form from the presumption of naturalism. Allégret’s

³²⁶ Robert J. Thornton, “The Rhetoric of Anthropological Holism,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 3.3. (Aug. 1988): 285. Interestingly, Thornton compares the anthropologist’s use of social structure to the fiction writer’s use of plot: “Social structure, then, like plot, is the image of coherence and order that writing creates” (286).

³²⁷ James Clifford, “Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation,” in *Observers Observed: Essays in Ethnographic Fieldwork*, History of Anthropology, Vol. 1, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 129.

³²⁸ Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, intro. Florence Weber (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012), 234.

acknowledgement of his difficulties ruptures the illusion that these visual images—and, by extension, any other of this era—conclude the subject matter. Central to each pursuit was the difficulty of staging necessary for the capture of images. Because of the relative bulk of his equipment³²⁹ and the lack of familiarity of his subjects, Allégret had to labor mightily, as he admits in a short article in the magazine *les Cahiers de Belgique* in 1928: “Il était difficile de triompher de l’appréhension que l’appareil causait à ces êtres superstitieux, qui gardaient toujours une crainte vague, en sachant que nous nous emparions de leur image [...]” [It was difficult to overcome the apprehension that machines incite in superstitious beings, who always hold a vague fear about our taking their photo].³³⁰ If the subjects are overly well aware, the possibility for naturalism fades quickly.

In short, if we wish to understand the literary ethnography of Gide, or the visual documentary ethnography of Allégret, perhaps the rubric of lucidity provides us a measure to situate artistic versions of ethnography against a more methodologically secure scientific ethnography. Lucidity expresses a goal of artistic representation that allows the cohabitation of subjectivity and objectivity. In science, if any obvious incursion of subjectivity risks ruining the veneer (or actuality) of scientific objectivity, in literature and the arts, it is easier to acknowledge how artistic techniques, such as Gide’s experiments with the note form, render objective, or quasi-scientific surfaces, without totally being divested from subjective rubrics, goals, or artistic contexts. Lucidity, then, is an artistic goal, and one that is both common to documentary forms, naturalism, and in evidence in these works as a goal.

³²⁹ Durosay supplies all the technical information about Allégret’s camera, a Plaubel Makina, and his movie camera, a Debie, called affectionately a “Sept” [Seven] for its seven integral functions. See Durosay, Introduction, 47, 50.

³³⁰ Allégret, “Voyage au Congo,” *Les Cahiers de Belgique* 4 (1928): 138-143.

Looking at certain technical features of Allégret's film "Voyage au Congo" (1927) will reinforce this contention. The film shapes our viewing, confining it to certain directions and goals, through a variety of means, beginning with its subtitle, "Scènes de la vie indigène en Afrique Equatoriale" ["Scenes of Native Life in Equatorial Africa"]. This announces that the film is less a cohesive narrative than a series of vignettes that will aspire toward something called "la vie indigène," or the total social facts by which a society is defined. Next there are intertitles. These guide the viewer toward certain aspects of the visual field, namely, subjects of ethnographic reportage: body washing, cooking, games, festivals, marriage, circumcision ceremonies, hunting, agriculture, architecture, music, religion, and means of transport. Conspicuously absent are shots of nature of any length or detail, as well as any self-reflexive shots that show the French in interactions with Africans. Political commentary is missing; any sense of how the French colonial companies interact with and shape the lives of the locals is also missing. Reading Gide's narrative and his later testimonies on the behalf of the natives against the abuses of the French colonial agents, we might find it hard to believe that Allégret and Gide shared the same voyage, the same experiences, the same perspectives. But this absence of political commentary is one feature of documentary, "scientific" filmmaking.

One prominent intertitle announces an uptick in interest, proposing that the following scenes will be of four "tribus les plus curieuses" [the most interesting tribes], the Bayas, the Saras, the Massas, and the Moundangs. The next intertitle of interest states that the Saras are notable for their willingness to allow the travelers into their lives: "ils nous admettent volontiers dans l'intimité de leur vie" [they freely admit us into their private lives] (37:55). Scenes from the lives of the Saras then proceed in the extended visual narration of scenes from the life of one Djimta, introduced by the intertitles as "Djimta et sa famille" [Djimta and his family]. These scenes constitute

a disproportionately lengthy portion of the film, and they trace Djimta and his family in all walks of life, even featuring him in his marriage proposal to a local girl.

Much of this seems staged, if it remains interesting viewing. In particular, there is a moment after Djimta has secured the assent of his bride's father when the young couple stands next to a straw or wattle wall. They talk, their arms touch, their flirt. Djimta casually touches the girl's breast. While the girl does not look at the camera at any point, Djimta does. It is an odd moment: his acknowledging the camera ruptures the pretense of naturalism, throwing the entire scene into doubt. How spontaneous is the scene? How sculpted is it for the camera? Is Djimta *really* getting married, or is he playacting? This moment stands in direct contrast to others, for example when Allégret hopes to film the Kotokos, native people try to get out of the camera's range. This seems more spontaneous, or more accurate, to how people react to the camera lens of a foreigner. These are moments that show that the film aspires toward lucidity; the failure to produce a transparent naturalistic surface retroactively points to the construction of lucidity itself.

The film also shapes vision through limiting the field of vision through frames. At times, the entire frame is visible; that is, there is a square, or rectangular, field of vision. But at other times Allégret uses a circular frame to direct the gaze toward the center of the frame. This is a focusing gesture that feels akin to a verbal "eureka" moment—"voilà," or "and here it is," native life in its essence. Such occasional framing makes other scenes conspicuous by contrast. A question emerges. This heavy-handed feeding of an image has by its imposition defined other aspects of the visual field not worth seeing: it has rendered them opaque, or, it could be said to reveal other elements as already having been rendered opaque by a type of visual interest and framing that takes place through the first-level concerns of epistemology, aesthetics, and ideology. What of interest exists in the frames outside of what occupies the narrative center of action, as dictated by the framing and by the intertitles? Simple details that do not conform to

ethnographic mandates are then invested with new interest: in an ethnographic scene that depicts a girl and her mother gathering water from a well for the girl to bathe, the trees whip to and fro in the wind. This is an enormously interesting detail from one perspective: in a film that attempts to show the real life for these “peuplades” [peoples], if we think about what we experience of life in our daily affairs, what is more real than a blustery day? What would more provoke the ire of the filmmaker who has lucidity as a visual goal than the wind that can knock over equipment and ruin lenses?

Part III. Conclusion

“The century has been such that, for one whole part of his life Gide saw himself rejected because of his audacity; for another, because of his lack of audacity.”

—Maurice Blanchot³³¹

The year before Gide and Allégret left for French Equatorial Africa, André Breton would launch his diatribe against description in the First Surrealist Manifesto (1924). In the Manifesto, Breton announces the end of his patience for the bourgeois, realist novel, and its chief features, including the fussy, fake practice of description:

Et les descriptions! Rien n'est comparable au néant de celles-ci; ce n'est que superpositions d'images de catalogue, l'auteur en prend de plus en plus à son

³³¹ Maurice Blanchot, “Gide and the Concept of Literature as Adventure,” in *Gide: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by David Littlejohn, translated by David Littlejohn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 60. Originally in *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

aise, il saisit l'occasion de me glisser ses cartes postales, il cherche à me faire tomber d'accord avec lui sur des lieux communs.³³²

[And the descriptions! There is nothing to which their vacuity can be compared; they are nothing but so many superimposed images taken from some stock catalogue, which the author utilizes more and more whenever he chooses; he seizes the opportunity to slip me his postcards, he tries to make me agree with him about the clichés].

Wishing to eschew the vacuity of novelistic description, Breton argued for surrealist poetic practices, but not far beyond the limit of this license would have been Gide's experiments with ethnographic description, which itself moves beyond the literary conventions of a moralizing naturalism. In fact, Breton's love for ethnographic objects³³³ would seem to vouch for the fact that if he writes about the malady affecting the French intellectual gentry, the "intraitable manie qui consiste à ramener l'inconnu au connu, au classable" [incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable], this statement does not address ethnography by and large, and *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* specifically. Rather, Gide's double book, too, serves as an implicit critique of descriptive practices that gloss over the ethical, epistemological and aesthetic difficulties of perception.

Yet Breton did not hold Gide in high regard. In 1922, Breton published in his journal *Littérature* a fake interview in which Gide is made to say that he believes he will

³³² André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: U of MI Press, 1969), 7, 9.

³³³ Breton's penchant for ethnographic knowledge and artifacts is well known. See Emmanuelle Loyer, *Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015) and James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 118-146.

be the French writer whose legacy matters more than anyone else's fifty years after his death, but to this Gide retorted that this characterization was much more appropriate to Breton's own "genre d'ambition" [type of ambition].³³⁴ Moreover, in a short essay that he wrote soon after Gide's death, Breton admits that Gide was an example of the sort of writer that Surrealists reviled: "il est un brillant spécimen d'une espèce que nous, surréalistes, n'avons cessé d'espérer révolue, celle de littérateur professionnel [...]" [he is a brilliant specimen of a type that we, surrealists, have never stopped hoping to discredit, the professional writer].³³⁵ But Breton also admits that there was something to admire in him, as well, for his work, including *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*, which Breton mentions explicitly, demonstrates a "quête passionnée de la justice" [an impassioned quest for justice] and is otherwise "hautement morale en disant la vérité, toute la vérité quand cette vérité était difficile à dire et ne pouvait manquer d'être exploitée à ses dépens" [highly moral in speaking the truth, all of the truth when this truth was difficult to say and could only be used against him].³³⁶ This understanding of Gide's almost masochistic pursuit of truth is crucial to these travelogues. The perceptual and ethical problems inherent in his relation to the truth cause Gide to develop new attitudes and new forms of description.

The travelogues are an oddity in Gide's oeuvre. It is difficult to think of a major writer at the height of their career who took on a writing project so eccentric, or that exceeded in such fashion the general tonality, subject matter, and style of their work to date. Gide was not an official reporter, hired by the French state, as Pierre Savorgnan

³³⁴ André Breton, "André Gide nous parle de ses *Morceaux choisis*," *Littérature* 1 (March 1922): 16. André Gide, *Journal 1889-1939* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), 802.

³³⁵ André Breton, "Sur André Gide," 1952, in *Perspective cavalière*, edited by Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 22.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

de Brazza was in 1905.³³⁷ Gide understood that having been granted a “mission” to French Equatorial Africa made him a “personage officiel” [official figure]. But he soon wanted to buck that designation, wondering whether he was being fed lies about the colony, “Circulais-je jusqu’à présent entre des panneaux de mensonges?” [Have I been confined so far to a room of lies?].³³⁸ He acknowledges his desire to see reality, “Je veux passer dans la coulisse, de l’autre côté du décor, connaître enfin ce qui se cache, cela fût-il affreux. C’est cet ‘affreux’ que je soupçonne, que je veux voir” [I want to pass backstage, to the other side of the décor, to know what is hidden, even if it is frightening. It’s this ‘fright’ that I suspect and want to see.] (113). This desire to see beyond the surface pertains to the reality of colonial abuse and imperial appropriation, but it also could be said to signal Gide’s desire to see beyond the appearances of the stage of traditional artistic practices of description that constitute and reconstitute the same flat theatrical world. Gide finds his purpose in his self-appointed role of an investigator, researcher, or observer: “Je m’invente un devoir professionnel d’observateur...” [I invent for myself the task of the professional observer...] (377). Here, then, we see a bookend phrase, and a response, to his self-critique of lacking a professional perspective; instead of providing exactly a sociological or a painterly perspective, Gide dedicates himself otherwise to observation per se, to seeing and writing clearly, and with lucidity, about sub-Saharan African reality.

What did it mean for Gide to have written about French Equatorial Africa, or for him to attempt to sketch African cultures with an amateur’s hand? For one, it meant that the Parisian literary establishment was forced to deal with Gide’s “notes,” much in a way that it did not have to after the conclusion of the Mission Brazza, whose findings were

³³⁷ Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, *Le rapport Brazza: Mission d’enquête du Congo, rapport et documents (1905-1907)*, preface by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (Neuvy-en-Champagne: Passager clandestine, 2014).

³³⁸ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 24.

suppressed by the French state until 1965.³³⁹ Indeed, Gide notes in his article “La Détresse de notre Afrique Equatoriale ” how disheartened Brazza was that after filing his report he was subject to “constants efforts pour discréditer son témoignage” [constant efforts at discrediting his testimony]; and that the sum total of his testimony in the public sphere amounted to no more than the stray word or two in the odd magazine or newspaper.³⁴⁰ With his literary career at its height, whatever Gide wrote was destined for widespread consumption and immediate and extensive commentary. To read Gide’s travelogues as a liminal example of literary ethnography guards them from erroneous placement within a tradition of merely exotic writing. Gide’s writing manifests a pronounced desire for scientific particularism and accurate descriptions; his frustrations are evident when he feels he does not achieve these goals.

In his variety of descriptive styles, there is also a tacit acknowledgement of how ethnographic description contributes to destabilizing the routines of bourgeois description in being part of a larger terrain of descriptive exigencies that opened up these routines to difference, experimentation, and, ultimately, criticism. Geiger and Putnam argue that Gide’s travelogues are not so much about the description of a world new to Gide as another opportunity for him to write himself into existence. Geiger laments the presence of “Gide’s self-projections” and how the works are “works of egoism.”³⁴¹ Putnam, too, writes that Gide himself stands at the center of the voyage “[s]ince the facts of his account are practically unverifiable by the reader, the authority of

³³⁹ Coquery-Vidrovitch’s lengthy introduction to the report provides the details of its suppression, first effectuated by Raphaël Milliès-Lacroix, Minister of the Colonies from 1906 to 1909 under Georges Clemenceau. In short, the details, critical of the concessionary system of economic exploitation, were deemed explosive. See Coquery-Vidrovitch, Préface, 9.

³⁴⁰ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 534.

³⁴¹ Geiger, “Sightseeing: *Voyage au Congo* and the Ethnographic Spectacle,” 112.

his discourse depends on the renown and reliability of the author.”³⁴² Yet egotism is simply a condition of authorship, and self-projections are as well. These attributes of the text do not diminish their modifications to the descriptive practices of the belles-lettres tradition, and they do not negate the note that emerges as a quasi-scientific descriptive form.

Prior to Gide’s travelogues, there were few French works to dislocate public taste in regards to the routines of naturalistic, novelistic description. Segalen’s *Les immémoriaux* (1907),³⁴³ and René Maran’s *Batouala, véritable roman nègre*, which won the Prix Goncourt in 1921,³⁴⁴ would be two, but neither was centrally placed in the French intellectual milieu. *Les immémoriaux* was left unread, only to be rediscovered by postcolonial writers, such as Abdelkébir Khatibi, upon its reissue in 1956 in Plon’s prestigious Terre Humaine series.³⁴⁵ *Batouala*’s did win the Prix Goncourt, and yet this achievement generated less recognition for the work than negative, racist conversation and concomitant backlash. In 1923, Gustave Geffroy, the president of the Académie Goncourt, stated unequivocally that race was a major influence upon the committee’s judgment: “Nous avons voulu, en décernant le prix-Goncourt à un nègre, honorer une race dévouée à la France” [In giving the Prix Goncourt to a black, we wanted to honor a race devoted to France].³⁴⁶ Segalen and Maran were overlooked, and Brazza’s voice was suppressed. Gide’s books, then, were the first testimonials of colonial abuse from the French literary elite that could not be denied, and, indeed, it is this fact that won Gide praise from literary rivals and admirers alike—from Breton’s statements at the head of

³⁴² Putnam, “Writing the Wrongs,” 95.

³⁴³ Victor Segalen, *Les immémoriaux* [1907], Terre Humaine (Paris: Plon, 1956).

³⁴⁴ René Maran, *Batouala, véritable roman nègre* [1921], edited by Josiane Grinfas (Paris: Magnard, 2002).

³⁴⁵ Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Le scribe et son ombre* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2008), 61.

³⁴⁶ Alice J. Smith, “Rene Maran’s *Batouala* and the Prix-Goncourt,” in *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 4.4 (1980): 31.

this conclusion; to Leiris' reluctant praise, "[j]e les défends pour le principe, car ce livre a tout de même dénoncé pas mal de cochonneries" [I defend them on principle, because the book denounced its fair share of idiocy]³⁴⁷; to Maran's retrospective expression of gratitude in 1938 that Gide's *Voyage au Congo* gave him some "satisfactions morales" [moral sense of triumph]³⁴⁸ insomuch as Gide's works confirmed his critiques.

Voyage au Congo and *Le Retour du Tchad* mix the literary and the scientific in the way that was not yet forbidden by newly rigorous routines of scientific ethnography and its descriptive proscriptions. They present an ongoing struggle for expression, a struggle of textualization that points to uncertainties contingent upon the intersection of epistemological constraints that came with competing styles of writing. In these struggles, and in the varieties of his descriptive style, we find Gide dealing with the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic limitations of his own style, the burdensome inheritance of exotic African travelogues, and the imprecise objectivity that anthropology presented for knowledge about African cultures, which becomes declined or delimited in these texts through the literary and artistic paradigm of lucidity.

Perhaps it was Gide's emergent aesthetics that dissuaded him from attempting any final, summary categorization beyond that which is fostered by his daily entries, as diverse as they are in content, thinking, and style. Writing about a boat trip to visit the Congo River rapids near Brazzaville, Gide takes offense at a fellow passenger's suggestion that art demands scale: "L'art comporte une tempérance et répugne à l'énormité. Une description ne devient pas plus émouvante pour avoir mis dix au lieu d'un" [Art demands temperance and distains enormity. A description does not become

³⁴⁷ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 248.

³⁴⁸ Maran, *Batouala, véritable roman nègre*, 23-4.

more moving for having given ten in the place of one.]³⁴⁹ Gide's artistic sensibility leads him to criticize Conrad's *Typhoon* for indulging in "enormity," and forcing the sublime; in these travelogues, Gide increasingly prefers the single detail, the scrupulous depiction. This is an attitude that finds much in accord with the methodology of modern science, which proceeds toward the building of whole pictures and universal knowledge through the incessant accumulation of single details afforded by each fruitful experiment.

Famously Gide took the field home with him. A week after he returned to Paris, visited Gide at Villa Montmorency in Paris. Martin du Gard describes Gide as being an uncharacteristically distracted host, living in a state of clutter, obsessed with "the great problem which preoccupies him: his report on the injustices and abuses which he discovered in Africa."³⁵⁰ Martin du Gard sits captive, the unwilling interlocutor to Gide's impromptu speech: "Once launched, he began to expound on the whole problem of colonialization, put the questions in their right order, marshaled the arguments, become more and more excited, and raised his voice" (ibid.). Gide tells his friend that his spiel is in preparation for his planned public speeches on the subject. Martin du Gard notes how Gide was overwrought with emotion. When Gide produces an official report from 1902, in the middle of reading the document to Martin du Gard, he stops and "stagger[s] off into another room." He cannot control his emotions when thinking about how colonial misadministration decimated a tribe, killing off the majority of its members (76). For the next year and a half, Gide would be in continuous public debate over the validity of the concessionary companies as an aspect of colonial administration. The texts provide good evidence that the problem of describing peoples forces Gide into considerations of the unethical perspectives of the Western imagination in regard to sub-Saharan Africa,

³⁴⁹ Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, 27.

³⁵⁰ Roger Martin du Gard, *Recollections of André Gide*, translated by John Russell (New York: Viking, 1953), 75.

and the descriptive practices produced out of and in conjunction with those perspectives. Apparent in a dense and complicated text, Gide struggles to overcome the ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic constraints enmeshed with inherited forms of observational practices and the traditional aesthetics that govern descriptive surfaces in texts. These travelogues provide insight into the collaboration—or, from one perspective, the *conspiracy*—of epistemology and style, and so serve as a double historical example of much underappreciated value.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Authentic” Description and the Literary Documentary in Michel Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme*

“A writer should have the precision of a poet and the imagination of a scientist.”

Vladimir Nabokov

The publisher’s Amazon blurb for the 2017 English translation of Michel Leiris’ *L’Afrique fantôme* presents the work in the language of paradox, calling it a travel journal, a diary, and yet “unclassifiable.”³⁵¹ Such thinking has long characterized *L’Afrique fantôme*. The blurb’s concluding paragraph attempts to resolve the problem of categories by eschewing genre altogether for a word with other connotations: “*Phantom Africa* is an invaluable *document*” [emphasis mine]. The impact of this last word is unmistakable: not only does it recall the multi-genre magazine *Documents* where Leiris was part of the editorial team, but it also conjures up documentary ethnography conceptualized by Marcel Mauss and Marcel Griaule and practiced during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission. This word and its history play a large role in the ambivalent language of paradox that surrounds the work, and it signals a critical lacuna that continues to define scholarship on *L’Afrique fantôme*, namely, the term “documentary” remains relatively uninspected as a literary category wedged against the ideas, aesthetics, and ethics of science.

If today not many read *L’Afrique fantôme*, this is perhaps due to its historical association with the blight of colonialism. Objectively, the book’s lack of a reading public today might also be due to its tremendous size. James Clifford, for instance, calls it “a

³⁵¹ Publisher’s advertisement for *Phantom Africa*, amazon.com, accessed 11 July 2017. Michel Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, trans. Brent Hays Edwards (Chicago: Seagull, 2017).

monster” and “dense.”³⁵² Additionally, its incorporation of languages, through the use of personal names and the naming of objects and experiences of foreign cultures, constitutes a challenge to most readers due to general ignorance about Africa. To read *L’Afrique fantôme* specifically as literature presents the further challenge of recovering it from the social sciences, where commentators read it as a critique of colonial ethnography. Seán Hand calls it a “classic of ethnographic literature,”³⁵³ and yet he resolves this ambiguous designation—is it ethnography? is it literature?—with further modification, calling it a “fieldwork document” (54), thus heightening again its social scientific status. When in 1996 Gallimard grouped *L’Afrique fantôme* with Leiris’ other works on Africa in the volume *Miroir de l’Afrique*,³⁵⁴ the weight of the collection fell in the direction of ethnography. An anonymous note opposite its title page states that the compilation stands “au carrefour de la littérature, de l’ethnographie et de la réflexion esthétique” [at the crossroads of literature, ethnography, and aesthetic thinking]. But the second of these categories dominates the extensive volume introduction by Jean Jamin, the noted social scientist and executor of Leiris’ literary estate. James Clifford constructs an ambiguous portrait of the book, as well, emphasizing what he sees as its non-normative and “stubbornly naïve” narrative structure, a “merely chronological collection of citations and snapshots.”³⁵⁵ Yet this structure of the teleological progress of a nearly unending string of days is common to travel writing, and by eliding this simple fact, Clifford obscures the work’s literary status. The originality of the work has less to do with

³⁵² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 165.

³⁵³ Seán Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54.

³⁵⁴ Michel Leiris, *Miroir de l’Afrique*, intro. Jean Jamin (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

³⁵⁵ Clifford, *Predicament*, 172.

“hold[ing] off acceptable forms of narrative” (ibid.) than with something else, yet to be defined.³⁵⁶

To acknowledge that *L’Afrique fantôme* is a travel narrative, and thus to reinscribe it within the literary history of travel writing, elucidates several salient facts about that history. *L’Afrique fantôme* shows in characteristic and revealing ways how, by the early 1930s, the tradition of travel writing had moved away from the standards of the picturesque voyage, with its emphasis on pictorial description and its generalizations about the customs and manners of foreign peoples. Victor Segalen wrote in 1917 that the successful circumnavigation of the globe had effectively ended the “exoticism of the world,”³⁵⁷ and in the first decades of the twentieth century, anthropology was the motivating force behind change in the genre, so much so that by the 1930s, at least in Marcel Griaule’s mind, “anthropology [was] the most perfected form of travel.”³⁵⁸ Studying foreign cultures through more objective lenses became a new focus, and suddenly “[c]omprendre des cultures fut alors plus gratifiant que découvrir des terres nouvelles” [to understand cultures was then more gratifying than discovering new worlds].³⁵⁹ Travel writing bifurcated into two veins: the narrative of adventure, like those of Pierre Loti or Henri de Monfreid in which the author-hero is the center of the narrative’s drama; and the narrative of the anthropologist, in which the cultures encountered while traveling are the narrative focus.

Beyond the scholarly tendency that positions the text as a fringe production of social science, two chief literary ways exist to explicate this text, each with its significant

³⁵⁶ Imputations of naivety are common to postcolonial scholarship on colonial travel writing. David Scott differentiates between Gide’s *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad* and Leiris’ work by calling the former and not the latter “naive.” See *Semiologies of Travel: from Gautier to Baudrillard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 162-3.

³⁵⁷ Victor Segalen, *L’essai sur l’exotisme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978), 96.

³⁵⁸ Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield*, trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 129.

³⁵⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 38.

flaws. First, to read *L'Afrique fantôme* primarily as an African interlude of Leiris' Surrealism changes the status of his dream transcriptions: while these transcriptions are quantitatively few, an emphasis on these dream passages pushes the work toward a "surrealist poetics," "surrealist ethnography,"³⁶⁰ or "oneirography."³⁶¹ This reading attempts to explain the work in continuity with Leiris' involvement with Surrealist groups and psychoanalysis, which he began in 1929.³⁶² Yet this reading minimizes the text's pronounced and uncommon interest in the world, and it suppresses the richness of cultural detail, the book's most obvious quality—the "démon glacial d'information" [glacial demon of information] that besets Leiris during the mission.³⁶³ Such readings diminish the impact of the book's scope of details as important to a new tradition of travel writing, the anthropological. Secondly, postcolonial readings seem largely content with annotating the writer's deficits of cultural awareness and excesses of self-understanding.³⁶⁴ While postcolonial readings have provided temporary remedy for a French literary tradition that still struggles to overcome exoticism, such readings nevertheless eschew the question of the text's difference within the literary tradition of

³⁶⁰ Hand, *Leiris*, 54, 55.

³⁶¹ Clifford, *Predicament*, 165. This Surrealist approach also defines Ian Walker's interpretation of the 1934 cover image to *L'Afrique fantôme*, the "Masque 'jeune fille'" [mask of the 'young girl']. Walker claims that the photograph is an example of Surrealist ethnography due to its obvious sexuality, its fetishized nature, and that it sits on the cover and "did not seek to explicate but rather to celebrate otherness." See *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 196. However, the precise caption given to the photograph reproduced inside the volume just after page 80 shows that Leiris could—and in fact does—explain the cultural dimensions of the photograph, as the image is labeled, "Le masque 'femme du cordonnier' avec ses seins en fruit de baobab, Sanga, 1er novembre" [The mask 'wife of the cobbler' with her breasts in baobab fruit, Sanga, November 1st].

³⁶² Michel Leiris, *Journal, 1922-1989*, ed. Jean Jamin (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 202.

³⁶³ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 90.

³⁶⁴ See Phyllis Clark Taoua, "In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme*," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 167 (2002): 479-498.

travel writing, and thus the question of how exactly this text stands as exemplary, or marks a new horizon of possibility within literature.

I would like to redeem *L’Afrique fantôme* as a literary text and to re-approach how it speaks of Leiris’ quest to attain a certain form of “authentic” description, a form of description possible in what I will call the literary documentary. This form of description develops through an intersection of scientific principles and literary-aesthetic conditions. It goes without saying that Leiris’ intellectual perspective during the voyage was greatly indebted to Griaule’s method of fieldwork, his “*documentary system*.”³⁶⁵ These ethnographic imperatives weigh heavily on Leiris’s thinking; adapting them to travel writing proves to be part of the book’s oddity, innovation, and “viscerality.”³⁶⁶ Leiris wishes for more a constrained form of description, less solipsistic, less strictly judged by the traditional aesthetic criteria of the “belle phrase.” Straddling scientific and literary realms, Leiris’ thinking seeks a balance as he attempts to locate a form of description that is both ethical and aesthetic; in retrospect, we can call this form the literary documentary.

Part I. The Unsayable

³⁶⁵ In this method, first, new media—photography, video, audio recordings—document culture. Then, in the second phase, informants serve as interpreters and guides for “an *initiatory complex*.” See Clifford, *Predicament*, 65.

³⁶⁶ On January 31, 2018, Brent Hays Edwards presented his English translation of *L’Afrique fantôme* at the Columbia University Maison Française. He was joined by Emmanuelle Saada, Denis Hollier, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, and the anthropologist Brian Larkin. Larkin mentioned repeatedly that while there are many excellent works of scholarship that investigate the connections between imperialism and anthropology, nevertheless the work of Leiris remains fresh and surprising for its “viscerality.”

Il est probable, en effet, qu'une Afrique à peu près inconnue et non encore domestiquée, si tant est qu'à une telle époque j'eusse osé l'affronter, m'aurait fait peur et, de ce fait, aurait pris à mes yeux une plus grande opacité.³⁶⁷

[It is likely, in effect, that an Africa that was so little known and not yet domesticated, as it was in the era that I dared venture there, frightened me, and, because of this fact, would have appeared in my eyes with an even greater opacity.]

Commenting on the varieties of ethnography that have developed in the aftermath of relentless anthropological self-critique that began in earnest in the 1970s, Clifford writes that each ethnographer has to make a choice, and, like it or not, a finalized text ultimately presents to the public “a controlling mode of authority.”³⁶⁸ This is true as well of a literary work: its credibility, its claim upon the reader's attention, arises from a certain structure that could be called a mode of authority. In *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris exhibits an ambivalent attraction and repulsion to aspects of both ethnographic and literary traditions. Leiris struggles to achieve a tenuous balance at the intersection of the scientific and the aesthetic, and this quest for balance in objective and subjective probity defines the framing parameters for the “authentic” description that constitutes this work's mode of authority. In short, at stake is nothing less than the limits of description.

Leiris' 1951 preface to the republication of his book, quoted above, raises the issue of Africa's opacity. How could Leiris have seen anything if it was covered with a sort of opacity born from ignorance? If Africa was covered with a film of opacity that would logically render it invisible, what could Leiris have written about, during the six

³⁶⁷ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 12.

³⁶⁸ Clifford, *Predicament*, 54.

hundred-odd pages of his travel narrative? Opacity is a visual check producing blindness. At the textual level, this blindness becomes muteness. Reliant primarily upon visual information,³⁶⁹ the ethnographer who acknowledges the presence of opacity in fact points to an existential threat to their task. But Leiris does not speak of a total opacity. He writes that Africa was more opaque than it might have otherwise been, for instance, in the case that he had been knowledgeable, or if the times had been different. The question becomes one of contingent opacity, or how epistemological and aesthetic frames create versions of opacity.

Indeed, we could say that different from the hubris of proto-anthropological observation in which the stature of the European observer is seemingly enough to vouch for the credibility of his or her observations, thus pretending that the world is nothing but transparent to the privileged voyager, Griaule's method of ethnography is premised upon contingent opacity. In order to generate credible observation that will be separable from anthropology's textual antecedents and the categorical, off-the-cuff generalizations of the writers of the picturesque voyage, a new imposition is enforced, and the European observer has new conditions to meet before vision is itself accredited. Now intensive, personal, and credible observation in the field is required; time itself is one measure of this new investment in seeing. Through such observation, anthropology hopes to create texts of social scientific status to match or compete with those of history, the "mother" of all social sciences.³⁷⁰ That is, if history is traditionally thought to rest "on the critical study of documents," and in this its privilege is constituted, then anthropology is based on "observations."³⁷¹ Ethnographic observation must be intensive and sedentary in order to

³⁶⁹ Clifford, *Predicament*, 31.

³⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 378.

³⁷¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 17.

be credible; it must acknowledge initial opacity as a staging ground and first condition for the development of reliable information.

Griaule's rigorous methodology is premised upon various levels of opacity. First, the science's credibility rests upon direct observation: what is seen is seen for what it is because the scientist carries no presumptions as an observer and holds no presumptions or preconceptions. Griaule's method began with the collection of objects and documents, followed by their being "given voice" by "dialogical processes of education and exegesis."³⁷² In one sense, the documents are rendered visible through native testimony and the information gleaned through native informants. By limiting the unchecked speculative forays of the Western observer, and in acknowledging the ethnographer's fundamental need for the native informant to explain each document, Griaule greatly reduces presumptions to knowledge. In one way, science, like any form of knowledge, is defined through a concentration of attention and a relinquishment of certain spheres of human experience and contemplation. Only through marking off certain sectors as what is beyond science does science produce its specific form (and rhetoric) of credibility. What is and is not possible of being incorporated into anthropology, then, relates both to what is and is not opaque or visible, and what is and is not describable.

In *L'Afrique fantôme*, the tension between science and literature, two forms of knowledge that take description to be if not their chief task then one of primary importance, leads to the fruitful balance of the literary documentary. Both science and literature acknowledge the not-yet-described as being at the center of attention. In attempting to describe the not-yet-described, the scientist assumes *a priori* that it is describable—that it is open to being described; yet since science works on the edge of previously conducted research, the definition of the describable per se is never very

³⁷² Clifford, *Predicament*, 65.

strongly challenged. The convention of science makes the not-yet-described seem like a natural and inevitable extension of the already-described. Through this, the potentially indescribable seems, for a moment, like possibly describable.

Science works in the domain of the not-yet-described but potentially describable: that which has not yet been described is conceivable through its proximity to that which has been described. The indescribable is merely that which is not proximate to the current bounds of scientific investigation; it is not, per se, an important category. Literature does not acknowledge indescribability either, but for different reasons: what is not yet described, or what is indescribable, is so because of a failure of method or insight. Take Leiris' suspicion of picturesque description as an example: landscape is opaque, and so indescribable, due to the excesses of pictorial, picturesque description. But for literature the indescribable has no reality of its own, no reality beyond referring to a flaw in literary depiction. Yet if both literature and science do not acknowledge the indescribable—each for its own reasons—these two forms of knowledge have different relations to the unsayable. Strictly speaking, science is marked off as a form of knowledge against the unsayable as a metaphysical boundary, whereas literature binds itself, defines itself, in the difficult task of approaching the unsayable.

In fact, you could say that the arts (with literature as one example) differ from the sciences in that the former strives to express the unsayable and the latter renounces it. When Jean-Luc Nancy contrasts “canonic” language to “apocryphal” language, the first aligns with scientific discourse and the second, with poetry. Their difference is their relation to the unsayable, “cette chose indicible” [this unsayable thing].³⁷³ Science is unable to address the unsayable, or the metaphysics of that which is beyond understanding: “[c]hose indicible: non pas qu’elle excède les possibilités de langue, non

³⁷³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Langue apocryphe/Apocryphal Language* [2002], trans. Michael Bishop (Halifax: VVV, 2014). No page numbers appear in the bilingual chapbook.

pas qu'on ne *peut* pas la dire, mas tout différemment qu'elle *n'est pas à dire*. Ce qui est à dire est cela, que la chose est hors-sens [...] [an unsayable thing: not that it is in excess of language's possibilities, not that one *cannot* say it, but quite differently that it is *not for the saying*. What has to be said is that—that the thing is beyond meaning] (ibid.). But Leiris moves to claim the unsayable, writing that the poet alone can “prétendre avoir quelque connaissance de la vie dans ce qui fait sa substance” [claim to have some knowledge of life in what constitutes its substance].³⁷⁴ In so doing, Leiris not only self-consciously orients the text toward literature but rather defines its ontology—its fundamental perspective upon what is and is not incorporable—as literary. Thus, to understand fully the literariness of the literary documentary form in which Leiris' authentic description emerges, we must go beyond acknowledging the characteristic literary features of the text's surface to speak of its relation to the sayable/the unsayable, the describable/the indescribable, and opacity/transparency.

It is with no little irony that the unsayable manifests itself in Leiris' travel narrative. Since Griaule's science cannot countenance the unsayable, Leiris has, in the end, a very different subject position in relation to moments in the field when the ethnographic method does not transform the opaque and the unsayable into the visible, the transparent—and so the sayable. If the ethnographic team expects and allows opacity in the first moments of cultural contact, when interrogations of native informants or the collection of documents does not transform opacity into transparency, then the team becomes frustrated. Their experiences near Fodébougou, Mali attest to this fact. “Tout le monde est furieux” [Everyone is furious] (67), writes Leiris, when the guides do not lead them to the expected cultural sites where the scientific process of “marcher de pièce à conviction à pièce à conviction” [going from one 'piece of conviction' to another] can happen apace, and thus where “poursuivre la vérité comme à la piste” [following the

³⁷⁴ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 311.

truth like you do a path] (66) is stymied. At the end of the day of July 16, 1931, Griaule tells the chief of the village of that his guides would not get but modest compensation, as they had twice lied to them: once in misidentifying “des trous véritables” [true holes] and once in saying that the “holes” were not accessible (69). Thus, the in-built paradox of the ethnographic situation is the following: while the ethnographers assiduously seek the knowledge of “secret” rituals, they cannot believe that this knowledge is *actually* secret, that is, beyond words and so knowable only by certain persons who have been attested to as trustworthy and capable of guarding the culture’s unsayable. When the team meets with this fact, the members can only believe that their informants are being stubborn, childish, or obstructionist. The impenetrability of certain spheres of knowledge for the Western interloper raises the specter of the unsayable as inherent in the ethnographic acknowledgement of cultural opacity: the unsayable is perplexingly resistant to scientific knowledge.

Science, by itself, cannot conscience the unsayable; it is a metaphysical category that defies its positivist prerogatives. On the other hand, literature can countenance the unsayable, and, in part, its very definition invokes the challenge of its impossibility—to put into words that which cannot be put into words. A poet in the broadest sense of the word, Leiris understands that experience has an unsayable dimension—sacred, private, “not for the saying.” Literature is the textual space in which the idea of reaching into the beyond, into the unsayable, as untenable and as taboo as it may be, obtains. In one way, we can see that the scientific desire to overcome opacity through a method of utter objectivity, distance, and reason, produces, to Leiris’ mind, the frustration with opacity that the team experiences. By involving himself in the practice of observation and the process of understanding, the poet can see a potential way beyond the impenetrability of another culture’s “truth” that the anthropologist cannot contemplate for the very reason that anthropology’s mode of authority, its method of credibility, is pinioned against the

texts of the picturesque voyage, and against the texts of history, marking a specific sphere that it will render visible in a new and credible way and at the same time marking off other spheres—the experiential, the affective—as antithetical to its purposes. For Leiris, that science that does not let observers interact fully creates its “inhumanity” and this leads to the poet’s bitterness: “Amertume. Ressentiment contre l’ethnographie, qui fait prendre cette position si inhumaine d’observateur, dans des circonstances où il faudrait s’abandonner” [Bitterness. Bad feelings for ethnography, which makes this position of the “inhumane” observer, in circumstances where it would be better to dive in].³⁷⁵ The circumscription of anthropological visibility produces at once a willing but frustrated resignation to forms of opacity. Yet, at the same time, Leiris’ curbing of the speculative flights that otherwise are one earmark of the literary such makes this a remarkable work: Leiris achieves a literary documentary form in *L’Afrique fantôme* that addresses the problematic of the describable in literature and its textual avatar, authentic description, and it does so within a historical moment of ethnographic expansion and direct and protracted contact with non-European people.

Part II. The Document and Information

Mon ambition aura été, au jour le jour, de décrire ce voyage tel que je l’ai vu, moi-même tel que je suis.³⁷⁶

[My ambition was to describe this voyage on a daily basis just as I saw it, just as I was.]

³⁷⁵ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 433.

³⁷⁶ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* [1934], in *Miroir de l’Afrique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 96.

The Document

Vincent Debaene writes that a tension between the “‘Conradian taste’ for stories and Leiris’s preference for the literality of the ‘document’” defines *L’Afrique fantôme*.³⁷⁷ While for narratives of the madness inspired and maintained by colonial worlds, few anecdotes can match the ordeal that the ethnographic team faces at the Sudanese-Ethiopian border; and yet the concept of the document is the more obvious pole from which to begin a discussion of Leiris’ aesthetics here and the literary documentary.

The concept of the document inheres in the professionalization and disciplinary categorizations of the social sciences in the 1920s in France; it exists as a new and stringent premise for the method of ethnography developed first by Mauss and then consolidated and expanded by Griaule. Furthermore, the concept of the document shows how the rubrics and thinking of science penetrated the literary domain in such a way that aesthetic practice now contends in *L’Afrique fantôme* directly with a rubric for scientific textuality, with the latter constraining traditional features of literature to a considerable degree. The concept of the document as scientific text creates the argument for ethnography’s credibility and the blueprint for the new type of literary anthropology that Leiris uses here.

Within the French literary tradition, the concept of the document was tied to ethnography as far back as 1859. For Fromentin, the document existed as a new horizon of representation. The document relies upon a relatively new desire in the artist for rigorous “truthfulness.” If traditional demands for artistic representation direct the artist toward the all-consuming pursuit of beauty, Fromentin perceived that “truthfulness” could be a single-minded goal. The dedicated pursuit of truthfulness results in a raw text so new to art that there is no word in art dictionaries to name it:

³⁷⁷ Debaene, *Far Afield*, 178.

Le peintre qui bravement prendra le parti de se montrer véridique à tout prix rapportera de ses voyages quelque chose de tellement inédit, de si difficile à déterminer, que, le dictionnaire *artistique* n'ayant pas de terme approprié à des œuvres de caractère si imprévu, j'appellerai cet ordre de sujets des *documents*.

[The painter who bravely decides to pursue truthfulness at all costs will bring back from his travels something so original, so difficult to name, that, with no appropriate term for these works of such an unexpected nature in art dictionaries, I will call this order of subjects *documents*.]³⁷⁸

This new form of artistic textuality is not a genre; Fromentin writes that the pursuit of truthfulness applies “dans chaque genre” [to every genre] (185). In order to describe the concept of the document, Fromentin uses the felicitous phrase an “order of subjects.” This phrase suggests that Fromentin was aware of how the “document” itself could condition the idea of his artist’s task, and, thus, determine practices that produce and also circumscribe visibility.

Fromentin acknowledges that this new principle of truthfulness can be applied to every possible subject of representation. When the traveler has this documentary regime in place, there is no end to what can be represented: “[...] il n’y a plus de limite aux investigations du voyageur lorsqu’il a pris pour règle l’exactitude” [there is no limit to the investigations of the traveler when he has taken upon himself the principle of exactitude] (185). Furthermore, the artistic account will furnish images “minutieuses copiées avec la scrupuleuse authenticité d’un portrait” [copied with the scrupulous authenticity of a portrait] (*ibid.*). The “document” is like a portrait in that the latter aims for a one-to-one, transparent representation of reality. The new aim of overseas travelers engaged in

³⁷⁸ Eugène Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel* [1859] (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 185.

writing about or painting the non-European world will be to give “données positives” [credible facts] in the words of Garcin de Tassy, that fill in the “lacune” [lacuna] of “particularités” [details] missing previously from overseas accounts.³⁷⁹

When applied to rising European curiosity about foreign people, “l’attrait de l’inédit” [attraction to the raw] produces “le goût de l’ethnographie” [the taste for ethnography].³⁸⁰ Thus, the concept of the document, this new “order of subjects,” stands as a new defining edge for the possibilities of the description of foreign lands and their cultures. If pursued with sincerity, if controlled by a greater artistic design, then the principle of the document is useful as an acknowledgement of the curiosity people increasingly take in the foreign: “L’originalité des costumes, l’étrangeté des physionomies, la diversité des types, qui présentent une variété presque infinie [...] tout cela peut étonner et intéresser l’esprit” [The originality of dress, the strangeness of physiognomies, the diversity of types, in their almost infinite variety ... all of this shocks and interests the spirit].³⁸¹

By the 1920s, anthropology as a science began to differentiate itself from other social sciences, including history, and the concept of the document was crucial in the disciplinary separation of the social sciences.³⁸² Several issues concerning the competition between history and anthropology deserve mention for the ways that they inform the scientific prerogatives that so heavily inflect *L’Afrique fantôme*. These issues are animated by the challenge that anthropology faced in formalizing a method for

³⁷⁹ Garcin de Tassy, *Mémoire sur des particularités de la religion musulmane dans l’Inde, d’après les ouvrages Hindoustani* (Paris: L’Imprimerie royale, 1831), 3-4.

³⁸⁰ Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 186.

³⁸¹ Eugène Fromentin, “Salon de 1876” in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. and intro. Guy Sagnes, La Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 1226.

³⁸² Marcel Detienne writes that “[t]he official establishment of anthropology came about later than that of the ‘Science of Language’ but at about the same time as the ‘Science of History.’” See *Comparing the Incomparable*, trans. Janice Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 5.

producing documents that had disciplinary specificity but that also could be argued to be as authentic and as authoritative as the documents of history.

From the perspective of historians, anthropologists cannot be as “critical,” or as objective, because their data and documents are tainted by personal involvement. In his *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, Griaule addresses this difference from the perspective of anthropology. He defines the ethnographer, a “researcher of human documents,” as a type of historian, “Le chercheur de documents humains est un historien mis à même les faits qu’il décrit” [The researcher of human documents is a historian who lives through the events he describes].³⁸³ But, for Griaule, the ethnographer compares favorably to the historian because “[l]’historien peut rarement juger des faits qu’il vit” [the historian can rarely judge the facts that he lives through] (102). In other words, the historian makes an argument by locating “data” in documents, whereas “research in anthropology is based on creating data,” and subsequently creating authoritative documents.³⁸⁴ Lévi-Strauss refines this division by qualifying the traditional difference between two paradigms: history’s documents of critical study are the collected analysis of “numerous observers” whereas anthropology’s observations are generally those of a “single individual.”³⁸⁵

Trying to address the deficit of authoritativeness of the anthropological document, the new ethnography that emerged in the 1920s was concerned with fieldwork and emphasized the ontological privilege of “the power of observation” in trying to effect a systematization of its method.³⁸⁶ Mauss’ *Instructions sommaires pour la collection d’objets ethnographiques* (1931) details the rules for collecting cultural objects

³⁸³ Marcel Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 9.

³⁸⁴ Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

³⁸⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 17.

³⁸⁶ Clifford, *Predicament*, 31.

for ethnographic study, and the manual served as the field guide for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission.³⁸⁷ It presents a rigorous method that dictates how ethnographers are to “furnish documents.” Mauss emphasizes how material objects serve as better cultural specimens than written documents. Because of their use in cultural practices, they are more reliable. They are anonymous, and their “authentic” and “autonomous” status in cultural practices means they are never fashioned “for the needs of a cause.” In that way, they are not self-conscious, and their forms do not express the motivations or needs of particular actors within society. They define “types” and are free of individualizing rhetoric: “[...] parce qu’il s’agit ici d’objets authentiques et autonomes, qui n’ont pu être fabriqués pour les besoins de la cause et caractérisent mieux que quoi que ce soit les types de civilisation” [because they are authentic and autonomous objects and cannot be bent to support a cause and characterize civilizational types better than anything else].³⁸⁸

Written documents are deemed ideologically motivated. In this sense, they can only obscure the world, rendering it opaque to the scientist. Objects are uniquely qualified to represent culture. In Mauss’ guidebook, objects are also outside of the distorting agendas of aesthetics: “L’objet n’est pas autre chose qu’un *témoin*, qui doit être envisagé en fonction des renseignements qu’il apporte sur une civilisation donnée, et non d’après sa valeur esthétique” [The object is nothing if not a *witness*, which must be understood for the information that it brings about the given civilization, and not for its aesthetic value] (8). Objects are “witnesses” to the truths of culture: they are full of details and information. As Clifford writes, these witness-objects in this practice are documents in and of themselves, and “the task of the ethnographer, whether alone or in

³⁸⁷ Marcel Mauss, *Instructions sommaires pour la collection d’objets ethnographiques* (Paris: Musée d’Ethnographie, 1931).

³⁸⁸ Mauss, *Instructions sommaires*, 7.

a research team, was to amass as complete a corpus as possible: texts, artifacts, maps, photographs, and so forth—‘documents’ precisely localized and covering a broad range of cultural phenomena.”³⁸⁹

With Griaule, this inherently plural pursuit became explicitly so, and the need to collect multiple sources and to create documents for cross-referencing and verification would become a principal methodological constraint for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission. The lens of opacity that obscures the truth about the inner workings of foreign cultures is cleaned person by person, object by object, document by document. This is, practically speaking, the same rationale of any modern scientific laboratory: it takes a team to produce knowledge. As Griaule writes, “L’équipe est seule capable d’organiser une enquête cohérente et productive, car elle permet une division du travail quantitative et qualitative” [Only the team is capable of organizing a coherent and productive research agenda because it allows a quantitative and qualitative division of labor].³⁹⁰ Griaule would make sure that a team carried out methodical observations based upon a range of cultural objects from which anthropological truth could be culled. If history was premised upon the comments of other observers, anthropology was built upon the premise of “we, the observers,” or, as Lévi-Strauss summarizes, the “ethnographer furnishes documents.”³⁹¹

To view cultural objects as documents was not foreign to Leiris. Ethnography’s method for accessing and assessing the real was already part of the intellectual platform at *Documents*.³⁹² Michael Richardson argues that *Documents* offered “a sort of

³⁸⁹ Clifford, *Predicament*, 63.

³⁹⁰ Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 15.

³⁹¹ Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 18.

³⁹² George Bataille and Pierre d’Espezal were fellow librarians at the Bibliothèque Nationale when they conceived of the idea of the magazine. D’Espezal, the editor of *Aréthuse*, got backing from the art collector

ethnography of the everyday in which there was a two-way movement between the exotic and the commonplace.”³⁹³ The “ethnography of the everyday” hopes to produce the re-experiencing of quotidian objects as both “exotic” and “commonplace.” Such an artistic agenda creates the synthesis of the exceptional and the typical: “Car, somme toute, montrer des objets usuels, quotidiens, pour ainsi dire banals (serrures, portes, houes, calebasses, paniers, jarres, etc.), n’est-ce pas détourner le rôle qu’on lui prête d’ordinaire: conserver, concentrer, exposer les *trésors* d’une culture, ce qui donc révèle de l’exception en même temps que de l’exemplarité? [Because, in sum, to show usual objects, quotidian ones, in other words banal ones (locks, doors, hoes, drinking vessels, baskets, jars, etc.), isn’t it to reroute the role that we assign to the ordinary: to conserve, to concentrate, to expose the *treasures* of a culture, that which reveals the exception at the same time as the exemplarity?]³⁹⁴ Through this re-experiencing of the quotidian object, Bataille desired to propagate “base materialism” and the reappraisal of mundane materiality.³⁹⁵ The “marginal” and the “suspect” were the means by which *Documents* could launch its critique of bourgeois life, bourgeois art, and its conventions.³⁹⁶

Jamin writes that *Documents* forecasts the prerogatives set down in Mauss’s manual for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, its insistence upon the objective concept of the document, the primacy of mundane objects, and the suspicion of the authority of written

Georges Wildenstein. The magazine’s seventeen issues were published by Musée du Trocadéro. The titular editors were the art critic Carl Einstein, Bataille, and Georges-Henri Rivière, director of the museum and jazz enthusiast. See Denis Hollier, *Les dépossédés* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993), 153.

³⁹³ Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, 52.

³⁹⁴ Jamin, Introduction to *Miroir de l’Afrique*, 19.

³⁹⁵ Georges Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” in *Visions of Excess* [1970], trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 51.

³⁹⁶ Maubon writes that the magazine’s goal was “la mise en perspective et la prise de distance des préjugés les plus enracinés de la civilisation occidentale, à travers la réévaluation de domaines marginaux ou suspects” [the putting into perspective and the attaining of distance from the most rooted prejudices of Western civilization, through a re-evaluation of marginal or denigrated domains]. See Maubon, *Michel Leiris*, 163.

texts. In the “locks, doors, hoes, drinking vessels, baskets, jars” on display in *Documents* can be found Mauss’ belief in the inherent value of quotidian objects for the study of culture; the Dakar-Djibouti team too was to focus upon the collection of “les objets les plus communs sont ceux qui en apprennent le plus sur une civilisation. Une boîte de conserves, par exemple [...]” [the most common objects are those that teach the most about a civilization—a jam jar, for instance].³⁹⁷

Mauss’ regime framed an alternative to Paris’ literary intellectualism. Leiris’ preface to the 1951 republication of *L’Afrique fantôme* makes clear how, at the time, he had thought to exchange, if temporarily, the life of the Parisian writer for the life of the ethnographic writer in order to “abattre des cloisons entre lesquelles j’étouffais et élargir jusqu’à une mesure vraiment humaine mon horizon” [to demolish the walls within which I was suffocating and to expand my horizons to a full human measure].³⁹⁸ Ethnography served as a hopeful beacon of possibility, “[...] cette science qui a ceci de magnifique que, plaçant toutes les civilisations sur le même pied et ne considérant aucune d’entre elles comme plus valable qu’une autre” [this science that has this magnificent thing about it that, placing all civilizations on the same footing while not considering any among them to be more valuable than another].³⁹⁹ Ethnography promised a new vision of the world, a scientific one, one greater than the ideological cast of the aesthetic coteries of the Parisian intellectual milieu where he increasingly felt claustrophobic. The reconceptualization of the literary text as document provided an important change of horizon.

³⁹⁷ Mauss, *Instructions sommaires*, 8.

³⁹⁸ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 13.

³⁹⁹ Leiris, “L’œil de l’ethnologue (à propos de la mission Dakar-Djibouti),” *Documents* 7 (1930): 404-414. Quoted in *Zébrage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 28.

For the creation of authentic and authoritative documents that could vie with the prestige of historical documents, the anthropological team was dedicated to object collection and the “enregistrement” [recording] of cultural objects and phenomena. As secretary-archivist of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, Leiris records in *L’Afrique fantôme* the ethnographic collection of objects. Objects were at times given freely, at times paid for by the team, and on occasion when the collection met with resistance, instances of pillaging ensued.⁴⁰⁰ Leiris also records the uses of documentary media. The documentation insisted upon by Griaule included a full spectrum of media.⁴⁰¹ The most important form of recording is the “fiche,” or notecard, of precise detail, fit for the museum display case.⁴⁰²

Leiris’ role on the team is defined by the quest for documentation. It involves “rédaction,” the word used to describe transcription in Griaule’s *Méthode de l’ethnographie*:⁴⁰³ Leiris is responsible for noting “all the useful details or information” gleaned from the native informant.⁴⁰⁴ In one instance, Griaule, the ethnographer makes a visual observation, a photograph is taken, developed and presented to the native informant who interprets it, and Leiris transcribes this interpretation. Yet, as the “rédacteur” [transcriber], Leiris characterizes his role as being that of “pion, de juge d’instruction ou de bureaucrate” [of the supervisor, judge, or bureaucrat] (93). The quest

⁴⁰⁰ In the village of Kéméni, Griaule “prend deux flûtes et les glisse sans ses bottes [...] et nous sortons. [...] Tout le monde refusant, nous y allons nous-même, emballons l’objet saint dans la bâche et sortons comme des voleurs [...] À peine arrivés à l’étape (Dyabougou), nous déballons notre butin [...]” [Griaule takes two flutes and slides them into his boots and we leave. Everyone refusing, we wrap the sacred object in the canvas and leave like robbers. Hardly arrived at our destination (Dyabougou), we unpack our spoils]. See Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 103.

⁴⁰¹ See Griaule, Chapter 3, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*.

⁴⁰² Comparing Griaule’s instructions on this point are nearly identical with Mauss’ instructions for the “fiche descriptive” in the section Étiquetage et Documentation. See *Instructions sommaires*, 23-25.

⁴⁰³ Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 75.

⁴⁰⁴ See the entry for July 16, 1931. Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 66.

for a principle of textuality and for a quality of description that surpasses self-involved literary style by reaching into the documentary results in something far from that, to be sure; but not something that Leiris will not revel in, until he gets to Gondar: “C’est la grande guerre au pittoresque, le rire au nez d’exotisme. Tout le premier, je suis possédé par ce démon glacial d’information” [It’s a total reversal of the picturesque, a laugh in the face of exoticism. More than anything, I’m possessed by this glacial demon of information]

The Principle of Information

Leiris’ 1981 preface to *L’Afrique fantôme* defines the task of the Mission as being the collecting of “des informations et des objets” [information and objects] (8), and the principle at stake in the creation of scientific documents meant that the communication of factual information was of untold significance for the ethnographic team. The word “information” is crucial. *L’Afrique fantôme* is punctuated by words that emerge out of the French verb “informer,” principally, “informateur” [informant] and “information” [information]. Information is, at heart, a principle. It suggests a transparent relay between the world and the written word, the text; a form of description now called information claims to be the transcription of physical reality into words, or, in the case of informant testimony, the transcription of pure testimony of informants—“enregistrement pour ainsi dire mécanique” [properly put, a mechanical recording], in Griaule’s words.⁴⁰⁵ Once the world has been transcribed as raw material onto the page, the scientist can begin to transform it into knowledge.

Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar’s *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Social Facts* speaks directly to how information as a principle inscribed into a descriptive form lays claim to scientific authority. In Latour’s language, the documentary media that the

⁴⁰⁵ Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 75.

ethnographic team used to create documents are “inscription devices [...] items which can transform a material substance into a figure or diagram which is directly usable by one of the members of the [scientific team]” (51). Clifford would echo this language since, for him, inscription is the first stage of textualization in the field, or “the passage of experiential phenomena into writing.”⁴⁰⁶ For Griaule’s ethnographic team, the camera, the movie camera, the dictaphone, the kit of anthropometry, and “fiches” [notecards] were such inscription devices.⁴⁰⁷ The visual media were the most important forms of transcription beyond the descriptive notecards,⁴⁰⁸ and photography is the most common tool of cultural documentation mentioned.⁴⁰⁹ Through the use of inscription devices, a material substance (the objects of the world) is transmuted into graphic symbols—words, charts, marks on a page, which the scientist can subsequently try to interpret. Griaule argued for technology to be used in the recording of culture for “une présentation objective des sociétés étudiées” [an objective presentation of studied societies] so that the product would be “loin des approximations conjecturales” [far from speculative approximations].⁴¹⁰ In science, technology is presumed to be an objective measure due to its purported freedom from human manipulation, and so the authority of the inscription device derives from its being a form of technology; thus, the scientific instrumentation

⁴⁰⁶ James Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” in *Fieldnotes, The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 56

⁴⁰⁷ The page numbers for these documentary notes are as follows: photography (67, 77, 79, 100, 103, 129, 158, 195, 200, 219, 352, 377, 440, 483); filming (99, 247, 483, 506); dictaphone (77); anthropometry (152); transcription writing (452; 464-74; 476-481; 484-491; 512-28).

⁴⁰⁸ The “take” from the Mission included, according to Rivet and Rivière, 3500 ethnographic objects, 6000 photographs, and 200 sound recordings. See Dias, “From French Indochina to Paris and back again,” 15. Quoted from Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Rivière, “La Mission ethnographique at linguistique Dakar-Djibouti,” *Minotaure* 2 (1933): 3-5.

⁴⁰⁹ Jamin writes that the team had three cameras. Aside from Griaule and Eric Lutten, Marcel Larget and even Leiris were occasionally enlisted to take photographs. See Jamin, Introduction to *L’Afrique fantôme*, 82-83.

⁴¹⁰ Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 81.

creates the unassailability of the claim that its graphic transcription is a reliable and authentic record of the material phenomena being observed. The technology and instruments of science, whether in Griaule's rubric or in the scientific laboratory as described by Latour and Woolgar, guarantee the informational value of their graphic transcriptions.

The authors write as well about noise, an unwanted byproduct of any recording technology. Though the authority of the inscription devices is deemed absolute, scientists acknowledge that these tools create noise. Noise means two things: the imprecise recording of physical phenomena by inscription devices, and the potential misuse of these devices by human operators. Both produce the oxymoronic category of "bad information." Each scientist must minimize the creation of noise coming from the inscription device that he or she controls; this ability to reduce noise has a direct impact upon the reliability of the inscription device and thus the credibility of its transcriptions. Since modern scientific research is based upon the teamwork of a laboratory, then "any decrease in the noise of one participant's operation enhances the ability of another participant to decrease noise elsewhere."⁴¹¹ A lack of calibration at one point impacts the entire scientific investigation because the bad information that it generates is fed into the system.

Griaule, too, implements a methodology premised upon teamwork, with each scientist pursuing his or her specialization: "L'équipe doit donc être hétérogène dans sa formation, homogène quant à son but: pour constituer une documentation complète et honnête, elle unira des travailleurs qui considèrent le même objet sous des angles différents et qui lient leurs observations les unes aux autres" [The team must have different specialties but one singular goal: in order to amass a complete and honest documentation, the team will unite researchers who consider the same object from

⁴¹¹ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 240.

different angles and who link their observations together].⁴¹² The team must be coordinated;⁴¹³ the team members must be individually adroit at operating their devices. In the case of ethnographic research, they must also be irreproachable in their ethical outlook. In the case of photography (and by extension cinematography), Griaule notes that the physical qualities of the technology mean that in order for the document that it produces to be judged “une pièce authentique” [an authentic specimen] and “un témoin indépendant” [an independent witness], the researcher must be deemed “de bonne foi” [of good faith] (81).⁴¹⁴

The principle of information and the concept of the document define the epistemological and aesthetic parameters of Leiris’ authentic description. The document conduces to the production of information—credible evidence about the world; information supplants picturesque description of the tradition of cultural writing about non-European peoples as the means to guarantee authenticity. To Leiris, authentic description must have has an ethical perspective, and information, as a principle of objectivity, provides a counter to the limitations of aesthetic, subjective records. Yet, as subjectivity too must be a part of observation, when subjectivity is added to the constraints set in place by the document and information, authentic description emerges

⁴¹² Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 16.

⁴¹³ Lévi-Strauss concludes that Griaule was the first French ethnologist to “develop a systematic method and tradition of ethnographic research, one based on doing fieldwork as a team.” Quoted in Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013), 237.

⁴¹⁴ Éric Jolly writes about the team methodology that Griaule implemented: “[...] démontrer leur capacité à travailler en équipe pour saisir tous les aspects d’une institution, sans rien laisser dans l’ombre” [to demonstrate their ability to work in a team in order to record all aspects of an institution, without leaving anything out.” See Jolly, “L’ethnographe, l’écrivain et la poésie secrète des Dogon,” in *Leiris & Co.*, 127. Griaule’s strict desire was that “[a]ll observers note the exact time of their observations so that a synthetic portrait of the ritual can be constructed.” See Clifford, *Predicament*, 71.

on the page, as both— “the most stringent objectivity in observation” *and* “a sustained relationship between subjectivity and reality.”⁴¹⁵

Part III. Circumscribing the Describable

In Griaule’s method, the ethnographer’s task in the field is the collecting of objects and the recording of information. Only in the metropole does the sussing out of details occur. Then they are parsed, organized, selected, and represented. Griaule thinks that this final act is simply an act of description: “Lorsqu’il expose les résultats de ses travaux, l’ethnographe ne fait pas que décrire” [When it comes to presenting the results of his work, the ethnographer only describes].⁴¹⁶ For Griaule, the ethnographer is not allowed interpretation in the field. That is partially due to the amount of time needed to parse the document, evaluate the testimony of natives, and to produce scientific knowledge from these, as “[...] les documents s’articulent très lentement et, de règle, ne le font jamais sur place” [the documents begin to speak very slowly and, by rule, never in the field] (102).

Leiris would qualify his text as “mi-documentaire, mi-poétique” [half-documentary, half-poetic].⁴¹⁷ But it certainly lacked the after-the-fact reflection, organization, and control that Griaule wished for in the ethnographic document. In fact, instead of scientific circumspection and excessive delay, Leiris readied to publish his book while still in the course of writing it. His guiding principle is the literary impulse of not to revise the “premier jet” [first “go”],⁴¹⁸ the sort of “first thought, best thought” motto that Allen Ginsberg would advocate, wishing not to destroy whatever emotional or artistic

⁴¹⁵ Édouard Glissant, “The Repli and the Dépli,” translated by Cynthia Mesh, *Yale French Studies* 81 (1992): 22.

⁴¹⁶ Griaule, *Méthode d’ethnographie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 100.

⁴¹⁷ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 9.

⁴¹⁸ Jamin, Introduction to *L’Afrique fantôme* in *Miroir de l’Afrique*, 81.

coherence it presented. But, if there was real contention between Griaule and Leiris about the timing and content of publishable material, as well as about the subordinate's desire to contradict the expedition leader,⁴¹⁹ the impulse to publish the "first go" might also be thought of as sincere to a type of documentary principle. In the Sudan, Leiris writes his famous draft prefaces to the to-be-published book in which he contends that he is not engaged in descriptive practices: "Je décris peu. Je note des details [...]" [I describe little, I note details] (264). The contrast between description and notation in this phrasing speaks to the ways in which the principle of information and the concept of the document frame the possibilities of the describable. The desire to let initial observations stand without revision acts as a self-conscious method to contradict the type of literary text edited after the fact to heighten style and demote facts into the status of secondary importance.

Michael Richardson reads Leiris' general literary method as performing an "ethnography of the self" in which "objective data of his everyday life, collected in a systematic way [...] moves inward."⁴²⁰ Life provides "data"; this is the basis of the mode and ideal of information necessary for the documentary. In "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie," Leiris states his desire to write the undiluted and unfiltered, to find a form full of "lucidité et sincérité" [lucidity and sincerity].⁴²¹ By putting "les pieds dans le plat" [my feet on the ground], he wishes to free "les fait réels" [real facts] from their usual cooption within art by "les produits pur de l'imagination" [the pure products of the imagination]. He wants "récits d'événements réels" [narratives of real events]; he

⁴¹⁹ See Jamin, Introduction *L'Afrique fantôme*, 76. In *Les Flambeurs d'homme*, Griaule explains what he believes to be the difference between the scientific and literary text written. See *Les Flambeurs d'homme* [1934], pre. Geneviève Calame-Griaule, intro. Michel Perret (Paris: Calmann-Lévy; Berg International, 1991), 27.

⁴²⁰ Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1984), 44-5.

⁴²¹ Leiris, "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie," in *L'Âge d'homme* [1939] (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 10. *L'Âge d'homme* was published in originally in 1935. See Leiris, *Journal*, 882.

theorizes his style of text as a “photo-montage puisque aucun élément n’y est utilisé qui ne soit d’une véracité rigoureuse ou n’ait valeur de document” [photomontage since no element is utilized that is not of strict veracity or of documentary value] (16). This new form of realism, a “réalisme positif” [positivistic realism] (17), which Leiris contrasts to the worn realism of novels, abjures fantasy, the abstract, and conjecture in favor of a strict rule to “ne parler que de ce que je connaissais par expérience et qui me touchait du plus près, pour que fût assurée à chacune de mes phrases une densité particulière, une plénitude émouvante, en d’autres termes: la qualité propre à ce qu’on dit ‘authentique’” [speak only of those things that I learned through experience and that touched me intimately, so that each of my sentences would have a particular density, a moving fullness, in other terms, that quality that we call ‘authenticity’] (17). Here, then, is a concise statement of Leiris’ agenda: authentic description is premised upon the documentary notation of “positivistic realism.” Description in *L’Afrique fantôme* is underwritten by the principle of information as a mode and ideal of communication and the form that it births, the literary documentary.

Leiris’ reacts strongly against the picturesque, as well as forms of exoticism and local color. The word “pittoresque” [picturesque] appears more frequently than “l’exotisme” [exoticism], and that, more frequently than “la couleur locale” [local color], but as three sites of enunciation within a discursive field they represent the descriptive practices of the picturesque voyage and its exotic tradition.⁴²² That is, Leiris uses the phrases “picturesque,” “exotic,” and “local color” self-consciously and generally to distance himself as the author from the antedated system of description and visual reference in which the words are the familiar lynchpins of Orientalist depiction. These words are cinched together as discursive accompaniments to the “livre d’images” [photo

⁴²² By my count, the word “pittoresque” appears seven times (39, 52, 64, 106, 179, 227, and 582), “l’exotisme” five times (174, 202, 212, 280, and 539), and “la couleur locale,” once (181).

books] (170) of nude “sauvages,” red earth, the bush, and the exotic fashion of the occasion housewife. Equally determinative in this visual construction of Africa by Europeans are stories, histories, and works of art that emphasize the exotic: *L’Africaine*, an opera by Meyerbeer, *Aïda* by Verdi, Roussel’s *Impressions d’Afrique*, the story of “prêtre Jean,” the death of Livingstone, and Rimbaud selling arms to Menelik II (365). A visual field is linked to a textual field; a historical field is linked to an artistic one. The fields reinforce one another to produce the familiar Orientalist European tropes about Africa.

Leiris views askance the type of landscape description that is central to early anthropological-literary genres. To him, this type of description risks continually falling into the clichés of the picturesque. Because of the heavy overwriting of picturesque forms of description onto European perceptions of landscape, landscape, is, to Leiris, if not impossible to accurately see, then impossible to represent justly in literature. Leiris’ comment about Gide’s travelogues—published only three years before the beginning of Dakar-Djibouti Mission—indicates this attitude: “Mais toutes les descriptions, si brèves soient-elles, sont décidément bien vaines. On ne peut retracer un paysage, mais tout au plus le *recréer*; au condition, alors, de n’essayer aucunement de décrire” [But all the descriptions, as brief as they are, are quite pointless. One cannot redraw a landscape; at most one can *recreate it*, provided, then, that no attempt at all will be made to describe it.]⁴²³ This passage makes clear the impossibility of one type of description: description of landscape is “pointless.” Words cannot “redraw” landscape; there is little chance at notational accuracy when words are employed to represent land.

Leiris’ distaste for the picturesque is a theme of the book. In his reaction against the traditionally picturesque, Leiris marks off an area of the world as indescribable: the thinking that lies latent in the representation of certain landscapes pulls description

⁴²³ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 1934 (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 248.

toward clichés that make representation of these scenes indescribable from the perspective of authentic description; these scenes have been occluded from vision and from understanding. Leiris hopes to make visible and known at the same time; this is the goal of authentic description that has nevertheless been made impossible by the history of depiction in the picturesque voyage. For example, when the team arrives at the waterfalls of Félou, Mali, Leiris writes “[p]oussé jusqu’aux chutes du Félou, très pittoresques, trop pittoresques même pour qu’il y ait le moindre intérêt à les décrire” [arrived at Félou Falls, very picturesque, too picturesque even for there to be the slightest interest in describing them] (52). This is the principle by which he means to abide: if expectations of beauty precede or envelop the scene, then any attempt at description, as a representation, is futile. Leiris associates the picturesque with decadence and outmoded thinking and writing. Lévi-Strauss would later write that “anthropology is a profession in which adventure plays no part,”⁴²⁴ and that sense of the seriousness of the scientific pursuit defines Leiris’ attitude, as well.

When Leiris does give landscape descriptions, they are remarkably compact. Here is one example: “Paysage agréable, assez brûlé mais sans aspect de particulière désolation. Baobabs et arbustes” [Pleasing landscape, fairly dry but without any particular sense of desolation. Baobabs and bushes].⁴²⁵ And another: “Beau voyage sur une piste de brousse: termitières, verdure, bambous, bois noircis à cause de la calcination pour la fabrication du tabac ou le défrichage, terre alternativement grise et rouge” [Pleasant trip down a jungle path: termite mounds, verdure, bamboos, blackened trees on account of burning for the cultivation of tobacco or clear cutting, earth alternatively gray and red] (39). These descriptions pose as challenges to the tradition of aesthetic landscape description. They are bare and surprisingly abstract. For instance,

⁴²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 17.

⁴²⁵ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 38.

“paysage” [landscape] does not point to a specific geological or topological feature. Moreover, he uses other nouns that denote his passage through the landscape—“voyage,” “parcours” [passage] (63), and “trajet” [route] (64). These descriptions describe the landscape obliquely, or as though seen through a translucent screen, a sensibility that reduces their pictorial beauty. Thus, Leiris displaces the landscape from its typically central position within travel writing. When it reappears, it is drastically reduced in scope and in power of evocation.

The adjective “picturesque” debases the thing or person that it nominally describes. In Leiris’ thinking, the word is hollow of actual meaning; rather, it simply invokes types of scorn and derision. He uses the word to characterize people negatively. For instance, he thinks of himself as he must appear to others, in his pith helmet, his khaki shirt, and his “culotte de trappeur,” and all he sees is a “bon type, à la fois tranquille et pittoresque (?), une sorte de bourgeois artiste” [a good guy, at the same time placid and picturesque, a sort of bourgeois artist] (162). This image mortifies him. At times, the use of the word is highly self-conscious, such as above, where the question mark afterwards indicates that it does not refer to any specific quality. Then, at times, he uses the word with scorn but not particularly full of self-consciousness. In describing conflicts of personality with Abba Jérôme and other Ethiopians in Gondar, Leiris writes, “[e]t tout cela si pittoresque, si rococo, si décrépit, si peu humain! [and all of this so picturesque, so rococo, so decrepit, so little human!] (582). The chain of association with other negative qualities shows this to be a moment of colonial and personal prejudice: in his desire to escape French intellectuals and their solipsistic wormholes, he finds an Ethiopian intellectual, who, he believes, one ups the French, since “[q]ui pourrait faire plus ‘intellectuel’ q’un intellectuel abyssin?” [who could be a greater intellectual than an Ethiopian intellectual?] (ibid.). In this quote, these adjectives have the strange quality of actually not describing the person or the situation they purport to describe; paradoxically,

they only describe Leiris' prejudices and his dislikes. Here, then, is a moment when the tenuous balance of authentic description seems evident: while his assiduousness is usually supreme, here his paroxysm of disgust in the face of intellectualism catapults him back into the outmoded way of describing people as picturesque. This passage shows that Leiris himself does not achieve authentic description at all times, but through his failures we can more clearly see the limits that he means to set.

With landscape description being tantamount to impossible due to the obscuring lens of the history of depiction in the picturesque voyage and associated exotic fare, *L'Afrique fantôme* moves from Orientalist tradition in indulging in lush tracts on flora and fauna toward new types of content, most notably, cultural descriptions, including the extended descriptions of his interactions with native informants and translators. While the book does of course include much cultural description—and none so dense as the transcriptions in Gondar—nevertheless, the importance of native testimony in corroborating the European team's observations means that important descriptions of cultural interactions between Leiris, the team, and native informants and translators provides a new type of content to French travel writing. In fact, the absence of informants means that the cultures in place remain so opaque that the team must move on: no "data" can be culled, no observation practice, and no description rendered. For instance, during their journey through today's Cameroon, Leiris laments about how the lack of interpreters makes an interesting culture unreadable: "Garoua [...] Recherche d'interprètes, d'informateurs, pour commencer le travail. Bien des difficultés, toujours du côté des Kirdi, si intacts que très peu d'autres indigènes connaissent leur langue et qu'il n'y a certainement pas un interprète pour un rayon de 100 à 200 kilomètres" [Garoua ... Looking for interpreters, informants, to start working. A lot of difficulties, always due to

the Kirdis, so intact that very few other Africans know their language and there is absolutely no interpreter in a 100-200 kilometer radius].⁴²⁶

If Griaule's treatise on ethnography sets out the method to secure good native informants, nevertheless he also admits that "[t]out indigène n'est pas informateur" [every native isn't a 'native' informant],⁴²⁷ and so the management of native informants becomes a preoccupation of the team. Sessions of information gathering are intensive and exhausting: "Pas encore bougé de la gare et toujours le flot d'informateurs, tellement nombreux que nous prenons figure d'examineurs devant lesquels défilent des candidats" [Not yet moved from the train station and always the influx of informants, so numerous that we are like examiners in front of lines of candidates] (93). Leiris is the scientific operator of an inscription device—native testimony—but the device itself must be calibrated before recording can take place: the masses of potential informants must be evaluated for credibility. Once ethnography opens up to native information, the difficulty of the creation of knowledge shifts from the authority of the observer's prior knowledge and observational acumen to the parsing of noise from information. Conceptually, the most troublesome source of noise for Griaule is the native informant, seen as a tool of science and an "inscription device."

Traveling across Africa, the team finds different financial and cultural economies in place that restrict and frustrate their pursuit of unbiased informants and so credible information. Native officials, whose reasons for selecting the informants remain obscure to the group, often select informants.⁴²⁸ Also, natives—even implicitly sympathetic ones— inveigle against the team. In Gondar, Malkam Ayyahou limits the team's access to good informants: "[Elle] a soigneusement détourné de nous ceux des gens de sa

⁴²⁶ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 202.

⁴²⁷ Griaule, *Méthode de l'ethnographie*, 54.

⁴²⁸ See the entry for January 14, 1932. Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 202-3.

connaissance qui auraient pu devenir nos informateurs [...]” [She makes sure that some of the people she knew could have been our informants never made it to us] (542).

Due to its need for native corroboration, and due to Griaule’s systematic suspicion of the motivations of native informants, the ethnographic team suffers from a neurotic suspicion about the credibility of informants.⁴²⁹ The word “déception” [deception] becomes a refrain: “Déception quant au *koma*” [deception concerning the *koma*]; “Déception à Bankassi, déception à Kani-Kombolé.” Even in interactions with trusted informants, Leiris expresses his frustrations with the experience of generating information: “Mais il semble que rien n’avance et que les gens, s’ils lâchent quelques petits secrets, cachent soigneusement le principal” [But it seems that nothing progresses, and that the people, if they let on about some small secrets, hide carefully the full matter].⁴³⁰

Griaule states that the two chief qualities of a good native informant are a good memory and, again, good faith.⁴³¹ The informant is equally capable of producing falsifications and noise as producing good information: “L’informateur le plus dangereux est l’oublieux, ou le menteur par omission, qui donne une série de renseignements apparemment cohérents et d’ailleurs sincères, en masquant le ou les principes essentiels de l’institution” [The most dangerous informant is the forgetful one, or the liar by omission, who recounts information that is apparently coherent and moreover sincere, while holding back the one or more essential principles of the institution] (56). Even a good informant, Griaule warns, can stray from the straight and narrow. They

⁴²⁹ The characterization of the unreliable native appears in other works from the era. The book flap summary for Carleton S. Coon’s *Measuring Ethiopia and Flight into Arabia* characterizes the informant-interpreter as unreliable, “[t]he interpreter whose chicanery did much to ruin their plans.” See Coon, *Measuring Ethiopia and Flight into Arabia* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1935).

⁴³⁰ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 111, 165, 129.

⁴³¹ Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 54.

must be regarded as “patients.” The ethnographer must not give the native informant too much freedom to speak: “[Il] est dangereux de conduire comme de laisser parler l’indigène. [...] D’informateur l’indigène devient un ‘patient’; il se fatigue vite et ne laisse plus entre les mains de son interlocuteur qu’un document déséquilibré” [It is dangerous to allow the native to speak. As an informant, the native becomes a “patient”; he tires quickly and will leave the listener with nothing but an imbalanced document].⁴³² Informants need doctor’s firm hand, and to let the interrogation get away from you, “c’est faciliter à l’informateur le besoin instinctif qu’il a de dissimuler les points les plus délicats” [is to allow the informant the indulge his instinctive need to lie about the most delicate points] (59). A good informant for one aspect of culture may not be so in another, and “un témoin sincère pour telle catégorie de faits peut se mettre à mentir quand il s’agit d’autres faits” [a good witness for one category of things might begin to lie when it comes to something else] (95). Since information “is measured against a background of equally probable events,”⁴³³ it is difficult to know whether the information provided in native testimony is accurate or not. Testimony must be regarded as “equally probable” at first, and only through comparison of multiple testimonies can the status of information be decided. Such an act of comparison is an “operation of information construction” that “transforms any set of equally probable statements into a set of *unequally* probable statements” (241). The native informant, as a tool of scientific research, must be strictly handled and continuously calibrated since the field “overflows” with “inscriptions” (246).

Moreover, there is a great suspicion that irreparable damage is being done to information through the act of translation. Even in the cases where the informants are not viewed as intentionally malicious, the act of translation seems to compromise the scientific value of information. During the first large-scale information-gathering activity

⁴³² Griaule, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, 59.

⁴³³ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 240.

after Sanga, Leiris laments that both his interpreter and the informants compromise the enterprise:

Mais les patients sont bien plus difficiles. Moins retors, et même pas retors du tout, mais terriblement confus. Je ne m'entends pas du tout avec mon Moundang, qui est bien gentil, mais parle à tort et à travers et m'embarque à tout instant dans d'interminables histoires dont je ne me m'aperçois qu'avec difficulté qu'elles n'ont aucun rapport avec l'interrogatoire. (215)

[But the patients are the most difficult. Without deceit, without any deceit, but terribly confusing. I do not get along at all with my Moundang, who is very nice, but talks willy-nilly and who plunges me into interminable stories whose relation to the interrogation I have great difficulty in perceiving.]

The dynamic of interrogation for the purpose of information gathering is complex: the Western observer wants the “right” native to speak but to speak within the limits imposed by the observer-cum-interrogator. The ethnographic researcher engages in a constant “battle” against the native informant to elicit good information: “Le chercheur [...] doit mener sans répit une lutte patiente, obstinée, pleine de souplesse et de passion maîtrisée” [The researcher [...] must lead without respite a patient, obstinate battle full of subtlety and controlled passion].⁴³⁴

So if translation risks ruining the quality of information through the translator's unsolicited riffs, in the field the translator also frequently deviates from the communication task at hand so as to expand his own authority as speaker and informant, moving from being merely an intermediary or conduit to occupying a new

⁴³⁴ Griaule, *Méthode de l'ethnographie*, 59.

“agency of a mediator.”⁴³⁵ Translation also seems to always muddle facts: “Mais la traduction reste toujours aussi embrouillée” [But translation remains always just as muddled]; “Tout s’embrouille du fait de l’interprète, qui traduit mal” [Everything gets muddled because of the interpreter, who translates poorly].⁴³⁶ In one instance, Leiris tries to convince one of his chief informants and interpreters, Ambibè Babadyi, that he wishes to have a literal translation of all communication with natives. In this incident, Leiris lays out pebbles to demonstrate the one-to-one relationship he seeks between each French word and each word of the mask rituals’ “langue secrète” [secret language], but his counterpart cannot comprehend this intellectual game, and he mistakes the pebble named “homme” [man] to signify an actual man. Leiris writes, “L’exemple concret que j’avais pris, croyant lui faire mieux comprendre, n’a réussi qu’à tout embrouiller” [The concrete example that I had taken, thinking it would help him understand, only succeeded to muddle everything] (144). Leiris’ act of elucidating his desire for “des traductions littérales et non des traductions approchées” [literal translations and not approximate ones] only leads to absurdities, and the experience represents to Leiris a “[f]rappant exemple du genre de malentendus qui affolent périodiquement l’enquête, dès qu’il s’agit de traduction” [striking example of the type of misunderstandings that riddle the inquiry, when it comes to translation] (144).

These and other passages that document his interactions with native informants and interpreters mark a shift away from the content of exotic French travel writing with its emphasis on landscape description and generalized cultural observations. That information is literally a chief new focus of attention illustrates how that principle defines *L’Afrique fantôme*. Six months into his trip, Leiris wonders whether the entire enterprise

⁴³⁵ Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “Cultural Mediation, Colonialism & Politics: Colonial ‘Truchement,’ Postcolonial Translator,” in *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa, Beyond the Magins*, ed. Wale Adebani (Woodbridge, England: James Curry, 2017), 312.

⁴³⁶ Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 137, 377.

has consisted only of an exchange of “une attitude littéraire contre une attitude scientifique” [a literary attitude for a scientific attitude] (260). While he sees that as problematic, because the latter lacks a human dimension that Leiris acknowledges as vital to the balance necessary for authentic description, nevertheless his descriptions of landscape abide by an anti-literary orientation. All literary fussiness must be avoided. Indeed, Leiris would not even call them descriptions. Leiris creates for himself the quasi-scientific role of a writer who is “merely [...] discovering facts” and far from the “business of being convinced and convincing others.”⁴³⁷

The literary documentary is the form, or the “ordre de sujets,” as Fromentin writes, through which authentic description emerges. It is a variety of the “transparent” form of realism that Philippe Hamon defines as refusing “la référence au procès de l'énonciation pour tendre à une écriture ‘transparente’ monopolisée par la seule transmission d'une information” [reference to the process of enunciation in order to effect a ‘transparent’ writing monopolized by the singular transmission of information]. Hamon calls this the “*détonalisation*” [detonalization] of the text's message (150). Modalization, a hallmark of Leiris' endless sentences in other texts, is largely absent here. Its absence signals that the possibilities of description in this text are tightly administered. Catherine Maubon goes so far as to suggest that description in *L'Afrique fantôme* suspends all judgment, all interpretation, entirely: “Toute forme de jugement et même de conjecture suspendue, la description tend à ne laisser aucun jeu s'introduire entre l'objet et sa reproduction” [With all judgment and even conjecture suspended, description hardly allows any space to open between the object and its reproduction].⁴³⁸ Yet I do not argue that, and Maubon acknowledges that authorial insertions do take place through occasional modalizing that breaks the flow of informational transcription (ibid.).

⁴³⁷ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 88.

⁴³⁸ Catherine Maubon, *Michel Leiris: en marge de l'autobiographie* (Paris: José Corti, 1994), 126.

Nevertheless, through renouncing decadent descriptive subjects like landscape, by focusing upon information as a new mode of communication as well as information gathering as a new subject of travel writing, and by marking notations instead of writing descriptions, Leiris pushes his writing toward a new literary paradigm of transcriptional transparency.

Part IV. Conclusion

In his draft prefaces for his book, Leiris defends the irruptions of subjectivity through the language of paradox, stating that it is at subjectivity's height that objectivity emerges: "[c]'est par la subjectivité (portée à son paroxysme) qu'on touche à l'objectivité" [it is in subjectivity (taken to its extreme) that we arrive at objectivity].⁴³⁹ In other terms, Leiris touches upon the difficult balance that he sees as essential to the authorial position necessary for authentic description. Similar to his statements in "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie," Leiris argues for the validity of the textual product in which life-data is "authenticated" by first-hand experience, or "écrivain subjectivement j'augmente la valeur de mon témoignage, en montrant qu'à chaque instant je sais à quoi m'en tenir sur ma valeur comme témoin" [writing subjectively, I increase the value of my witnessing, in showing that at each instance I know where I stand in relation to my value as witness] (ibid.).

Tethered, then, between a factual, corroborated document inventory and a subjective efflorescence, *L'Afrique fantôme* is a striking example of travel writing that seeks to balance the strengths of science's and literature's modes of authority. The book is a continuous exemplification of this quest for balance. Glissant calls Leiris' "meticulousness in observation" a process of "detailing" in "spiral accumulation" from out

⁴³⁹ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, 263.

of which veracity is constructed.⁴⁴⁰ But it is not just the details in their accumulation that are important, but also the complex system in which details can be allowed to accrue, and the balance that the system's rubrics enforce that leads to the chance of veracity, or authentic description.

For instance, in his draft prefaces, Leiris would write, though later excise, his intention to balance European and African personal names against the weight of history: his depersonalization of Europeans (whom he would name only through their initials) would contrast with his treatment of Africans who alone would have "le droit de voir leur nom imprimé en toutes lettres" [the right to see their names printed in full].⁴⁴¹ Though it is not a plan that he would keep to, the naming of Africa that the book does enact must be seen for what it is: a revelation of the specificity, the individualism, and the humanity of African subjects previously absent from travel literature. Take, for example, the details of the traveling party on a day trip from Sanga:

Nombreuse équipe. Mamadou Kèyta, Abara, Amadignê, un autre enfant nommé Ana, deux jeunes garçons que nous ne connaissons pas, Ambara, Apama, Akoundyo (le fils d'Andyê, le gros tirailleur qui, paraît-il, reprendra le fonds de sorcellerie de son père), Fali le marmiton et un de ses amis, Makan et un personnage que nous ne reconnaissons pas et qui a été réquisitionné comme porteur.

[A large party. Mamadou Kèyta, Abara, Amadignê, another child named Ana, two young boys that we don't know, Ambara, Apama, Akoundyo (the son of Andyê, the big infantryman who, it seems, will retake the magic resources of his father),

⁴⁴⁰ Glissant, "The Repli and the Dépli," 21.

⁴⁴¹ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, La Pléiade, ed. Dennis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), 723.

Fali the little guy and one of his friends, Makan and someone that none of us recognize and who was added to the team as a porter.]⁴⁴²

The naming of individuals is important as it contradicts the collective identification of non-white peoples through which Romantic, Orientalist exoticism operated: now “blacks” are generally as individualized as “whites.”⁴⁴³ This probity of nomination (of naming) comes in equal but contrasting respects from a desire for objective, or “positivistic” detail, and from a literary sympathy for subjectivity that names represent in a quintessential fashion.

This desire for noting a strict record is balanced by Leiris’ frustrations with the unnaturally restrictive distance that scientific objectivity enforces. Ultimately, Leiris would prefer to be “possédé qu’étudier les possédés, connaître charnellement une ‘zarine’ que connaître scientifiquement ses tenants et aboutissants” [possessed than to study the possessed, to know physically a ‘zarine’ than to know scientifically her ins and outs] (402). This is because scientific knowledge is, in the end, limited, a conduit, a “pis-aller,” and not an end in itself. He laments that ethnography reminds him of a police interrogation. Instead of being led into closer and closer proximity and thus understanding (or vice versa), instead of being led into great rapport, interaction, or sociability with the peoples that fascinate them, and whom they study, ethnography leads to the opposite: “On ne s’approche pas tellement des hommes en s’approchant de leurs coutumes. Ils restent, après comme avant l’enquête, obstinément fermés. Puis-je me flatter, par exemple, de savoir ce que pensait Ambara, qui pourtant était mon ami?” [We do not come closer to people while coming closer to their customs. They remain,

⁴⁴² Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* (1988), 154.

⁴⁴³ It would take more than fifty years for another French travelogue to match this level of absorption into non-European culture, namely, Jean Genet’s *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

after the investigation as before, obstinately remote. Can I pretend, for example, to know what Ambara was thinking, who was my friend?] (260).

Certainly, the textual surface of Leiris' travelogue indicates to us that this is a work of literature. Its narrative structure, similar to travel narratives of the past as recent as Gide's *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*; its first-person narration and authorial asides; its self-consciousness about terms such as "picturesque" and "description" that hold pregnant weight within literary history; and its construction and introduction of characters in accordance to the literary prerogative that Hamon defines as "strict realism"⁴⁴⁴—these are all noteworthy and clearly literary features of the text. But it is in the subtle ways that Leiris claims the unsayable for the text defines the text as fundamentally and irrevocably literary. Authentic description—the overall goal of the text—is, for him, the complex enmeshing of epistemological, observational, aesthetic, and ethical goals that necessitates a movement toward and into the unknown. The point is not merely to reposition the text as literary so as to reconsider it within the tradition of travel writing where it shows us the possibilities of that genre in a historical moment of great importance. By acknowledging the text's quest for authentic description within a literary epistemology that bears upon and into the unsayable, we are able anew to articulate the amorphous but powerful contours of the literary, and literariness, and how the features of documentary are, in this case, re-inscribed as literary.

In his essay "De l'information du poème," Glissant writes of a contrast between two forms of language, a contrast very similar to Nancy's "apocryphal" and "canonical"

⁴⁴⁴ Hamon provides one last characteristic of strict realism concerning the introduction and description of characters. He writes that, in this style, immediately after the introduction of a character (designated by a proper name) the author provides a set of data, or a characteristic portfolio of identifying information about the character: "[...] l'apparition d'un personnage nouveau, manifesté par l'apparition d'un nom propre [...] sera suivie aussitôt de l'information à laquelle il renverra dans la suite du texte: biographie, description physique ou psychologique, acte caractéristique, programme d'action" [the appearance of a new character, manifested by the appearance of a proper name ... will be followed soon by the information back to which the character will be returned as the text proceeds: biography, physical or psychological description, characteristic act, program of action]. See Hamon, "Un discours contraint," in *Littérature et réalité*, 119-181 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982); originally appeared in *Poétique* 16 (1973): 161.

language. In Glissant's rendition, a scientific use of language, exemplified by the computer scientist's codes, tries to insulate itself from poetic language. Poets and computer scientists differ on what sort of totality may be presented as their form of knowledge, of truth, and how the medium of transcription should be. Poets approach "l'énorme inconnu" [the tremendous unknown] hoping to articulate "la parole de tous les peuples, l'accent de toutes les langues" [the speech of all peoples, the ring of every language].⁴⁴⁵ To a poet such as Leiris, the "tremendous unknown" holds interest—the beyond that is the unsayable. By signaling the crushing shortchange of not investing the whole body, the whole mind, into the process of detailed documentation of experience, the world, and the other cultures into whose contact he comes, Leiris shows that the "speech of all peoples" is not just the articulate speech of languages, but the metaphorical "speech" and "ring" of culture itself, embodied, and invested in interpersonal relations and thus, in the interstices of the known and the beyond that is the unsayable.

Switching the balance of our own observations in regard to *L'Afrique fantôme* toward the literary reveals the book as an example of the literary documentary as it emerges in modern French literature. Allan Sekula writes of the switch in reception that takes place when the documentary is received as art. An about-face takes place, and the new foci of attention are "subjective metaphysics" and "auteurism." The audience of the photograph, or the reader of the literary documentary, begins to notice "mannerism [...] sensibility [and] the physical and emotional risks taken by the artist."⁴⁴⁶ The documentary aesthetic of *L'Afrique fantôme* does not abrogate metaphysics; quite to the

⁴⁴⁵ Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 97. Translation by Betsy Wing, in *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 83.

⁴⁴⁶ Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism," in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996* (Normal, IL: University Galleries, IL St. U, 1999), 122.

contrary, when considered as art, the book shows that a “subjective metaphysics” obtains throughout in its sensibility toward a type of ethical and aesthetic balance that takes place at the crossing of information and description, and in whose balance Leiris seeks authentic description and, thus, a way to represent accurately Africa and his experiences there.

CONCLUSION

Transparency and Opacity, or the Ethical Trajectory of Description in the Postcolonial Era

The scientific epistemology that underscores Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* establishes that the social worlds outside of Europe are initially opaque. But instead of arguing that this opacity cannot be mitigated, this scientific grounding argues the opposite, namely, that the methodical collection of documents paired with the testimony of native informants can reverse opacity and transform it miraculously into transparency. Yet the framing of opacity within anthropology changed when the assumption of final transparency began to lose accreditation during and after the 1960s. Derrida's critique in 1967 of the irresolvable contradictions in Lévi-Strauss's methods marks one important moment, and thus that speech's inauguration of a poststructuralist era also signals the inchoate beginnings in anthropology of the self-consciousness that would erupt in full measure with Talal Asad, James Clifford, George Marcus, and others in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Leiris' ethnographic literary method, Edouard Glissant finds a desire for "contact réel" [real contact]⁴⁴⁷ that serves as one spur toward rethinking what "real" might mean in relation to the concept of opacity. Glissant writes in *Tout-monde* that so often the colonial and postcolonial calls for cultural contact issued by Europeans to non-Europeans have been "le plus sûr moyen pour les puissants de vous limiter, de vous rogner, de vous garroter [c]ar ce dépasser qu'ils vous proposent, c'est leur laissez-passer pour l'Empire [the surest method for the powerful to limit you, to clip your wings,

⁴⁴⁷ Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 74.

to pinion you because this ‘going beyond’ that they propose is their entrée for Empire].⁴⁴⁸ This outlines the difficulty of conceiving of a historically advanced or “real” form of cross-colonial contact from a postcolonial perspective: the only possible form of colonial contact would seem to have been the non-European being thrust into an oppressive power relation with a force of incursion—the imperial army, or the colonial social anthropologist, or otherwise.

But just as Leiris’ scrupulous attention to the constraints of reciprocal contact across the colonial divide is important to Glissant’s act of redefining the concept of opacity, so too is Segalen’s writing of crucial importance. Segalen decries the superimposition of Western forms of scientific knowledge on non-Western cultures, and in his theory of exoticism, he argues for the right of non-Western cultures to self-preservation, self-definition, and ultimately self-description. The revivifying “shock of the Diverse” arises due to this infrangible difference. Ultimately, Segalen’s oeuvre is of lasting importance not just because he articulates this prescient ethical position but because, as I hope to have demonstrated, he also attempts to decentralize description from Eurocentric frames before, truth be told, the general French reader would have even recognized the bias of epistemology and aesthetic thinking that French literature unconsciously reproduced. In fact, this more ambiguous intermingling of French literary expression and foreign cultural modalities and sign systems would seem to occupy a more central position in Glissant’s restructuring of opacity through his theory of the *Tout-monde* [All-world].

Taking Segalen’s concept of inter-cultural “shock,” Glissant defines the *Tout-monde* as relying upon the historical truth that “[l]es civilisations se connaissent, se frottent, se changent et s’échangent de manière consciente ou inconsciente depuis des milliers d’années” [Civilizations interact, rub against one another, affect one another, and

⁴⁴⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 514.

effect changes in one another in conscious and unconscious ways, and have done so for millions of years].⁴⁴⁹ Glissant defines the Chaos-monde [Chaos-world], one derivation of the Tout-monde itself, as being “le choc actuel de tant de cultures qui s’embrasent, se repoussent, disparaissent, subsistent pourtant, s’endorment ou se transforment, lentement ou à vitesse foudroyante” [the actual shock of so many cultures that unite, push apart, disappear, stubbornly persist, falling asleep or transforming, slowly or at lightning speed].⁴⁵⁰ The value of the specificity of cultural expression is linked to the particularities of geographical placement in the world. Glissant builds to the idea of opacity by overturning the European “false” universal’s tendency to reduce non-European cultures to a European mean. Instead, we must “tâcher de n’oublier pas un détail, pas un coin d’existence, pas une île et pas une rivière, pas un parler comme pas une roche” [try not to forget one detail, not one corner of existence, not one island or river, not one language and not one rock].⁴⁵¹ He echoes this emphasis on the specificity of place and culture in *Traité du Tout-monde* where he writes that we are now allowed to “chanter notre lieu, insondable et irréversible” [to sing our place, unfathomable and irreversible].⁴⁵²

Place is “incontournable” [inescapable].⁴⁵³ The acknowledgment of the specifics of cultural expressions tied to place leads Glissant to develop his concept of postcolonial post-anthropological opacity as a force brimming with a sense of contestation, of being suitably defensive, of not assuming easy intercourse, and of allocating the rights to self-definition through speaking for oneself in one’s own language of one’s own imagined or

⁴⁴⁹ Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, *Quand les murs tombent* (Paris: Galaade, 2007), 13.

⁴⁵⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 22.

⁴⁵¹ Glissant, *Tout-monde*, 513.

⁴⁵² Glissant, *Traité*, 22.

⁴⁵³ Glissant, *Tout-monde*, 513.

real history. Glissant imagines a new world traveler, with a new consciousness, who does not attempt to fold the other into an already satisfying account of the world, but rather this traveler will accept the opacity of the other as the terra incognita, as a finistère (end-of-the-world), where sharing and understanding might begin with the acknowledgement “que l’opacité est fondamentale du dévoilement; que l’opacité, la résistance de l’autre est fondamentale de sa connaissance; que seulement dans l’opacité (le particulier) l’autre se trouve connaissable [...] et que l’opacité soumise au dévoilement suppose lenteur, accumulation, durée” [that opacity is fundamental to unveiling; that the other’s resistance is fundamental to his knowledge; that only in opacity (the particular) does the other find himself to be knowable [...] and that opacity, submitted to unveiling, presumes slowness, accumulation, duration].⁴⁵⁴ This new world traveler must accept the world as relation and begin the labor of understanding.

Glissant’s opacity, thus, serves as a strategic reversal of anthropological discourse. Segalen’s capitalization of the “Diverse” in his work finds new life in Glissant’s *Tout-monde*: “Contre cette transparence réductrice, une force d’opacité est à l’œuvre. Nous appelons donc opacité ce qui protège le Divers” [Against this reductive transparency, a power of opacity is at work. We call this opacity that which protects Diversity].⁴⁵⁵ His words echo Segalen’s precursory awareness of the dangers and the hubris of social scientific universalism: “La transparence n’apparaît plus comme le fond du miroir où l’humanité occidentale reflétait le monde à son image; au fond du miroir il y a maintenant [de] l’opacité” [Transparency no longer appears like the mirror’s depths where Western humanity reflects the world in its own image; now in the mirror’s depths there is opacity] (125). Opacity is now an ethics of relation through which the contours of

⁴⁵⁴ Edouard Glissant, *L’Intention poétique*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 175; *Poetic Intention*, trans. Nathanaël (Calicoot, NY: Nightboat, 2010), 168.

⁴⁵⁵ Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 74-5.

description will emerge; it demands reserve, thought, and time. As the visual metaphor par excellence for the *Tout-monde* and its poetics of relation, opacity can only be valued within a worldview that itself “aime à divaguer dans l’inutile et la dérade qui prolonge” [likes to stray off-course into uselessness and long anchorages].⁴⁵⁶ Through such a dilatory, reflective position, the new world traveler and thinker will begin to see connections, “l’équivalence entre des paysages si différents, des langages si éloignés, le vôtre au loin et celui que voici là” [the equivalence between such different landscapes and languages, yours so far away and this one right here] (ibid.). This experience of “real” contact will prove that “ça valait la peine, d’attendre et de patienter” [it was worth it, to wait patiently] (ibid.).

With opacity as a guiding rule, any act of postcolonial cultural description must not be rushed. Also, postcolonial cultural description must bear in mind that the colonial anthropological ideals of “la chose isolée” [the isolated thing] and “l’unicité” [uniformity] with their appearance in “la race, la langue, le terrain, l’idée” [race, language, terrain, idea] are exposed as idealist constructions and that all culture is a part of “le jardin créole” [the creole garden] (555). Glissant’s idea of postcolonial description refuses anthropological and exoticist essentialism because of the “chaos” of intermingling in which “tout un limon déposé par des peuples, limon fertile mais à vrai dire incertain, inexploré, encore aujourd’hui” [all of an alluvium deposited by peoples, a fertile delta but, to be honest, uncertain, unexplored, still today].⁴⁵⁷

In the era of the nation-state’s rise through imperial economy and colonization, peripheral domains were never been given the chance for self-definition. The reality of European ethical engagement with the colonies was, then, always narrowly limited. In postcolonial times, however, this cultural sedimentation of peoples mixed together

⁴⁵⁶ Glissant, *Tout-monde*, 522.

⁴⁵⁷ Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, 74-5.

through the displacements incurred through the very forces of imperial economy and colonization—once “le plus souvent nié ou offusqué” [most often denied or obfuscated]—is now the “présence insistante” [insistent presence] that “nous ne pouvons pas ne pas vivre” [we cannot *not* live by] (ibid.). This opacity is no longer “l’obscur” [obscurity] or merely the incomprehensible, but that which can be and should be “être accepté comme tel” [be accepted as it is] (205). It is the skin of “le non-réductible” [the non-reducible], and all mutual understanding must now proceed from this acknowledgement of the reality of difference. In the end, opacity is “la plus vivace des garanties de participation et confluence” [the most living of guarantees of participation and immersion] (206).

In the postcolonial era, then, how is the task of the literary description of world peoples affected by a greater consciousness of the necessity, right, and value of cross-cultural opacity? For one, postcolonial writers are now given the chance to express for themselves what life in their societies is like. Ethnographic descriptions turn into auto-ethnographic ones, in which a postcolonial writer describes his or her own society. Postcolonial writers interested in the entangled histories of European anthropological descriptions of non-European cultures and of nation building throughout the world based upon the notion that nation-states necessarily mobilize and express the will of a singular “people” critique and complicate the equivalences of people and nation. If in 1882 Ernest Renan argued in his address to the Sorbonne “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” against the growing ethnographic imperative that threatened to overwhelm “value”-oriented nationalism due to how “[o]n crée ainsi une sorte de droit primordial analogue à celui des rois de droit divin; au principe des nations on substitute celui de l’ethnographie” [so we create a sort of primordial right analogous to that of the divine right of kings; instead of

the principle of nations, we have that of ethnography],⁴⁵⁸ then the false transparency of a colonial system that maps one people onto one nation would seem to be a major historical liability of the modern era, producing civil war as heterogeneous populations vie to become the default dominant “national” “people” of the nation-state. This plays out as much in the Great Lakes region of East Africa as in South Asia.⁴⁵⁹ Furthermore, just as Segalen reviled all those writers who claimed to understand “l’âme Chinoise” [the Chinese soul],⁴⁶⁰ postcolonial writers invoke colonial anthropology and its desire to fix in place for eternity the souls of the foreign only to reverse this logic and prove its contemporary (and historical) failings through ironic self-portraits.⁴⁶¹

Within the postcolonial diasporic world, the basic ethical question at stake persists—how does one represent other people in a manner that is ethical as well as aesthetic, people very different from oneself about whom one may know little? One thing seems sure: the metropolitan writer has a responsibility to understand how representation always relies upon, exploits, or overturns epistemological frames with their inherently biased perspectives. Beyond that, several complexities cloud the matter of possible endpoints. One endpoint would ask that postcolonial writers not perpetrate the same dubious ethics of which normative French colonial travel writing was guilty—such a dubious ethics that is perceptible in retrospect and against the building ethical sense of this dissertation’s four writers. Another endpoint would conceivably be the demand for the rigorous enforcement of a person’s, an ethic group’s, or any identity

⁴⁵⁸ Ernest Renan, “*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*” suivi de “*Le judaïsme comme race et comme religion*,” ed. Shlomo Sand (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 60.

⁴⁵⁹ Gérard Prunier writes of these dynamics in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73.

⁴⁶⁰ Victor Segalen, *Briques et Tuiles*, intro. Jean Laude (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1975), 90.

⁴⁶¹ One example is Rachid Djaïdani’s *Boumkæur* (1999). See Matt Reeck, “Literary Ethnography in Rachid Djaïdani’s *Boumkæur*,” *Traduction, terminologie, rédaction* (forthcoming 2019), n/p.

category's, exclusive rights to self-definition and self-description. Yet Glissant cautions against postcolonial forms of cultural essentialism, and, were the world wise enough to listen to him, that would be enough.

Yet more than anything, the trajectory of the ethical imperative excavated in cautious steps in these metropolitan writers shows that these questions do not lead to any singular rigid ethical application, but rather the trajectory of this ethical awareness asks us to question the epistemological and aesthetic forces that constrain description and its portraits of identity. We must remain skeptical of any theory of identity that overdetermines how individuals take on cultural attributes through participating in society; personal identity must be considered semi-autonomous from the communities and congregations through which individuals generate aspects of their self of sense. Merleau-Ponty writes, "What if I took not only my own views of myself into account but also the other's views of himself and of me?"⁴⁶² If phenomenology can ask this question, philosophy's need for its own sort of intellectual rigor limits the intersubjective dynamics that might fully animate an answer to this question. Literature is, then, particularly well suited for the task of questioning how identity is produced through and against the relation between the individual and the group. Indeed, literature is a primary place where such questioning, such fashioning, of the self is possible. All literature is, as a creative act, an experiment. That questions and the shaping of identity inhere in literary expression means that works of literature are also experiments in thinking about identity and the multiform frames, observational regimes, and discursive and textual practices through which it gains shape.

As noted in the preceding chapters, all four metropolitan writers in this dissertation were valued by one or more postcolonial writers of note: Khatibi,

⁴⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, followed by *Working Notes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 8.

Chamoiseau, and Glissant cite the influence of Segalen; Djébar cites Fromentin; Glissant cites Leiris; and, stretching the rubric a little, René Maran cites Gide.⁴⁶³ This influence stems largely from the ways in which these authors intuited how description of world peoples is not merely an aesthetic task but an ethical one as well, demanding a reformulation of worldview as well as observational and literary textual practices. But not only do the examples of these writers provide support for postcolonial writers to choose French for literary expression over whatever other languages they speak, these writers' developing reflections on the ethics of representation also opens for postcolonial writers the possibility to write about their local "histories, geographies, communities"⁴⁶⁴ from a perspective that takes an ethics of representation as a major consideration. These metropolitan writers provide a lineage for decolonizing and postcolonial writers to access as they formulate their subject positions and writing projects within the colonizer's language and its literary tradition. Emerging through ambivalent contention and partial accord with new anthropological and ethnographic thinking, the ethical trajectory in these metropolitan writers' work allows us to read postcolonialism in French not merely as rupture but rather as continuity and development: literature and anthropology articulate a double hinge that has existed since early world exploration and that has become more interesting in postcolonial times now that both the cultures of the former colonizers and the former colonized can reflect upon the meaning, value, and modalities of "real" intercultural contact and connection. Postcolonial literary expression is complicated in the case of those writers writing in the colonizer's language by the fact that must

⁴⁶³ Réda Bensmaïa begins *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb* by acknowledging the importance of Gide's denouncing the "misdeeds" of colonialism for the postcolonial history he invokes. *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

⁴⁶⁴ In "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations," Edward Said writes that "in the decades-long struggle to achieve decolonization and independence from European control, literature has played a crucial role in the reestablishment of national cultural heritage, in the reinstatement of native idioms, in the reimagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities." Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations," *Race & Class* 32.1 (1990): 1-2.

negotiate two poles: through their literary education, they have been shaped by the colonizer's literature; and through lived experience, they have been shaped by a local social and cultural histories. These four metropolitan writers provide literary examples for postcolonial writers to seize upon as evidence that French language and literature are not to be solely associated with socio-political imperialism and cultural xenophobia: their collective example opens the tightly woven mesh of Eurocentric aesthetic thought to allow for critique as well as for new forms of anthropological cross-purposing in literary practices.

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