**Please Don’t Feed the Natives**: Human Zoos, Colonial Desire, and Bodies on Display

The widespread practice of displaying indigenous peoples in colonial fairs contributed to the creation of a sense of radical difference between colonizer and colonized, between European and non-European, between familiar and strange. The physical proximity afforded by close-up encounters with exoticized natives promoted an ideological position of superiority among European viewers whose power and prestige were confirmed by such displays. By removing these “specimens” from their “natural” environments, Europeans created a spectacle devoid of any meaningful context. Through control of the circulation of images and ideas, colonial powers were able to confirm their own centrality and superiority in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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We are here in Paris; all is fine in this great city where there are so many people that the whites are packed together like corn stalks in a field. Everyone is well. The great commander, M. de Brazza, is with us. And we are happy to be here. Tell everyone that, when we come home, we will have so much to tell about all that we have seen that we will talk for months and months without stopping. (*Exposition Universelle* 177, my translation)

This letter, published in the official catalog of the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris, was purportedly written by Mamouka, a canoe paddler, back to his loved ones in Gabon. He was one of several hundred Africans put on display in the African villages along the Champ de Mars at the foot of the recently-constructed Eiffel Tower. His perfect French, like his perfect feelings, cannot but have been contrived. Anoth-
er article from the same 1889 exhibit affirmed that the Guineans placed on exhibit would come to appreciate the glories of the French capital and return home to tell tales favorable to the French and to prepare a warm reception for future French colonists (Blanchard et al., *Le Paris noir* 29). During the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practice of exhibiting indigenous peoples was widespread and commonly accepted. These spectacles of radical alterity placed European and North American audiences in direct contact with “specimens” (for that is the term that was commonly used) from exotic lands. The displacement of natives not as slaves or captives, not as migrants or refugees, not as workers or tourists, but for the amusement and edification of their Western audiences has a long genealogy. The history of these exhibits, like most colonial policies and practices, mirrored internal mutations in Western societies. Many of these are the same mutations that could also go toward explaining the appearance of zoos across Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century, whether for non-human or human animals. Among the most important are: rapid industrialization and urbanization of Euro-American nations following the Industrial Revolution, increased distance from wilderness and nature, changes in notions of work and leisure, shrinking of space and preoccupation with speed, and a heightened brand of cultural anxiety manifested in racial discourse, class tensions and sexual realignments.

By the outbreak of World War I, European imperialism had gained control of nearly 85% of the earth’s inhabitable surface (Pieterse 76), while the resulting encounter of cultures led to what Aimé Césaire frequently termed the “colonial shock.” The new colonial powers were curious about the extent and content of their domain. Human zoos served ideological and propagandist purposes by attempting to convince a skeptical metropolitan population that the colonial adventure was working and that it was worth the cost.1 “Savages” soon become “natives” on their way to becoming “colonial subjects” and even “immigrants” according to the official scheme of cultural and political evolution. Their transformation from “objects of curiosity” to “subjects on display” followed the itinerary of racialization that informed public beliefs in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Situated at the juncture between science and show biz, these “living museums,” as they were sometimes called, contributed profoundly to Western perceptions

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1 For a fully developed study of metropolitan attitudes toward France’s overseas empire, consult Raoul Girardet’s *L’Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962.*