My Others' Others Other: the limits of Museum Ethnography

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"...the history of museology has been a history of the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogenous system or series." (2)

Douglas Crimp.

The paper is situated between Douglas Crimp's astute observation above and Frederick Bohrer's exhortation that: "The student of exoticism must necessarily be a connoisseur of discontinuity" (3). Museum ethnography, like anthropology itself, is based on the premises of discontinuity and difference; the discontinuity between consciousness and some sort of external reality and the attendant division between subject and object as well as the whole series of differences that such discontinuities engender between the individual and society and the 'I' and the 'other'. 'Otherness' has become an increasingly inflated term. Even in the late 19th century, the category had been extended outside the jurisdiction of non-western cultures to include the large section of rural British inhabitants, often of Celtic origin, who still harboured 'quaint customs', which folklorists eagerly sought to trace back to antiquity. Taking on a class-based dimension, 'otherness' referred to the 'savage' within European culture as well as the 'pagan' races beyond its frontiers (4). By the mid 20th century, the category became further extended in George Steiner's work, and later that of Pierre Bourdieu and Chris Searle for example, to include even the relationship between men and women and
the adults and children belonging to a particular speech community. The basis on which this ‘other’ has been defined and used needs to be subjected to some measure of scepticism; the very term ‘other’ proving remarkably elusive and phantasmagoric until in the works of theorists like Paul Ricoeur it has redoubled its trajectory back onto our own fragmented consciousness to make us ‘other’ to ourselves. Anthropological discourse therefore becomes twice removed as a reflection of my ‘others’ discourse on one among many ‘others’ of a fragmented ‘otherly’ subject.

By failing to question the epistemological basis of such a view of the world and ignoring the sustained self-criticism that anthropology itself has undergone in the past two decades, museum ethnography has lost much of its interpretative conviction. The discipline continues to equate material objects with specific cultures whose existences it objectifies by reference to their defined geographical territories under specific political jurisdictions. The classification of styles of material culture with specific ethnic identities, defined by local geography and political administration, often ignores the conditions of contemporary cultural productions which are sited at the interstices of societies and reflect far more complex relationships between competing productive and ideological strategies which constantly re-negotiate their makers’ own histories and identities, sometimes independently of their ethnic or nation-state affiliations. The discipline is therefore, at best, ill-equipped to represent many groups like Santamarina’s Guerrerenses, indigenous peasants from one of Mexico’s poorest and most isolated states, who work in Montreal and communicate in a mixture of Spanish, Otomi, and a pastiche of Quebecois French and American English or the sign board painters of Nairobi brought-up in the countryside as Kikuyu or Luo, but eking out an existence as brokers of global imagery in their country’s metropolis. Museum ethnography is even less equipped to provide the apparatus to visualise contemporary Black culture, not by nationhood or tribal affiliation, but according to a tri-continental culture developed over many centuries from the experience of slavery, forced settlement, re-settlement and travel. Cities and seas are the sites of cultural productions (historical, material, narrative, oral and musical), which are not constrained or reducible to containment by national or tribal divisions but which offer possibilities of creative and open-ended strategies and responses to a world capitalist system. The cultural expressions they nurture reflect identities not based