Out of Europe

The African Palimpsest in Michel Leiris’s
L’Afrique fantôme

Voyage = la joie vague du noyé
[Voyage = the vague joy of the drowned]
—Michel Leiris, Mots sans mémoire¹

Voyage = la joie de voir de ses yeux, voilà—ailleurs—l’enjeu!
[Voyage = the joy of seeing from one’s eyes, there—elsewhere—the stakes!]
—Michel Leiris, Langage tangage²

Écrire un livre de voyage n’est-il pas, il est vrai, une absurde gageure
par quelque bout qu’on s’y prenne?
[To write a travel book, is it not, really, an absurd wager in any way one
can see it?]
—Michel Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme

IN HIS TRAVEL JOURNAL classic, L’Afrique fantôme (1934), after a year of
travel through sub-Saharan Africa on the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, the French
writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris listed a group of texts under the sim-
ple heading “African Imagery” (“Imagerie africaine”). The list, included in
an entry for the June 19, 1932, covers a wide range of heterogeneous names
and materials, from events in French colonial history to more or less exoticist
European texts such as Giuseppi Verdi’s Aïda. At this particular moment in

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations in this chapter are mine.

². Michel Leiris, “Souple mantique et simples tics de glotte. En supplément,” in Langage
his journey, Leiris explains that he had “plunged himself” into such a textual atmosphere. He gives no other account for this inscription. The references are presented as separate from the rest of the entry as if they were a fact in themselves, a kind of personal and cultural baggage to be dealt with—but Leiris never explicitly returns to these texts or historical events in the rest of the journal.

Imagerie africaine:
*L'Africaine*, l'opéra de Meyerbeer, avec son fameux « unisson » et le grand air de Vasco de Gama;
lacasquette de père Bugeaud et la smalah d'Abd el Kader;
*Aïda*, que Verdi composa pour les fêtes d'inauguration du Canal de Suez;
l'histoire du prêtre Jean;
lamort de Livingstone;
Fachoda;
Arthur Rimbaud vendant des armes à Ménélik;
Savorgnan de Brazza;
le Prince impérial tué par les Zoulous;
les massacreurs Voulet-Chanoine;
les dynamiteurs Gaud-Tocquet;
l'affaire de la N'Goko Sanga;
le scandale du Thiès-Kayes;
le Congo-Océan;
labataille des Pyramides;
le coup d'Agadir;
laconférence d'Algésiras;
*Impressions d'Afrique*;
lareine Ranavalo;
les amazones de Béhanzin;
et le sirdar Kitchener, et la guerre du Mahdi, et Samori, etc.
(Leiris 1981, 365–66)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the indications of Leiris’s list, and its framing in the travel journal, as a palimpsest that states itself but also calls into question the writer’s knowledge of Africa. More precisely, what I want to do is tease out some finer implications of the specific textual “ambience” to which the author refers by this list and investigate the ways in which the connotations of this list, and Leiris’s African travelogue as a whole, are related to the writer’s emerging notion of self-writing. By the palimpsestic quality of the
list I mean that it foregrounds the fact that writing takes place in the presence of other writings and the contradictory forces of remembering and forgetting. By listing some of his favorite African images, from legends to plays and operas to fictions, with the violent history of French colonialism in Africa, Leiris dramatizes a loss of command of the exotic discourse—thus dissociating himself from some of these images and pointing to the cure of exoticism, or the “mirage exotique,” which he later associated with European egocentrism vis-à-vis other cultures, and that he mentions at the journal’s end.3

Simultaneously, the inventory suggests an attempt to take hold of a certain textual authority concerning the experience in Africa. The entry from June 1932 thus opens up the question of the use of African imagery in relation to colonialist history and travel experience: How, if at all, can it be legible? The self-conscious taking hold of imagery, together with the potentially ironic juxtaposition of literary myth and colonial reality, contributes to the general tendency of destabilization of the divide between self and other in this travel journal. The inventory contrasts with many earlier and later passages in the travel journal where the writer seeks to affirm notions of the primitive sacred and the authentic exotic.

**African Imagery**

*L’Afrique fantôme* is an intimate journal that Michel Leiris (1901–1990) kept during the French government-sponsored ethnographic mission through sub-Saharan Africa from 1931 to 1933. Working as a secretary–archivist of the Mission headed by the ethnographer Marcel Griaule, Leiris passed through thirteen African countries, of which ten were French colonies. This mission contributed more than 3,000 artefacts to the Trocadero exhibitions and research laboratories in Paris, as well as countless photographs and recordings, notations of thirty languages and dialects, and botanical specimens. *L’Afrique fantôme*, likewise, has a vast scope, including 633 entries from 21 months from May 1931 to February 1933. The journal is characterized by a hybrid narrative authority that combines confessional diary entries, travel story, dream journal, self-analysis with ethnographic observations, field notes, and seemingly unmotivated shifts in narration.4 After the list of some twenty

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3. Towards the end of *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris refers to the mirage exotique, meaning the desire to ‘go to Calcutta’ and the desire for ‘femmes de couleur,’ as an illusion that no longer obsesses him. The same concept is also used in the footnotes (Leiris 1981, 629, 655).

4. The generic hybridity of *L’Afrique fantôme* reflects a turning point in Leiris’s career. Irene Albers has made the important observation that after *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris clearly
Figure 7. Map of Mission Dakar-Djibouti (May 1931–February 1933) (Michel Leiris, L'Afrique fantôme. © Éditions Gallimard).
texts and events that apparently had influenced his vision of Africa, Leiris states briefly that one day he had forgotten himself in the ambience of these texts but then he was interrupted. Leiris never explicates the meanings of the list thereby giving the reader the opportunity to reflect on its contents and implications or to leave it as it is. From the outset, Leiris’s African imagery defies the borders of fact and fiction, myth and history—or at least suggests the possibility of their mutual implication. The list opens with one of the great nineteenth-century Orientalist and colonialist operas, Giacomo Meyerbeer’s \textit{L’Africaine} (\textit{The African Woman} or \textit{The African Maid}, 1865), about the explorer Vasco da Gama and his slave, the African queen Sélika. \textit{L’Africaine} is accompanied by another reference in the same genre to Verdi’s \textit{Aïda} (premiere 1871), an opera about an Ethiopian princess torn between love of her homeland and the man who loves her. The medieval legend of Prester John (\textit{Prêtre Jean}), who supposedly ruled over a perfect Christian kingdom somewhere in Asia or perhaps in Africa, comes fourth in the list. These references are instances of fanciful images of marvels and the exotic earthly paradise.

The rest of the entries, however, with the important exception of one novel, \textit{Impressions d’Afrique} (1910) by Raymond Roussel, involve names and narratives from the actual history of Africa’s colonization with a specific emphasis on French involvement. They make up an anti-colonial palimpsest that exposes the writer’s personal memory as interlinked with colonial history and discourse, revealing a mind being colonized by certain imagery. The second entry about the “cap of père Bugeaud” and the Arab leader Abd el Kader, refers to the history of the conquest of Algiers by the French in 1830 and the establishment of their long rule there. Major names connected to African colonization in the list include the Scottish missionary–explorer David Livingstone, along with the Italian-born French explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza who, in competition with Stanley, opened up for the French an entry along the right bank of the Congo. Brazza’s endeavours eventually led to the establishment of French colonies in West Africa. Fachoda, where the British–French competition over African colonies culminated in 1898, is on the list as is also the 1879 death of the exiled French imperial Prince in the Anglo-Zulu war in South Africa. The poet Arthur Rimbaud is mentioned in relation to a colonialist scene, selling arms to the Ethiopian emperor

\begin{footnote}
subdivided his writing into theoretical texts and autobiographical or literary works. The same tendency may be already observed in the publication of parts of the African travel diary in 1933 and 1934 in roughly two different genres: passages published in the journal \textit{Nouvelle revue française} that conform with the genres of “journal intime” and “journal de voyage” and ethno-graphic observations published in the June 1933 special issue of the \textit{Minotaure} where the writer supresses his own participation (Albers 2008, 288).
\end{footnote}
Ménélik. The Rimbaud reference and the story of the death of Livingstone (near Lake Bangweolo in 1873), in their own right, combine colonial history and myth. The fact that Rimbaud left belles lettres for action and adventure in East Africa also resonates with Leiris’s wish to distance himself from surrealism and Parisian artistic circles. The potential ambiguity with this reference, however, is that there is no genuine break in Leiris’s writing activity during the African travel but instead a transition to new forms of (autobiographic) writing through intense documentation, note-taking, and introspection.

These entries are followed by references to the widely covered atrocities committed under French colonial rule. The “Voulet-Chanoine murderers” refers to the bloody mission that in 1898 tried to establish contact with the borders of French Niger and Tchad; the “Gaud-Tocquet dynamite exploders” alludes to French officials in Central Africa who on Independence Day, 1904, exploded a local person named Papka with dynamite in a strange spectacle of public punishment; “N’Goko Sanga affair” points to the colonial company with the same name that exploited a large tract of the French Congo and received much bad publicity from the 1900s to the 1930s; the “Thiès-Kayes scandal” and the “Congo-Océan” refer to the early twentieth-century great railway construction projects that used forced labor recruitment and led to the deaths of thousands of workers. The other references also indicate central events and moments in the French colonial campaigns.5

Remembering and Forgetting Africa

The passage has been singled out, although only in passing, by a number of prominent Leiris scholars, including James Clifford and Séan Hand, who mention it as an important instance of self-analysis. Clifford suggests in his analysis of L’Afrique fantôme that here “we come across lists of ‘imagerie africaine’ (to be forgotten)” (1988, 170). Similarly, Séan Hand points out that Leiris notes here a list of European clichés of Africa (2002, 59), and “half-ironically composes an ‘imagerie africaine’” (1995, 179).

More could be said about the list’s self-analysis or half-irony. The inventory and its framing seem to be marked by a deliberate contrast between an apparent and an intended meaning. Undeniably, some of these entries were clichéd images at the moment when Leiris wrote them down. But it is not simple to justify the claim for the list’s potential irony let alone to locate

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5. These include the Battle of the Pyramids in 1789, the coup of Agadir in 1911, the Algeciras conference in 1906, the exile of Queen Ranavalo of Madagascar, the capture of Samori Ture in 1898, and the 1894 surrender of King Behanzin and his amazons of Dahomey.
irony inside the list. The contrast between the literary imaginations of Roussel, Rimbaud, or romantic opera and stories of colonial violence does not necessarily involve any irony. We know, for instance, that Leiris had much serious interest in Roussel's work even if he also associated Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* with a childhood fantasy of “haunting exoticism” that he had outgrown by the time he embarked on the Dakar-Djibouti mission (I will return to Roussel’s role in the list later in more detail).⁶ Leiris was also a great admirer of opera, such as Verdi, and thought that only opera was able to capture the duration of music in action and space.⁷ It is possible, perhaps, to locate irony in the heterogeneity of the list, where fiction, exoticism, and opera are listed alongside actual events, or the way the writer’s “revelry”—if “ambience” means that—is suddenly interrupted by a local Ethiopian chief who wanted to talk to Leiris about his good relations with a former French consul in the region. Furthermore, we may argue that the listing implies a certain ironic attitude, which is that the author dissociates himself both from certain popular clichés relating to Africa and the less-than-glorious French colonial history. This seems possible especially if we interpret the listed items as quotations of popular imagery rather than as notes that relate to the writer's self-analysis. More than simply ironic, however, the writer's immersion in the ambience of these references, and the list's strategic placement near the center of the journey, seem to suggest a sense of important personal meaning and weight to be investigated. The references are perhaps something to distance oneself from, but the degree of sincerity, irony (or self-irony), and personal meaning involved remains indeterminate.

On the outset, Leiris’s style in this entry is a dry kind of self-irony or Romantic irony; it is certainly not very humorous. As a potential sign of Romantic irony, the writer would thus remind himself (and his reader) with the list, and with this interruption of the travel journal, that it is he who manipulates the description of his world and that this universe is dependent on his knowledge and preconceptions. The potential double meaning in this sense stems from the savvy, self-aware playfulness involved in the inventory

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⁶. Leiris starts his 1930 essay “L’œil de l’ethnographe” with a memory of a theater production of Roussel's novel that he saw at the age of eleven (in May 1912). Comparing Roussel’s imagery of “Africa” with Helen Bannerman’s story “The Little Black Sambo” and André Mouézy-Eon’s play *Malikoko roi nègre*, he points out the distorting Western perspective in such representations while emphasizing the promise in ethnographic research and travel to “dissiper pas mal de ces erreurs et, partant, à ruiner nombre de leurs conséquences, entre autres les préjugés de races, iniquité contre laquelle on ne s’élève jamais assez” (Leiris 1930/1992, 33) (“clear up many of these mistakes and, thus, prevent a good number of their consequences, including racial prejudices, and iniquity that we can never fight enough”).

and undermining of personal myths. The meaning of “Africa,” so to speak, would thus emphasize the imagination’s ability to fuse historical events and struggles with transient, ordering fictions. Perhaps also, as in Romantic self-irony, the emphasis on equivocal voice—between revelry and self-analysis, quotation and self-expression, irony and serious intention—indicates that the experience of a certain time and space must always be other than the memories and literary or other textual models that the experience may evoke.

The inventory, thus, may postulate a double audience, but it is far from evident what the intended meaning of the list is. It also remains uncertain how much weight one should attach to the inventory. The dynamics of the juxtaposition and the framing of the list in the travel journal invite more extended attention, but this attention must necessarily remain open-ended. The idea that the list would involve things to be forgotten is not obvious either. Leiris’s African trip evidently led the writer to abandon his juvenile myth of breaking away from the “West,” from what he saw as Western rationality, technology, capitalism, and cultural arrogance, through voyage in the exotic. Instead of material to be forgotten, the explicit deposition of the textual strata indicates also a sense of self-understanding, revealed to the writer under the pressure of travel. These are mental images that have stayed with him; they are capable of immersing the mind into a specific ambience. The inventory, thus, does not necessarily reveal a desire to forget the imagery, but its function may be to note how much the writer’s vision of Africa has been dependent on it.

As Leiris is not explicit about the meanings of the list, there is room to speculate on its various potential implications. Beside the juxtaposition between fictional Africanist imagery and colonialist atrocities within the list, which may invite us to reflect on their potential connection, the entry suggests an important contradiction between mobility and immobility, or between action and revelry that resonates with many other parts of the journal. The heroism of the African myths and histories, implied by the list, stands in ironic contrast to Leiris’s present immobile situation on a stop in an Ethiopian village where he had just been offered inedible meat and sour milk. Furthermore, the sense of disparity between an eventful European home and the African immobile abroad is implied through the mentioning, in the beginning of the same day’s entry, of the horse races of the Grand Steeple chase taking place in Paris at that particular time. Leiris’s capacity suddenly to immerse himself in the ambience of the various African references creates a further contrast with his statements elsewhere where he laments his inability to submerge himself in the rituals of the Dogon people of Mali. After all, the religious rituals and the sacred language of the Dogon, which Leiris had investigated in Bandiagara and Sanga, had been for him closest to the kind of
authenticity of the noble primitive that he had been looking for. In contrast to this inability to participate, and the immobility from which he suffers, Leiris is able to immerse himself in the images of his mind.

Moreover, still another implication is that the list is a possible early instance of kinds of polysemantic and polymorphous facts that later served as important materials in Leiris’s long-lasting autobiographical project. This sustained project included the four volumes grouped under the title *La Règle du jeu* (The Rules of the Game) that Leiris wrote from the early 1940s until the mid-1970s, preceded by his memoir *L’Âge d’homme* (Manhood, 1939). Leiris had a habit of making notes on events and experiences in his life, which had made an impact on him and seemed to have a multifaceted or ambiguous meaning that required more reflection. These data were included in his *Journal* or an archive of index files to be later worked upon and developed it in his autobiography, *La Règle du jeu* (Hollier 2003, xxxvi; Brée 1980, 197–98). Such events and experiences, Hollier suggests, functioned for instance as a means of foreshadowing, providing the author and his confidante, that is, the reader of *La Règle du jeu*, with clues about where the autobiographic narrative might be going (Hollier 2003, xxxvi). In *Biffures* (1948), the first part of *La Règle du jeu*, Leiris explicitly refers to scenes that, as he says, have laid “dormant” in his *Journal*, preserved in anticipation of his later work. One such occasion is a scene involving a family of street artists dancing on stilts at a town square in Lannion on August 25, 1933, as Leiris was vacationing in Bretagne with his wife, Zette, some six months after his return from Africa. The description of the scene in his *Journal*, which he made the very same day, consists of one detailed paragraph, but the description is rudimentary and gives no insight about the note-taker’s experience or reason for writing it down (Leiris 1992a, 230). In contrast, fifteen years later in *Biffures*, the scene is presented much more fully. The description is, further, thematically framed and it re-evokes the writer’s state of mind at the time:

*Sur une place de cette petite ville dont je goûte fort le nom (parce qu’il sonne bien campagnard et qu’on croit, l’entendant, voir des paysans aller au marché le bras passé dans l’anse de paniers remplis de volaille, de mottes de beurre ou d’œufs frais) nous vîmes des baladins qui dansaient, montés sur des échasses. Deux adultes et deux enfants; selon toute vraisemblance,*

First of all, by placing the scene in a chapter entitled “Il était une fois . . .” (“Once upon a time”), Leiris ties the memory of this scene to the theme of distant past, and the relationship between imagination and the reality he experienced, which is his focus here. The memory is an important instance of the fusion of dream and real experience, as he explains, that the life has offered to him and that he has accepted as such without submitting it “to any poetic maceration” (2003, 134). Second, Leiris also contextualizes the scene in relation to his recent return from Africa and the question of how to perceive unfamiliar or, so to speak, exotic cultures. More precisely, Leiris explains that in the summer of 1933 he was trying to get back in touch with France as if it were a new country that would supply him with a lot of material for “exotic sensations” (2003, 146). It is then not surprising that the street artists appeared to him as a charming “explosion of freshness” in the routine bustle of the town and, as he says, just like a bed of flowers in an old provincial courtyard (2003, 147). Third, through this memory, Leiris recognizes his wish to see the family of artists more as fairy tale characters than real people, as goblins or sylphs in some narrative, living a kind of aerial life far removed from our daily habits. Further, he explains how he deliberately did not want to imagine that the family had any inner discord or everyday problems such as drinking, unfaithfulness, or violence. The mention of all the things Leiris does not want to imagine with regard to this memory is relatively long as if he wanted to underscore how his mind works rather than what was the reality that he witnessed.

This anecdote, and the list in L’Afrique fantôme, functions similarly in terms of the kinds of knots of significant but still “dormant” meanings that Leiris uses in his autobiographical project and narrative self-conception.
Leiris’s memory of the experience in Lannion, and the inventory in the travel journal, are both woven into a larger autobiographical narrative. As to the scene in Lannion, both its cognitive *and* affective relations are appropriated in the retelling. The list in the travel book, in contrast, stands without clear affective value, but it is framed by the experience of immersion. At the same time, however, it seems somehow simplifying to view these instances as evidence of the way the present may be experienced in the context of a larger life-narrative, or how the past can be relevant with regard to the present processes of narrative self-constitution. What I think needs to be emphasized here is the virtual dimension of the experience, the importance of the memory as having *potentially* meaningful forms before the act of narrativisation. In other words, what seems to come to the fore here is that the meaning potential of past experience is for the first time realized and given form in the retelling, while past consciousness, in terms of its form-finding capacity, also becomes part of the investigation. Thus, what interests the autobiographical author in such “souvenir descriptions” (*objet-témoin*) is that they are subject to reinterpretation as they are placed in a new context. Leiris’s rewriting of the scene in Lannion does not only try to re-evoke the past consciousness within the interpretive frame of a life-narrative, so as to restore the state of that mind, but also tries to investigate the multifaceted nature of the experience and the mind that takes hold of that experience before being able to give it a particular narrative, thematic, or other meaning.

**Palimpsest, Collage, Found Object**

Séan Hand has isolated three intertextual levels in *L’Afrique fantôme*. All of these levels, Hand claims, which vary in their degree of concreteness and intentionality, encourage us to investigate the journal’s epistemological groundings and poetic practices. More specifically, Hand argues that the layered textual structure of the journal speaks of the “phantasmic persistence of a general colonial and imperial epistemology within a consciously post-imperial and anti-colonial revalorization of native culture” (1995, 178). These textual levels include, first, Leiris’s readings that take place in the journal, especially classic and contemporary popular novels, and the writing raised by that reading; second, the writing taking place in and around *L’Afrique* and the reading raised by that writing; and third, the mapping of the culturally other carried out by the French Empire, especially the way Leiris resorts to accounts given by Commandant Gallieni (1849–1916) on his 1879–81 Senegal-Niger campaign.
The list of African imagery activates all these levels in intertextuality. The references are an outcome of Leiris’s readings that, in part, have made him write; they also showcase an inventory of persisting European images of the culturally other. It is remarkable how the list functions as an incentive for interpretation in its own right, through association between the materials. This is partly because the entries document the writer’s strategic location vis-à-vis Africa and that this documentation is simultaneously meaningful in many respects, in terms of ethnography of the self, surrealist devices, and colonial culture. At this point in his travels, Leiris not only presents to himself and to the reader a kind of chronicle of African colonial myth and history but also affiliates himself with other works and histories and thus *takes hold* of a certain textual and narrative authority, the discursive conditions of his knowledge concerning Africa. Africa, therefore, comes forth through this list as a field of knowledge that, further, under the weight of wide travel experience, forces upon the writer an exploration of available sources of reference.

The metaphors of palimpsest and the collage may help us to understand better the heterogeneity of the cultural material in the list. The palimpsest introduces the idea that there can be a fluid relationship between the texts that are written over each other and that the erasure of a textual layer is part of a layering process. In the heterogeneous materials of the list, texts are superimposed to bring about other texts or erasures. The alternating acts of reading and writing during the journey accentuate the effect. Furthermore, we may think here more concretely of Leiris’s earlier writings on African imagery such as the 1930 essay “L’œil de l’ethnographe” to which I will return in more detail later. A new erasure creates text; a new text creates erasure.

We can argue that Leiris reworks through his inventory certain unprocessed givens of his memory and his fantasies, to arrange them under a heading—“imagerie africaine”—only to connect them haphazardly according to a taxonomy of personal and cultural memory. The effect of the juxtapositions is an awareness of discursive pressure, of culturally persisting images of the other, and perhaps also, the ideological nature of identity. In this respect, the inventory resembles the juxtapositions of modern art and African sculpture in the periodical *Documents* in which Leiris was engaged prior to his journey. Or, rather, it constitutes an instance of collage and juxtaposition in action. In

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9. Michel Beaujour has, in fact, claimed, in regard to Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*, that the literary self-portrait functions as a kind of *objet trouvé* to which “the writer imparts the purpose of self-portrayal in the course of its elaboration” (1991, 4). This means not only the way the self-portrait may not have a clear notion of direction or continuous narrative but also the way the writer’s culture may “provide him with the ready-made categories that enable him to classify the fragments of his discourse” (1991, 5).
an intimate chronicle, materials are to be recorded as they present themselves, in their particularity and subjectivity, as Leiris explains in a preface in the middle of the journal:

Car rien n’est vrai que le concret. C’est en poussant à l’extrême le particulier que, bien souvent, on touche au général; en exhibant le coefficient personnel au grand jour qu’on permet le calcul de l’erreur; en portant la subjectivité à son comble qu’on atteint l’objectivité. (1981, 264)

Since nothing is real but the concrete. It is very often that in pushing the particular to its extremes, one reaches the general; in exposing the personal coefficient to broad daylight one is able to detect errors; in taking the idea of subjectivity to its farthest limits, one attains objectivity.

Following these principles, the list of African imagery is surrounded by notes on everyday relations with local people. Here, in an ironic instance of a tabulation of quantitative data, or a kind of textual archive of the ethnographer’s self, the travel journal turns from describing the African field of perception to the observing subject himself.

One such comprehensive rubric to be undermined was that of the novel. A suspicion towards the novelistic form, and specifically a critique of the conventions of the realist and psychological novel, was a tenet that Leiris shared with the surrealists, even after having distanced himself from the group in 1929.10 In fact, Leiris saw his first autobiographical narrative L’Âge d’homme as a negation of the novel and a conscious move away from conventional narrative structures. In the 1946 preface to the book (“De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie”), Leiris refers to a kind of montage of images where all elements have a rigorous sense of veracity as documents of the writer’s life:

Du point de vue strictement esthétique, il s’agissait pour moi de condenser, à l’état presque brut, un ensemble de faits et d’images que je me refusais à

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I take “affabulation” here to mean the narrative organization of an imaginary story. The inclusion of Raymond Roussel’s experimental novel in the list is important in this respect since it is not devoid of ambiguity. What was important for Leiris in Roussel’s novel was the investigation of the limits of the purely imaginary and the possibilities in fictionalizing one’s experience, while Leiris also saw that Roussel and Rimbaud believed too strongly in the power of words, or fiction, to change one’s life.

It is then telling that toward the end of his African travel, in the entry from December 26, 1932, Leiris appropriates Joseph Conrad’s novel Victory, planning out a colonial tale that he never completes. This tale, unlike Roussel’s wholly imaginary Africa, would borrow its materials from present-day colonial reality in the form of decadent eroticized colonialist writing, based on a Conradian character called Axel Heyst, an unsociable drifter. Leiris lists the assembled materials for the story and sketches an outline that is structured around a mise en abyme effect: Heyst’s narrative is seen by a second character, a doctor, who pieces the narrative together from Heyst’s papers that constitute a kind of intimate journal, but a rather confused one (1981, 617–18). Instead of a heroic adventure, the character’s life has something of the ordinary in it that can be reduced to a kind of inventory of the main documents. The protagonist dies during an epidemic and leaves behind a small number of belongings that Leiris goes on to detail in the sketch: a photo of a blonde woman, some books and magazines, and the intimate journal. The journal, in turn, includes Axel Heyst’s reflections on suicide, feared impotence, failed relationships and love, work, his tirades against romanticism, and short notes on other matters. Some of Heyst’s reactions to black Africans, Leiris explains, reveal that the character’s thinking is contaminated by racist prejudice despite his generally open-minded attitude (1981, 654–55). Thus, we find here a list of
documents of a fictional personality to be narrated and turned into a story while the fiction, in turn, is firmly grounded in the documents of colonial reality. The act of narrating a life story, and the rules that govern memory, therefore become the subject of travel writing.\(^{11}\)

But to return to the list of African imagery, the juxtaposition of the various references in this list also poses the question of their separation from their immediate contexts. The early twentieth-century artistic use of “primitive” items as found, hybrid objects meant not only the appropriation of those objects to a modernist primitivizing art discourse but also their appreciation in their own right (Bate 2004, 187, 193). Surrealism, and especially the journal *Documents* to which Leiris actively contributed from 1929 to 1931, broke with the first primitivism of Picasso, Apollinaire, and others. During the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, Leiris became disturbed by the ethnographic plunder of fetish objects for Parisian collections. A crucial moment in this respect is the incident with the sacred *Kono* objects about three and a half months into the expedition. In relation to the appropriation of these ritual objects, Leiris was at the same time excited by the sense of power in his own profanation but also realized the enormity of the ethnographers’ responsibility (1981, 105–6). Later, Leiris wrote critically of the European vogue for African art or fetish objects, and the ethnographic appropriation or outright theft of non-European ritual objects, as signs of primitivism wholly cut off from their contexts. In his important 1950 essay “L’ethnographe devant le colonialisme,” Leiris discussed the influence of the *l’art nègre* on the development of contemporary Western art and how African art had profoundly modified our very ways of living and our representation of the world (1950/1992, 149). The critical moment in the inventory of the list is that it turns the power of the object of memory, and the whole travel journal entry, into an open form of self-analysis, archaeology of cultural discourses, and personal desires. Perhaps also one is led to think with this list that the exotic phantasmagoria and the Orientalism of romantic opera are somehow tied to the atrocities of the present-day colonial reality.

**Zone of Confusion**

Leiris’s list of African imagery, like the whole journal, is thoroughly marked by an awareness of the fact that self-identity is based on conceptions of a

\(^{11}\) For Clifford, in Leiris’s sketch of a Conradian novel, the “process of collecting and telling a personal story becomes itself the focus of narration” (1988, 171). For Demeulenaere (2009, 264), Leiris’s imagination of writing a fictional story of the experiences of the trek allows him to adopt different identities of the traveller as a character in a novel, no longer the narrator of his travel story.
determinate other, or determinate difference. The motto in the 1950 preface to *L'Afrique fantôme*, a quote from Rousseau’s *Confessions*, makes this explicit:

Moi seul. Je sens mon coeur, et je connais les hommes. Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai vus: j’ose croire n’être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vaus pas mieux, au moins je suis autre. (Leiris 1981, 11)

Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any of the ones I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist. If I am worth no more, at least I am different. (Rousseau 1995, 5)

Rousseau emphasized in the beginning of *Confessions* his own uniqueness but in the context of Leiris’s travel journal the quotation rather stresses the importance of self-knowledge in relation to a fundamental recognition of otherness in one’s self. The self is unique and, as it were, in a unique relationship with itself. But this uniqueness is only possible through a confrontation with the other, meaning either another person or sense of otherness within one’s own self.

At the same time, Leiris’s writing is affected by the difficulty of presenting the relationship with the other. Despite the persistence of the images of the African, the other in Leiris’s inventory, be it within or outside the self, is not very determinate. A radical rupture with the notion of the African exotic other was an important outcome of Leiris’s travel. Later, in his 1948 lecture “Message de l’Afrique,” Leiris explained how in the course of travel the perception of similarities became more important than finding difference:

De fil en aiguille et à mesure que je m’accoutumai à ce milieu nouveau, je cessai de regarder les Africains sous l’angle de l’exotisme, finissant par être plus attentif à ce qui les rapprochait des hommes des autres pays qu’aux traits culturels plus ou moins pittoresques qui les différenciaient. (1996, 880)

Little by little and to the extent that I became accustomed to this new environment, I stopped looking at the Africans from the angle of exoticism, becoming more attentive to that which brought them closer to people from other countries than to those more or less picturesque cultural traits that differentiate them.

For Leiris, the African mission contributed to a gradual undermining of the “savage/civilized” pairing and the white/black hierarchy. Leiris explains here
how the mythological idea of Africa finally dissipated from his mind and was replaced by a very real Africa (*Afrique bien réelle*). The dilemma includes the need to question the epistemological grounds for representing, describing, and narrating the other, in a dual relation of affirmation and denial of past knowledge on Africa.

The listing, therefore, is not just a sign of self-analysis but a record of a destabilizing moment in the writer’s reformation of French colonial, ethnographic, and autobiographic identity. Leiris’s teacher at *l’Institut d’Ethnologie*, Marcel Mauss, recommended the keeping of field notebooks. Mauss, however, probably did not have in mind Leiris’s type of intimate journal, fuelled in part by psychoanalysis, where the attempt to speak about social reality results mainly in speech about oneself. For Leiris, the concept of national identity was problematic in the first place, but during his journey, as the list so well manifests, there emerges a wish to grasp the foundations of his own exoticizing conception of the other, involving specifically the idea of sub-Saharan cultures as the most distant and different from the European cultures and the desire to live out a myth through the exotic other. The inventory and its heading, therefore, bear the trace of what postcolonial theory has called the “zone of occult instability” (Homi K. Bhabha’s term for the geography of imperialism) and the “zone of confusion” in the imperialist space. For instance, Ian Baucom has argued that we should read British imperialism “not simply as the history of England’s expansion and contraction but as the history of a cultivated confusion” (1999, 3). This entails that the “empire is less a place where England exerts control than the place where England loses command of its own narrative of identity” (1999, 3). Many entries of *L’Afrique fantôme*, including the entry for the nineteenth of June 1932, suggest an awareness of the loss of exoticism as a master narrative of identity.

### Conception of Travel

There is a clear demystifying function to Leiris’s list: knowledge of the African space and cultures is based on and presented as images and histories, but these histories are themselves at least partially founded in fiction and legend. Fusing historical events with fiction, and thus levelling between the two, the display of these materials shows how culture has provided the

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12. By the desire to live out a myth through the other, I refer specifically to Leiris’s often ambivalent wish to fully participate in a ritual of spirit possession, that is, to be possessed, during his stay in Gondar, from July to December 1932. On Leiris’s ambivalent identification with the practitioners of the *zar* cult, see Albers 2008.
writer with ready-made categories. This interpretation is in line with “L’œil de l’ethnographe” (1930) where Leiris distances himself from exotic fairy tales, vaudeville shows, and l’art nègre that represented “Africa” to him in his childhood and youth.

The inventory of the African imagery, therefore, keeps in sight the sense of the loss of exoticism and a dislocation of colonial identity. At the end of this list, Leiris explains how his immersion in this ambience of images was interrupted by a local Ethiopian chief called Asfao who wanted to tell Leiris about his past good relations with the governor of French Somaliland, Léonce Lagarde. Leiris’s African memories are thus juxtaposed with other reminiscences. As a result, the writer’s revelry is suppressed by the pressure to consider an African’s memory and actual colonial relations. But, perhaps more importantly, the composition of the entry thus acts out a dramatic return to the concrete present moment (and we might remember that the sense of the concrete is one aspect that Leiris admires in African societies in his lecture “Message de l’Afrique”).

As I already suggested, the list serves to stress how certain narratives, images, and names in memory have the power to triumph over actual observations. From this perspective, it is important that L’Afrique fantôme includes, only some weeks later, another list in self-analysis inside an entry for July 7, 1932. The inventory that concerns the theme of travel builds explicitly on the surrealist breach with the restrictions of habit, intelligence, and morality and on a search for the strange and the marvellous within oneself. Like the examples of African imagery, these references are a combination of legendary and imaginary references as well as of historical events in near-modern reality. They include references to great mythical journeys in the sky and descents into hell; Oedipus killing his father in the course of his journeying; the revelation of the initiated in a distant place (Moses, Pythagoras, Jesus Christ, etc.); the quest for Sleeping Beauty; the absence of Bluebeard; the apprentice pursuing a tour de France to become a journeyman; the alchemist travellers; and the long distance sports of our day (1981, 389–90). There is little explicit interpretation of the meaning of this list other than Leiris’s remark that he still must wait for a revelation—“Je suis bien obligé de constater, quant à moi, que j’attends encore la révélation” (1981, 390)—and that the most important model of a traveller to him is Oedipus. This is the story of a man who, as Leiris specifies, leaves his home and upon returning, being over a hundred years old, does not recognize anyone.

What Leiris underlines in this inventory of great travel is thus the traveller’s alienation and misrecognition of identity that is comparable to an ironic occultation in the sense of one’s disappearance upon returning—the idea reso-
mates with Rimbaud’s “disappearance” in Africa as well as with the occultation of thought demanded by André Breton. The list of great travels is followed, in the same entry, by a note on the numbing effect of travel on one’s linguistic capacities. The isolation of the traveller therefore involves both disintegration and redefinition of one’s language. In this respect, the inclusion of Rimbaud in the list of African imagery may become somewhat clearer. Rimbaud is obviously a great figure of forgetting and escape, also in terms of writing activity. Yet, for Leiris, who laments the impoverishment of his language, as he has just revised some of his entries in the travel journal, the African journey becomes a means of transition from one form of writing to another. The Rimbaud reference thus does not necessarily stand for the forgetting of poetry in the name of action but for the forgetting of dead expression and an “aestheticizing” mind.

In this second list and also elsewhere in the travel journal, for Leiris journeying through Africa pointed towards a kind of defamiliarization of perception, identity, and language. This equates to the idea of transgressive vagabondage, not wanting to fix oneself to one place or to one point in time. In a later 1935 essay, “L’Abyssinie intime,” Leiris holds onto the importance of the idea of travelling to the archaic, not the exotic world, and the importance of forgetting oneself in travel. Leiris explains here how it is still agreeable to travel to Abyssinia:

Voyager n’était pas une question d’horaire ni même de calendrier, voire d’itinéraire, mais partir simplement à l’aventure, sans trop savoir où l’on arriverait, ni surtout quand l’on arriverait. (1935/1992, 48)

Travelling was not a question of a timetable or a calendar, or even an itinerary, but simply of embarking on an adventure, to not know too much about where one would go and, particularly, not about when one would get there.

In Ethiopia, Leiris no longer had many impressions of the exotic other but rather felt the similarity between the locals and the French, as he was engaged in studying the popular zar cult of spiritual possession. In the same 1935 essay, Leiris celebrates travel as an art of forgetting rather than as a means of learning or simple escape: the forgetting of questions of time and aging, skin color, body odor, taste, prejudice, and intellectual habits and means of expression—forgetting even the very meaning of travel (1935/1992, 56). The 1935 essay thus exemplifies the fact that while Leiris had abandoned one kind of exoticist project of escape, as he increasingly had to face a loss of command of the exotic discourse, this did not amount to a complete dissolution of exoticism.
in his writing practice. The sense of the archaic suggests a potential, residual “denial of coevalness” (in Johannes Fabian’s sense of the term)\(^\text{13}\) that marks Ethiopia and the Ethiopians as “prehistoric.” The contemporary Ethiopia, therefore, functions for Leiris, as for any primitivist, as an access to a mythical past.\(^\text{14}\) The “archaic” that Leiris finds in Ethiopia suggests that, while the writer is elsewhere self-reflexively aware of the pitfalls of colonial discourses, his writing practice does not always successfully negotiate through these pitfalls.

Yet, at the same time, the wish to forget oneself in archaic life and ritual is always haunted in Leiris’s journal by the sense of the irresistible persistence in identity: the disillusionment in the power of travel to escape oneself or to transform oneself.\(^\text{15}\) The ambiguous effect is detectable also in Leiris’s mentioning, immediately after the list of great travels, that he is still waiting for a revelation and that, at the end of this entry, his life is becoming more and more “beastly”:

Ma vie est de plus en plus animale. Faute de pain (car je suis parti avec très peu de provisions), je mange de la galette abyssine. Faute d’eau potable, je bois de la bière d’orge. Dégoûté des conserves, je me nourris de lait, d’œufs, de miel et de poulet au berbéri. (1981, 390)

My life is more and more beastly. Having no bread (since I left with very few supplies), I eat Abyssinian flat cake. With no drinking water, I drink barley beer. Disgusted by canned food, I feed myself with milk, eggs, honey, and chicken with barberry.

\(^{13}\) Fabian defines a “denial of coevalness” as “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (1983, 31). I would like to thank the anonymous reader of Studies in Travel Writing for drawing my attention to the problematic nature of the term “archaic” in Leiris’s essay.

\(^{14}\) Marie-Denise Shelton argues for the central role of a “primitivist” function of Africa in L’Afrique fantôme that would assert “the radical opposition of civilized and primitive” (1995, 336). I find this hypothesis, as well as the references to Leiris’s supposed fear of losing a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the colonized Africans, to be unconvincing. While Leiris certainly used Africa and Ethiopia for self-mythologizing purposes throughout his early career, and, as Shelton’s essay makes apparent, L’Afrique fantôme is deeply involved in a colonialist project at many levels, it is the authority of the observing subject and the “authenticity” of the primitive object that are increasingly called into question in this travel journal. The same anthology where Shelton’s article was published (Prehistories of the Future, Eds. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush) includes an important corrective by Marjorie Perloff to Marianna Torgovnick’s critique, in Gone Primitive (1990), of Leiris’s “exoticism” (1995, 339–54).

\(^{15}\) “Le voyage ne nous change que par moments, la plupart du temps vous restez tristement pareil à ce que vous aviez toujours été” (Leiris 1981, 225) (“Travel changes us only momentarily. Most of the time you remain sadly similar to the person you have always been.”).
Leiris's regimen may have become less Western and more local, but it does not seem that beastly. The remark on the animal-like diet contrasts with the interest in journeys of initiation, and other heroic journeys of spiritual or professional growth, which he has just listed. Leiris is still waiting for his revelation, whatever that may be, concerning the meaning of travel and occult rituals. At the same time, the reference to a radical metamorphosis in “animal life” is a potential parody of Leiris’s friend Georges Bataille’s interest in purification in sacred ritual where one was supposed to strip oneself of all prejudice and instrumental modern knowledge.

Another striking exception to Leiris’s emphasis on forgetting and effacement in travel, in *L’Afrique fantôme*, is the dynamic of attraction and repulsion that he reports in his relation with African women. This concerns the Dogon women but especially the Ethiopian woman Emawayish to whom he gradually attributes a true individuality in the travel journal entries during a five-month stay in Gondar.16 Leiris’s incapacity to participate fully in an occult ritual or to start a physical relationship with Emawayish reveals the persistence of Western identity to the writer. In relation to Emawayish it becomes impossible, if it ever was possible, for Leiris to use his African experience as a way to seek one’s true, primitive self. Finally, during the stay in Gondar, *L’Afrique fantôme* realizes escapism as illusionary, especially the modernist pattern of “going native” or the wish to possess the exotic land symbolically through the body of the native woman. In this respect, Leiris’s earlier European mantra of African images functions as an interim record of the changing relation between an attempt at forgetting himself through the other and a gradual acceptance of the persistence of his old self.

**Leiris’s Roussel**

Raymond Roussel’s presence in this list highlights the discrepancy between literary myth and colonial reality. In Roussel’s ascetic imagination, the figure of Africa stands for a self-consciously conceived, *phantom* space, or a dream

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16. While visiting the Dogon, Leiris explains, “Ce qui empêche, à mes yeux, les femmes noires d’être réellement excitantes, c’est qu’elles sont habituellement trop nues et que de faire l’amour avec elles ne mettrait en jeu rien de social” (1981, 148) (“What prevents, in my eyes, the black women from being really exciting is that they are usually too naked, and to make love with them would not bring into play anything social.”). Leiris points out Emawayish’s charm and beauty despite her “peasant appearance” (1981, 586) and later, in *L’Âge d’homme*, he reinterprets his feelings toward her as love. Vincent Kaufmann argues that Emawayish, since she emerges as a kind of extreme form of simulacra, allows for Leiris to remain European to the end (1989, 150–51). For more on Leiris’s ambivalence vis-à-vis Emawayish, see Côté 2005.
space that does not correspond with any real geography or culture, as in a fully imaginary world. What is interesting to Leiris in such a phantom “Africa,” however, may not so much be the pure fantasy of Africa but the undermining of the hierarchy between the primitive and the civilized. Impressions d’Afrique associates between a wholly imaginary Africa and an image of Europeans in Africa deeply engaged in fantastic phenomena, ritualistic machinery, inventions, and magic that some would, with disdain, call “primitive.” It is this levelling of cultures that likens Roussel, even if quite implicitly and within the realm of fiction, to the avant-garde ethnography of Leiris’s day, scholars like Maurice Delafosse, who took seriously the proposition that positive knowledge of diverse histories and cultures, not racial theory, was the key for the development of ethnography. With the Roussel reference, Leiris may not be so much distancing himself from this writer and his exoticism than exposing some aspects of colonial discourse of Africa through his favourite reading. Roussel’s “Africa,” after all, provided Leiris with the possibility of turning the look on the “primitive” back on itself so that the civilized observer starts to look like the primitive. In another strange blend of fantasy and actuality, even if this may not directly relate to the contents of the list, Roussel was also Leiris’s sponsor on the Mission Dakar-Djibouti.

Roussel is mentioned in Leiris’s essay “L’œil de l’ethnographe” together with the exotic fairy tales, vaudeville shows, and l’art nègre. Leiris explains that his first notions of Africa came from Roussel when, at the age of eleven, he attended a theatrical production of Impressions d’Afrique. Being inspired by this production, he was able to situate the sense of adventure in actual travel and poetic voyage of the mind at the same level of experience. Poetic travel, however, as Leiris further states, is only more deceptive and much less real, “beaucoup moins réel” (1930/1992, 28). It is both a tempting and a horrifying option for Leiris that imagination could be everything. On the one hand, Roussel’s novel, from what we know about Leiris’s attachment to this writer’s works, including for instance an unfinished biography consecrated to this author, is a figure of revelation, not something to be forgotten. Roussel exem-

17. Leiris explains the double interest in Roussel’s imaginary vision of Africa: “d’une part une Afrique telle, à peu de chose près, que nous pouvions la concevoir dans notre imagination d’enfants blancs, d’autre part, une Europe de phénomènes et d’inventions abracadabrantes telle que peut-être elle se trouve figurée dans l’esprit de ceux que nous nommons avec dédain des ‘primitifs’” (1930/1992, 27) (“on the one hand, almost exactly a kind of Africa that we were able to imagine as white children and, on the other hand, a Europe of ludicrous phenomena and inventions of the kind that can perhaps be imagined to be discovered in the minds of those whom we call, with sneer, the ‘primitives’”)

18. See “Entretien sur Raymond Roussel” (Leiris 1998a, 268) and Leiris’s thank you letter to Roussel signed on February 10, 1931 (Leiris 1998b, 290–91).
plified for Leiris both the perspective of the personal sacred and an interest in breaking mimetic representation (through a rejection of the plot narrative and insistence on the notion of the purely imaginary). Roussel stood for pure poetry for Leiris because he, far from trying to do away with rules in writing so as to make room for the unconscious by automatism, multiplied the rules and constraints of composition. Leiris discusses Roussel’s work, in his unfinished “Cahier Raymond Roussel” that he started upon returning from the African mission, especially in terms of a kind of poetics subjected to the demands of a personal imaginary world and myth:

Leiris refers often in his writings on Roussel to the fact that, despite Roussel’s many travels around the world, the exterior reality never seemed to disturb the writer’s personal, interior universe. Roussel insisted on the purely linguistic status of his fictional inventions and, like his contemporary Henri Michaux, was a writer of the futility of travel. Instead of learning to know a foreign place, travel made possible for Roussel and Michaux an exploration of ontological and epistemological propositions of the self in relation to the world while being also a means to meet one’s own phantasms. Nothing in his works, Roussel claimed, came from outside reality; everything came from inside the text, from the words, their relationships, and their interplay.19

There is a Roussel-like levelling of the real with the fantastic in Leiris’s list. Roussel employed in his writing hallucinatory imagery and at the same time eschewed the expression of all personality. Yet, while Roussel said nothing

19. The experience of foreign places only mattered to Roussel if they corresponded with this particular universe. Upon Roussel’s visit to Tahiti, his main interest was to see the tomb of Loti’s fictive heroine. In his *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*, Roussel famously states “Or, de tous ces voyages, je n’ai jamais rien tiré pour mes livres. Il m’a paru que la chose méritait d’être signalée tant elle montre clairement que chez moi l’imagination est tout” (Roussel 1963, 27) (“I have gained nothing from these travels as regards to my books. It is worth pointing this out since it shows clearly how imagination is everything to me.”). Roussel was also not interested in hearing about Leiris’s experiences in Africa. See Leiris 1998b, 268.
about himself in his texts, and related to the reader very little of his characters’ psyche, he nevertheless revealed in his thematic repertoire a consistent psychological content that, in Leiris’s interpretation, equalled the content of great myths (Leiris 1998c, 113). Similarly, the title of Leiris’s travel journal, suggested to the writer by his editor at Gallimard, André Malraux, points out that what Leiris discovered in Africa was to an important degree an inner experience or a phantasm and part of his personal mythology. His African journey thus made it possible for him to combine living with writing or writing with action as Leiris emphasizes in the preface “The Autobiographer as a Torero” (“De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie”) to his L’Âge d’homme.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Roussel is not devoid of ambiguity. For some child-like fantastic rendering of Africa, like that of Roussel, to triumph over actual observations of colonial reality indicates also the potential terrifying power that all-too-persistent narratives, images, and names can have in memory. In the company of actual instances of colonial violence, or old legends and romantic Orientalist opera, Roussel’s imaginary avant-garde version of Africa stands out also as a form of Western belief in the transformative power of words. Leiris saw that Roussel and Rimbaud were similar in having too much confidence in the influence of words in changing the world (1998c, 181). Or as Leiris wrote, Rimbaud and Roussel simply made “foolish and childish demands” on literature to change one’s life. It is possible that this exaggerated belief in and near obsession with the power of words and imagination is something that Leiris wanted to forget, together with the whole aestheticizing attitude of Western intellectuals, despite the fact that Roussel remains for him a figure of revelation.20

**Conclusion**

As may have already become evident by my interpretative quest, I believe the juxtaposition and framing of Leiris’s African “images,” and their ambiva-

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20. Leiris’s writings on Roussel reveal a deep interest in the question of the relation between inspiration and process: how word play and rules of composition could function as sources of writing and as the suspension of the everyday experience. Roussel’s emphasis on the opposition between inspiration and process (power of transmutation) attracted but also troubled Leiris. On the one hand, Leiris adhered to Roussel’s idea of literature as a process and an act (evidenced, for instance, in Leiris’s poetic word play and decomposition of words in his parodic *glossaires*). On the other hand, Leiris’s interest in Roussel’s *instinct de jeu* and associative play was not surrealist at all—that is, not based on the gratuitous rapprochement between the elements but on the idea of strict rules of composition.
lent status between narrative and non-narrative, to be suggestive in their own right. Let me reiterate three reasons why this would be so. First, the list calls attention to the way meaning is given to the unexpected during the African journey, perhaps even more so since the inventory is (nearly) devoid of commentary. The inventory thus provokes a sense of a dialectic relation between a submission to the travel experience and the projection of desire and memory onto African space and life. Second, the listing indicates awareness, possibly but not necessarily ironic, of the writer’s strategic location and of a critical relation to the existing categories for conceiving Africa. The list serves to stress how certain narratives, images, and names in memory are powerful enough to triumph over actual observations. And finally, in its ambivalent mapping of various images of the African other, the list suggests a potentially delirious space where the lines of the guilty colonizer’s history and the insubordinate, or the purely fantastic, meet. The effect of such a delirium is accentuated by the interruption of narrative authority at two levels: the inventory of African imagery disrupts the narrative of travel but the “ambience” that these images, which include several narratives, provoke in the note-taker is in turn cancelled by the actuality of the everyday.

However, it is already a kind of interpretation to call this list an inventory. Instead of understanding the title “African imagery” as referring to a detailed, comprehensive list that covers the most significant resources of Africanist discourse from Leiris’s perspective, it might serve us better to treat it as a more or less random list of references, the contents of which could vary (the open-ended nature of the list is indicated by the “etc.” at the end). The connotations of the terms “ambience” and “imagery” are also manifold, perhaps intentionally so. On the one hand, the textual ambience of the imagery may have the form of revelry, escapism, perhaps memory of childhood sensations of haunting exoticism and horror, or all of these combined. On the other hand, several of these references are not actually “images” as such. They are historical events and situations better known as (traumatic) events and narratives in the culture at large.

For all these reasons, Leiris’s African imagery is marked by cultivated confusion. To a considerable degree, the list testifies to a kind of impossibility of transparency, resulting in self-forgetfulness as much as in remembering. The references included in the list may be both signs of the forgotten or the remembered; the missing explanatory frame gives the inscription an unsettling form of inventory and cartography of identity, or artificial memory. The analysis of Leiris’s African imagery thus suggests to us that in *L’Afrique fantôme*, “Africa” is not a treatable or manageable entity, as a whole to be transformed into a narrative or a series of notes, neither anything marvel-
lously exotic. The Africa of Leiris’s list is rather an excess of experience, analogous perhaps to the unconscious, the personal sacred, or the ceaselessly self-transforming figure of an *objet fantôme*. As David Scott suggests, the travel journal’s title “draws implicit attention to the difficulty of grasping the real or the exotic other except as phantom or illusion.” For this reason, the notion of Africa is a phantom notion, “an elusive principle as much as a real object, that will be pursued.”

Leiris’s list of African imagery, however, like his interpretation of Roussel’s literary techniques, is not a surrealist celebration of immediate absurdity, even if the list combines the imaginary with colonialist atrocity, romantic opera with the history of railway construction and forced labor. Rather, the inventory transforms the surrealist aesthetic of the object, and its metaphoric *dépaysement*, into ethnography of the self and the colonialism of ethnography. In the process, the self is made strange as an object of description. Here the ethnographic and avant-garde perspectives coalesce but also stay apart as both get tangled up in the textual imagery and the actual space of colonial history.

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