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Simon Dell, *The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary: Photography between France and Africa 1900-1939*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020. 247 pp. €55.00/\$65.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9789462702158.

Review by Cécile Bishop, New York University.

Simon Dell's *The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary* explores the role of photographic portraits in mediating the colonial encounter between France and Africa during the first four decades of the twentieth century. It examines not only how colonized subjects were depicted by European photographers, but also how some African subjects appropriated and used the photographic portrait to negotiate their own status, within the constraints of colonial domination. The book is composed of three fascinating case studies that echo and resonate with each other in tantalizing ways, but do not easily resolve into an argument.

The introduction and the first chapter establish two of the central themes of the book: first, the colonial and missionary project of remaking the colonized into a "usable other," divested of absolute alterity. Second, the precarious forms of agency that emerge when the portrait, a medium that has traditionally facilitated the performance of subjectivity and personhood in European art, comes into contact with African subjects who have been largely excluded from that performance. Dell does so mainly through a discussion of the famous portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley completed by Anne-Louis Girodet in 1797. Perhaps less successfully, the first chapter also provides brief accounts of the Third Republic's colonial ideology, of the emergence of optical naturalism in Western art, and of the Christian idea of subjectivity.

The first case study, developed in the second chapter, discusses the photographs taken by Marc Allégret while travelling through Central Africa with his lover, André Gide, in the mid-1920s. Here, Dell brings together a number of Gide's texts, including his widely discussed account of the journey in *Voyage au Congo* and *Retour au Chad*, with the vast visual archive produced by Allégret, comprising a 114-minute film and 2000 photographs. Dell is as comfortable in the discussion of Gide's writing as in the visual analysis of Allégret's works, offering a nuanced account of their efforts to cast a sympathetic gaze on African subjects, often at odds with colonial and missionary agendas. In this process, Dell emphasizes their ambivalence towards African subjects and their difficulty in dealing with people who often confounded their conception of individuality. The images of a teenage girl known as "Boulboule," whom Allégret both photographed and sexually exploited, are among the most affecting in the book. Dell shows how a beautiful photograph of her with a print dress and downcast eyes reveals the photographer's persistent reliance on colonial conventions equating modesty and clothing with a higher degree

of civilization. The contrast Dell draws between the fragile sense of individuality that may emerge from the contemplation of such an image with the assertive subjectivity of Gide's comedic self-portrait, discussed at the opening of the chapter, offers an effective way of emphasizing the vast difference in power at work in these two performances of individuality: "Gide performs his own script under his own direction; Boulboule does not" (p. 114).

The third chapter is, according to Dell, "a broken hinge, connecting incommensurable elements, within itself, and within the...book" (p.119). The Paris colonial exhibition of 1931 provides a loose thread around which discussions of various images coalesce. These include Joseph Blanchet's striking photograph of a Sudanese woman staring distrustfully at the photographer while a crowd of visitors surrounds her--an image that both reveals and challenges the power dynamic between the people exhibited and those looking at them. The chapter also discusses the portraits of colonial officials included in the visitors' guide to the exhibition, as well as portraits of the participants in the Congrès international et intercolonial de la société indigène. Of particular interest is the discussion of three photographs taken by Roger Parry in the housing compound, which Dell describes as occupying an ambiguous "third space." Unlike the rest of Parry's output, they do not quite follow the organizers' architectural cues, but neither do they seek to reveal the logic of oppression hidden behind the official scenography. In this way, Dell suggests, they may constitute a fleeting moment of "resistance to the logic of the exhibition" (p. 141).

The final chapter tackles the ways colonized subjects have appropriated the photographic portrait through a compelling discussion of the unhappy fate of King Njoya of the Banum. The chapter starts by discussing Njoya's powerful self-portraits in the context of the king's initial strategy of adopting elements of European culture and techniques while seeking to preserve the Banum's traditions and social order. In this light, as Dell point out, the photographic portrait becomes the site of a "negotiation...with different categories of personhood and different procedures of representation" (p. 148). Dell also offers a deft account of the unravelling of that strategy following the departure of German colonizers and the arrival of the French. Njoya was gradually supplanted by his Christianized rival, Yeyap, whose portrait with his small, nuclear family appears as a token of his Europeanization, in opposition to the king's polygamous household. While Njoya attempted to maintain tradition while adopting European techniques, Yeyap did the opposite. By opening a museum where he exhibited objects made by Banum's artisans, Yeyap openly championed tradition and culture, calling for the renewal of lost skills and traditions. At the same time, the museum severed the artefacts from their spiritual meaning and from contemporary Banum culture. Photography, as the chapter goes on to demonstrate, not only documented this process, but also actively contributed to it by presenting to a potentially infinite range of indiscriminate viewers objects that were traditionally invisible to the uninitiated.

The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary eschews some of the conventions of academic writing in ways some readers may find unsettling. First, as Dell points out in the introduction, "the different studies in this book will seem in some regards to be quite separate texts" (p. 22). Dell justifies his refusal to impose an argument onto his material by the need to respect the different positions at play, and to avoid imposing on them a "conventional rhetorical coherence" (p.22). This position is manifested throughout the book by very limited transitions, as well as by the inclusion of an epilogue instead of a conclusion. Second, the dialogue with the vast scholarship relevant to Dell's project is minimal, mostly limited to three paragraphs entitled "The shape of the field" on page 21. I must confess that I would have enjoyed getting a clearer sense of how Dell's engagement

with portraiture and colonial culture contributes to what has already been written in the fields of history of art, visual anthropology, and postcolonial studies, to name but a few. Regardless, I believe that the book will be of great interest for scholars working in these fields and disciplines. The individual chapters that compose *The Portrait and the Colonial Imaginary* are riveting, richly illustrated, and together make an important contribution towards a less Eurocentric approach to the history of portraiture.

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