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**A road trip through the colonial culture of “Wider France.”
Revisiting “The Black Journey” (1924-1925) beyond our colonial amnesia**

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In a 2018 documentary produced by the Franco-German TV channel Arte, French historian Pascal Blanchard wondered how in France, and the West in general, people could believe that “savages” inhabited the colonies.¹ For him, the answer was to be found in the development of human zoos, beginning in the mid-19th century. Human zoos were one of the highlights of colonial exhibitions. The documentary unveils forgotten history, revealing that human zoos were part of a powerful discourse surrounding Indigenous Others that aimed to celebrate the “Wider France” and belittle Indigenous people in order to justify colonization.²

This aspect of history is shrouded by a collective amnesia. According to American historian Ann Laura Stoler, there is a fundamental ambiguity between “ignorance” and “ignoring” or, in other words, between the inability to know and the unwillingness to know.³ Today, most French people have no idea how popular events such as *The Black Journey* (October 1924–June 1925) were during the interwar period. This colonial amnesia is even more surprising considering the pivotal role these events played as the culmination of colonial propaganda during that time. *The Black Journey*—popularized by the car manufacturer André Citroën (1878–1935)—consisted of crossing Africa from north to south in caterpillar-track vehicles. The event was also eagerly supported by the Colonial Office, as well as the Geographical Society and the Museum of Natural History of Paris. A movie of the expedition by Léon Poirier (1926) and an exhibition in Paris (Palais du Louvre, October–December 1926), both of which met with popular success, depict *The Black Journey* as one of the greatest events in 1920s France. The event has not been entirely forgotten in the present day. For those who remember it, the event is now celebrated as a

¹ Pascal Blanchard, Coralie Miller, and Bruno Victor-Pujebet, eds., 2018, *Sauvages, au cœur des zoos humains. Une mise en scène de la colonisation* (Arte, 92 minutes).

² Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Nanette Snoep, and Lilian Thuram, eds., 2011, *Human zoos. The invention of the savage* (Paris: Actes Sud/Musée du Quai Branly); Pierre Singaravélou, ed., 2023, *Colonisations. Notre histoire* (Paris: Seuil).

³ Ann Laura Stoler, 2016, *Imperial durabilities in our times* (Durham/London: Duke University Press), 12.

masterpiece of Citroën's advertising campaigns, an illustration of the prowess of emerging mechanical sports, and a scientific expedition that yielded significant achievements.⁴

Beyond examining these three approaches to depicting and romanticizing *The Black Journey*, I would like to revisit it from a critical angle. The central question revolves around how *The Black Journey* efficiently enabled a majority of the French population to embrace the concept of "Wider France" and support derogatory perceptions of the Indigenous Other. Starting with the colonial desire to fill the gaps in the inner regions of the African map, this paper explores how places, landscapes, and Indigenous people were used as vehicles to substantiate the French "mission to civilize." More specifically, I aim to investigate how different discursive strategies concerning the people during this journey implicitly justified the violence of colonization and contributed to the popularization of a racialized perception of the Indigenous Other, including how they influenced the mindset of young people. The primary source for this investigation is the narrative of the expedition provided by Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil (the main organizers of the journey) in a book widely circulated at the time and immediately translated into English.⁵ Another source, taken from children's literature, is *Loulou chez les nègres* (1929). Largely inspired by *The Black Journey*, it illustrates how this discourse on Others also reached young people.⁶

Given the brutality depicted in certain subsequent quotes and images, I apologize in advance for any offense or distressing emotions they may evoke. However, France is facing ongoing calls for evidence of the so-called "positive aspects" of colonization. Building on the insights of Pascal Blanchard and others,⁷ I believe that to deconstruct colonial propaganda it is necessary to expose and confront the violent nature of the discourse on Others in colonial situations. The storytelling in *The Black Journey*, with its harsh, crude words and offensive pictures of Indigenous Others, dramatically illustrates the mechanisms perpetuating the enduring exclusion of African Others, which continue to feed the "colonial divide" in contemporary France.⁸

Dots on the map

Filling in the "blanks" on the map of Africa was a primary ambition of Europeans in the 1920s. Due to the harsh environments, such as deserts and wild tropical forests, huge parts of the "Dark Continent" remained difficult to access. However, mapping and drawing Africa was far from a

⁴ Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil, 2014, *La croisière noire. Sur les traces de l'expédition Citroën Centre-Afrique* (Paris : Glénat-Société de Géographie).

⁵ Georges-Marie Haardt, Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, 1927, *The Black Journey. Across Central Africa with the Citroën Expedition*, (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation Publishers).

⁶ Alphonse Crozière, 1929, *Loulou chez les nègres* (Paris: Nathan).

⁷ Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Christelle Taraud, and Dominic Thomas, eds., 2018, *Sexe, Race & Colonies* (Paris: La Découverte), 16.

⁸ Singaravélou, "Renouer nos histoires," in Singaravélou, *Colonisations. Notre histoire*, 5-6.

neutral undertaking. It was based on a conception of otherness inherited from the Age of Enlightenment and fueled by the evolutionist theories of the 19th century.⁹ The politics of otherness in Africa was dependent on two universal categories, namely the “universal human” and the “savage.” Beyond their pretension to universality, these two categories were indeed situated ones, thought out from European centers, and nourished by a particular way of understanding the world and Others within it. The figure of the “universal human” was in fact a fictionalized white, educated, moral man, whereas that of the “savage” was embodied by the Indigenous Other. European philosophers and evolutionists frequently mobilized Black people to illustrate the latter category.¹⁰

Most of the French colonial actors (explorers, scientists, colonial administrators, soldiers, etc.) were completely convinced of the role of the “universal human” over “uncivilized” lands and people. Moreover, it was an excuse to promote what geographer Gregory Derek named the “might and right to colonize.” The influential Marshal Louis-Hubert Lyautey (1854–1934) exemplified it. In the introduction of the *1929 Colonial Atlas*, published by the popular journal *L’Illustration*, he stated:

Colonial duty has become a form of civic and patriotic duty. To love France is to love the Wider France, the one which is not confined within its borders, but which shines on all parts of the world. [...] Colonization, as we have always understood it, is nothing but the highest expression of civilization. To backward peoples, or people who have remained apart from modern developments, sometimes ignoring the most basic forms of well-being, we bring progress, hygiene, moral and intellectual culture, we help them to rise up on the scale of humanity.¹¹

It is crucial to recall the dichotomy between “civilization” and “barbarism” before analyzing *The Black Journey*. Indeed, this analysis must be handled in its moving intention, or, in other words, like a metaphor of the progress of the “universal human” and “civilization” over “backwards” lands and people. The journey serves as a demonstration of the right and need to modernize Africa. Viewed through the lens of the “universal human,” the descriptions of Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil echo the promise to expand the “Wider France” and save Indigenous people from their allegedly pitiful way of life.

⁹ Henri Louis Gates and Andrew Currant, eds., 2022, *Who’s Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Sharon Stanley, 2012, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰ Claude-Olivier Doron, 2016, *Races et dégénérescence (XVII^e-XIX^e siècles)*, (Paris: Champ Vallon); Vincent Clément, 2019, “Beyond the sham of the emancipatory Enlightenment: Rethinking the relationship of Indigenous epistemologies, knowledges, and geography through decolonizing paths,” *Progress in Human Geography*, 43, no. 2: 276-294.

¹¹ Paul Pollacchi, 1929, *Atlas colonial français. Colonies, Protectorats et pays sous mandat* (Paris : L’Illustration): 5-6.

The expedition's point of departure (Figure 1), Colomb-Béchar, encapsulates the above political aim. Today, this city appears as a mere dot on the map of Algeria at the northern margin of the Saharan Desert. However, this dot was rather significant for the French of the time. In the narrative of the expedition, how Colomb-Béchar was regarded as the terminal stop of "civilization" was heavily emphasized:

Here the railroad stops. With it the intense life of Western civilization ceases. Beyond Colomb-Béchar the desert begins. Even now the din of cities is nothing more than a distant rumor; the Great Silence is approaching. Yesterday held the charm of remembrance; tomorrow will bring the attraction of hope; but today is the fugitive moment wherein memory and hope intermingle, wherein fancies crowd one upon another.¹²

However, Colomb-Béchar also materialized the place from which to expand "civilization" southwards, as the general commanding of the area expressed at the departure ceremony of the expedition on October 28, 1924:¹³

The whole army, he says, the whole of France comes to salute with pride and admiration the Colors under which you are faring forth to explore the French and other colonies of Africa, which a century of colonial expansion has evolved to a state of greater humanity, greater justice and greater happiness. Your mission will consecrate this work.¹⁴

Selecting Colomb-Béchar as the point from where France aspired to broadcast "civilization" was more than metaphorical. The trans-Saharan railway Mediterranean/Niger was planned to be prolonged southwards (the Occidental way) from the city.¹⁵ Thus, Colomb-Béchar spatially anchored the old dream of the emergence of an "African France" that was already formulated in 1859 by General Adolphe Hanoteau (1814–1897) as follows: "Who knows if, one day, linking Algiers to Timbuktu, the steam railway will not put the tropics six days from Paris?"¹⁶ Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil tried to make effective by car what the unbuilt trans-Saharan railway could not do at that time: to connect the "European France" with the "African France."

¹² Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 20.

¹³ A filmed extract of the departure of the expedition is available at the following link (Source: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel): <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000001211/le-depart-de-la-croisiere-noire.html>

¹⁴ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 21.

¹⁵ Ministère des travaux publics, 1929, *Organisme d'études du chemin de fer transsaharien. Carte d'ensemble des tracés* (Paris: French Government), 2 (map) and 31-40 (pictures).

¹⁶ Raynald Legouez, 1913, "Le chemin de fer transafricain. Les conclusions d'une mission d'études," *Revue d'Economie Politique* 2: 175.

Other light dots on the map punctuated the progress of the French expedition. They were part of a new colonial geography of Africa made of illuminated points, linked together by dashed lines, and separated by distances calculated in days. All of these points consisted of places conquered, strongholds (Fort Lamy, Fort Archambault, Fort Bol, etc.), and European-fashioned cities (Bangui, Stanleyville, Kampala, Nairobi, etc.) that bear witness of the progress of “civilization.” For example, regarding Lake Tchad:

Our hold on Tchad has been extended by warfare; from now onwards it is a French lake. To this we had a right, thanks to the heroism of our explorers, and of our soldiers to whom falls the honor of having overthrown the power of the Sultan Rabbah.¹⁷

Every bright dot on the map, depicted in the expedition’s storytelling, was an opportunity to glorify French heroes and emphasize the benefits of colonization. In the minds of the French people, France could realize its own “manifest destiny” by spreading the “torch of civilization” throughout the “Dark Continent.”

People in the wild

The narrative of *The Black Journey* offers a vivid opportunity to document the ambition of the “African France.” In the 1920s, explorers and expeditions south from Colomb-Béchar fed a new vision enabling the average French citizen to amplify the idea of France, that was previously restricted to its inner limits, to a greater, overseas France. As part of the expedition’s storytelling, the fabric of Other first required fantasizing an African decorum wherein such notions as emptiness, wilderness, and roughness predominated. These notions were mixed into wise combinations to alternate appealing and appalling sceneries. The below example illustrates the idea of a pristine paradise:

We follow the tracks, but at the end of half an hour all we have killed is a pelican and a young heron. What does it matter? We have had a delightful stroll. Little glades jeweled with flowers and perfumed with mimosa — nature in a pleasing state of wildness out of which one could easily make a garden; we even find stretches of tall grasses resembling fields of ripe rye. We get a delicious sensation of peaceful nature, an intuitive, possibly a profound, echo of an original paradise.¹⁸

However, these cartoon-strip landscapes could also be quite impressive or even frightening. When explorers entered the deep tropical forest further south, they romanticized it as a “Cathedral of nature” and experienced the fear of the unknown due to the fact that “mystery

¹⁷ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 59.

¹⁸ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 75.

roams the outskirts of the equatorial forest.”¹⁹ The forest had “no very definite outline,”²⁰ thus increasing its sense of mystery. They saw a temple by a river where the bodies of dead chickens had been laid so as to protect the locals from the dangers of the crossing. Unpredictably, as representatives of the brave and intrepid “universal human,” the French defied the river and penetrated the forest despite its perils:

We cast a last look on the exotic river-bank to which point the enterprise of Frenchmen has advanced the frontiers of France. On the farther bank of the M'Bomou [river] a somber mass forms a wall in which no breach can be distinguished. The trees and creeping plants descend into the water, forming a protecting network across which only the multicolored birds can pass; behind a compact barricade of mangroves is a tiny patch of open water. The ferryboat grounds on a slope of bare earth, and our caterpillars, gripping this new soil, mount up to the floor of the equatorial forest.²¹

Only “uncivilized” people could live permanently in such mysterious and rough environments. The Indigenous Other represented a radical alterity that the explorers highlighted in various ways. Animalizing Others colored many descriptions of those they encountered. Indigenous Others were often compared to animals or had abilities that made them appear more animalistic than human in the minds of the explorers. Occasionally, references to the supposed animality was intended to be metaphorical, assimilating Indigenous people to the alleged “ancestral beast” of humans, thus showing a clear influence of the evolutionist theories, as regarding the Bantu and Hyondo peoples.²² Similarly, the Logo people were considered as “ugly,” and, due to their nakedness, were downgraded in the following manner: “[they] give us a strong impression of primitive humanity in the process of evolution from the animal kingdom.”²³

The Indigenous Other was thus viewed as a primitive form of humankind, echoing the vision of Others already defined by one of the French founders of anthropology, Joseph-Marie Gérando (1772–1842), who had a major and durable influence. In his *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* (1800), Gérando situated Indigenous people at the first step and degree of humanity and civilization.²⁴ The explorers' obsession with Indigenous people's bodies, usual in physical anthropology, illustrates this influence. The encounter with the Pigmy peoples serves as a dreadful and violent example:

¹⁹ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 150-151.

²⁰ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 151.

²¹ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 152.

²² Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 92 and 174.

²³ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 224-225.

²⁴ Joseph-Marie Gérando, 1800, *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* (Paris: Société des observateurs de l'Homme), 3.

The proportions of the bodies of the pigmies are infantine (five or six heads in length); the shortness of the legs contributes to this result, as the trunk follows the dimensions of that of a man of small stature. The arms, on the contrary, are disproportionately long, coming down as a rule below the knees, in such a way that the structure as a whole appreciably recalls that of the chimpanzee. This, however, is rather to be expected, for the Tick-Tick [nickname given to the Pigmy people] climb trees after the manner of monkeys, literally running along the trunk which they grip with their hands like forefeet [...] The distribution of the hair is very strongly developed; the face of the adult is ornamented with a well-grown beard and that of the youth with budding whiskers; the breast is sometimes covered with a woolly fleece.²⁵

Such a description, obscured by pseudo-scientific discursive codes, unveils the violence and mechanisms of a racialized perception of Others. Despite writing afterwards that “the glance of a pigmy is often keen and cunning; we do not find in it the low and almost animal expression to be found in certain negroes,”²⁶ the whole description above categorizes Pigmies as similar to monkeys. Additionally, as with other aspects, the developed hairiness of the Pigmies was completely invented. This again illustrates the explorers’ desire to animalize Indigenous people for the average French citizen and popularize such an understanding of Others. In so doing, the positional superiority of White people could thus be reasserted.

In this painting of otherness, additional attention should be paid to women. The narrative of the expedition reveals another facet of the domination over Others—particularly their bodies—in colonial situations.²⁷ The evocations of women most often encapsulated erotic considerations. The women’s nakedness and their beauty were the core principle to compare them, and disparage women who did not respond to French’s criterion of womanhood:

His wives [of chief Maruka] are primitive in form: their build is in straight lines, their limbs are cylindrical with shapeless joints; they are without grace, but possess “a beauty of mechanism which is well designed for very definite functions” in the words of Iacovleff [painter of the expedition]. In short, their beauty is a little cubist, and their nakedness is still more complete than that of the Mangbetou women, and is not so pleasant to contemplate. Their dancing is a kind of shuffling about in one place, and is as heavy as that of a dancing bear.²⁸

²⁵ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 177.

²⁶ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 177.

²⁷ Blanchard et al., *Sexe, Race & Colonies*; Yann Le Bihan, 2006, “L’ambivalence du regard colonial porté sur les femmes d’Afrique noire,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 183, no. 3: 513-537.

²⁸ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 225.

Here, Chief Maruka's wives are reduced to their female sexual and reproductive functions, and also disparaged by comparing their way of dancing to that of a bear. The aesthetic ideal of the French was embodied by the Mangbetu women, and particularly by the iconic Nobosodrou (Figure 2),²⁹ who appears topless in many photos and posters of *The Black Journey* in the 1920s and beyond.³⁰

In addition, the photos of women by Georges Specht (the expedition's photographer) evoke a sense of unease, much like in other regions of the French colonies.³¹ Under the guise of photographing Others for a purportedly scientific purpose (i.e., cataloging native types), many of these photos of women are erotically staged. A telling example can be found in the photo titled "Women Kanembou among spurges," in which two women appear fully nude, but partly masked by spurges (Figure 3). However, in everyday life, the Kanembou women would wear long dresses, as shown by another photo.³² That "flowery composition" had a clear erotic intentionality. The erotization of women in colonial settings was anything but new.³³ But Specht devised a new way of photographing Indigenous women for public consumption. Until then, there were mostly two kinds of allegedly-scientific photos: the "anthropologic type" (focused on inventorying races) and the "ethnographic type" (focused on traditional activities and ways of live). Specht developed the "erotic type," which consisted of obvious and suggestive arrangements meant to satisfy the fantasies of the Western men over "wild" women, as in the two following photos of "Black beauties" in the Ubangi-Chari (Figure 4).

The combination of the distance from Europe and the existence of a color line enabled the violation of the prevailing moral standards of the time, leading to Black women being reduced to mere sexual objects.³⁴ Widely circulated in the 1920s and onwards as postcards, these "erotic type" photos, such as those by Specht, contributed to heightening hegemonic masculinity over African women. According to Ann Laura Stoler, though is rarely discussed today, there was an acknowledged attitude among men in all colonies: "European men should 'take on' native women not only to perform domestic work but to service their sexual needs, psychic well-being,

²⁹ Enid Schildkrout, 2008, "Les Parisiens d'Afrique: Mangbetu Women as Works of Art," in Barbara Thompson, ed., *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* (Washington: University of Washington Press), 70-93.

³⁰ In Figure 2, I have chosen to crop the photo to avoid showing a close-up of Nobosodrou's breasts and thus restore her dignity. In this respect, see the work of the American photographer Ayana V. Jackson.

³¹ Jean-Louis Tissier, Jean-François Staszak, 191, "La passion de l'inventaire," in Olivier Loiseaux, ed., *Trésors photographiques de la Société de Géographie* (Paris: Glénat-Société de Géographie, 2006).

³² Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 78.

³³ Jean-François Staszak, "Danse exotique, danse érotique. Perspectives géographiques sur la mise en scène du corps de l'Autre (XVIII^e-XXI^e siècles)," *Annales de Géographie* 660-661 (2008): 129-158.

³⁴ Blanchard et al., *Sexe, Race & Colonies*, 12.

and physical care.”³⁵ In the interwar period, Africa, due to its proximity to Europe, became the largest “whorehouse” among the colonies, to borrow Blanchard’s terminology.³⁶ Thus, Specht’s photos of “Black beauties” and women “among spurges” should not be viewed as innocent scenes captured along the way. They embody a sense of sexual domination that was an obvious marker of colonial power.

“Trivial racism” for youth

The Black Journey reached a larger audience beyond adults. Before examining how *Loulou chez les nègres* contributed to molding the image of the Indigenous Other among children, it is important to stress that the expedition took place a few years after the horrors of World War I. In the 1920s, French authorities and such notable voices as that of Albert Sarraut (1872–1962, Minister of the Colonial Office in the early 1920s), wanted to give a new deal to the young generation. He saw the colonies as an opportunity to restore France’s grandeur.³⁷ Sarraut promoted a methodical propaganda, in which many media types (images, movies, journals, exposition, etc.) were mobilized to “inform and entertain the young French unaware of the colonies.”³⁸ In the early 1920s, instructions for academic programs (in 1923 for primary school; 1925 for secondary school) made room for extended parts devoted to the French colonies. In the wake of this, children’s press and books also espoused this political ambition.

Surprisingly, before the work of French historian Mathilde Lévêque, little interest had been paid to the children’s literature of the 1920s. This is all the more puzzling considering that the 1920s were a turning point in children’s literature production in terms of modernity (new technologies of the time), mobility (heroes moving by car or plane), and morality (reaffirmation of the French Republic values). Despite the 1920s being a pioneering time for children’s literature, Lévêque described it as “a period particularly unknown and even depreciated in the history of books for children.”³⁹

Such an amnesia or avoidance among scholars may well be due to two major reasons. First, children’s literature in the 1920s explored in depth the discursive possibilities of the colonies (exotism, adventure, heroism, etc.) with often negative and racialized views on Indigenous people that conflict with current ethical principles. Accordingly, it would seem that a clear boundary has been erected between the history of France and the history of colonial France,

³⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 1. See also the work of Arlette Gautier, “Possessions et érotisation violentes des femmes esclaves,” in Gilles Boëtsch et al., *Sexualité, Identités et Corps colonisés* (Paris: CNRS, 2019), 319-331.

³⁶ Blanchard et al., *Sexe, Race & Colonies*, 20, 26.

³⁷ Albert Sarraut, 1931, *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire).

³⁸ Pascal Blanchard, 2003, *Sandrine Lemaire, Culture coloniale (1871-1931)* (Paris: Editions Autrement), 11.

³⁹ Mathilde Lévêque, 2011, *Écrire pour la jeunesse, en France et en Allemagne dans l’entre-deux guerres* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes), 12-15.

regardless of the specific topic.⁴⁰ Second, some intellectual figures of the French Resistance in the 1940s, such as the popular novelist Vercors, were involved in the production of 1920s' children's literature, which had clearly racist connotations. It is revealing to note that biographies of Jean Bruller (alias Vercors during World War II and later) do not mention that he was the illustrator, and most probably the writer of the colonial book for children, *Loulou chez les nègres* (1929), rather than the often-credited Alphonse Crozière.⁴¹ Most biographies prefer to limit Bruller's part in children's literature to *Baba Diène et Morceau-de-sucre* (1937), written eight years later, because of the anti-colonial tone of the book that seems more in line with a figure of the French Resistance.⁴²

Loulou chez les nègres has an obvious kinship with *The Black Journey*. The main character, Loulou, a ten-year-old French boy, travels through Africa by car. Accompanied by two friends, he starts in Colomb-Béchar and aims to meet his father on his return journey from the continent's southern tip (that he explored with caterpillar-track vehicles). Every chapter of *Loulou chez les nègres* is directly inspired by Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil's storytelling. Page after page, the young reader follows a pedagogy of the difference grounded in the superiority of Loulou (a brave, intrepid, intelligent boy) and the inferiority of the Indigenous people. The modernity of the car repeatedly emphasizes the technological advance of France in relation to the so-called "barbarism" of Black people, as when Loulou and his friends encounter the Pygmy people: "This confidence from the leader encouraged the Pygmies to surround the cars, dancing around with small steps and ridiculous contortions."⁴³ Further, when Loulou is taken prisoner by a "fierce tribe," some "unruly children examined the vehicle with the curiosity of little monkeys."⁴⁴

As in the narrative of *The Black Journey*, *Loulou chez les nègres* discredits Indigenous authority figures. The antagonistic leaders are depicted as warlike, bloodthirsty, cannibals, and fetishists. However, the friendly African leaders are scarcely given better consideration. In Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil's storytelling, they were often ridiculed. For instance, Chief Diagara, who welcomes the explorer with much ceremony, inspired the French's subsequent comment: "Diagara is quite civilized. Like an American he knows that to wear round spectacles lends prestige. But he has only been able to procure motor-goggles!"⁴⁵ In *Loulou chez les nègres*, Chief Diagara is changed into Chief Bazilou, but similarly ridiculed as "a handsome old man with a fierce face but gestures full of nobility, who wore motor-goggles without lenses."⁴⁶ Here,

⁴⁰ Singaravélou, "Renouer nos histoires," 7.

⁴¹ Nathalie Gibert-Joly, 2012, "Jean Bruller, dessinateur et illustrateur de la littérature coloniale pour la jeunesse de l'entre-deux-guerres : de *Loulou chez les nègres* (1929) à *Baba Diène et Morceau-de-Sucre* (1937)," *STRENÆ* 3: 4.

⁴² Gibert-Joly, "Jean Bruller, dessinateur et illustrateur de la littérature coloniale pour la jeunesse de l'entre-deux-guerre," 3-4.

⁴³ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 38.

⁴⁴ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 47.

⁴⁵ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 71.

⁴⁶ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 56.

the supposedly funny aspect of the portrait comes from an Indigenous chief not knowing the proper use of an object (motor-goggles).

The “humoristic,” racist vein is also convoked for depicting and disparaging Indigenous women. The occasion is given by a “black beauties contest” organized in Bangui.⁴⁷ Loulou is designated as the arbiter of the contest:

And, determined to get out of trouble with a humorous vote, he pointed to a horrible woman, from the Sara-Djina tribe, lost in Bangui. “The woman with the cymbals,” he announced solemnly. What Loulou described as cymbals were nothing but two wooden plates which fit between the distended lips of this unpleasant creature.⁴⁸

The associated illustration shows the winner with her lip plates overextended and, behind, countless Black women with exaggerated “Negroid” features (Figure 5). This passage of *Loulou chez les nègres* echoes the expedition’s storytelling. The tribe’s very name of the plate disk women is that of Sara-Djingé. In *The Black Journey*, they were awfully portrayed: “They look like the monstrous beak of some pelican of the Apocalypse. The appearance of these unfortunate creatures disfigured in this way is really appalling.”⁴⁹

Lastly, cannibalism became an essential component of children’s literature during both the interwar period and beyond. *Loulou chez les nègres* makes no exceptions. In a chapter titled “Where Loulou learn what cannibalism is at his expense,” the young reader is meant to be captivated by a frightening episode that is intended to be informative. Cannibals, regarded as “the most recalcitrant to civilization,” have a terrible shape in Loulou’s eyes:

Warlike cries rose around him and he saw himself surrounded by a group of horrible Black people with ferocious masks, who were uttering screams that would scratch his eardrums. Loulou turned pale as a shroud when he felt his arms and legs being felt. Probably these hungry loners thought he was plump enough to be put on the spit.⁵⁰

Unsurprisingly, Loulou manages to escape. He takes advantage of the attack of another “cannibalistic tribe” seeking to avenge one of their fellows captured and eaten shortly before. Here also, the episode is fully inspired from the expedition’s storytelling, notably by a part titled

⁴⁷ “Black beauties contests” were common in the colonies. Blanchard et al., *Sexe, Race & Colonies*, 32.

⁴⁸ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 37.

⁴⁹ Haardt, Audouin-Dubreuil, *The Black Journey*, 84.

⁵⁰ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 47.

“Among former cannibals,” in which, thanks to different discursive strategies, cannibalism was supposedly still real although hidden, having become “invincible cravings.”⁵¹

Thus, the youth of the time were not shielded from exposure to the colonial discourse on Others. On the contrary, children’s literature was a powerful medium for cultivating a colonial mindset among young people, as exemplified by *Loulou chez the nègres* (1929), which was directly inspired by *The Black Journey*. Episode after episode in *Loulou chez les nègres*, Indigenous Others were ridiculed and disparaged, with the prevalent theme being an implicit racist humor.

To conclude, an examination of how *The Black Journey* was reported and presented to the French public underscores the need to abandon romanticized and admiring perspectives of such events. Beyond the technical challenges of such an expedition in the 1920s, the information and objects collected during the journey, and the aim to connect remote regions of Africa, *The Black Journey*, from a critical perspective, can be characterized as nothing more than a colonial experience for Indigenous people. It is also an event widely employed as an unprecedented vehicle for glorifying the concept of the “Wider France” and fueling colonial propaganda, even among young people.

As highlighted in this article, the narrative of the expedition unmasks an asymmetric relationship between the “universal human,” embodied by the French explorers, and Indigenous Others. Under the influence of physical anthropology and evolutionist theories, the latter were not only belittled but also categorized as closer to animals than humans. These efforts to disparage Indigenous Others employed various explicit and implicit discursive devices. Pseudo-scientific formulations, racist humor, and value judgments on African tribes and people (stupid/cunning, beautiful/ugly, etc.) were among the most prevalent. Nudity, particularly of African women, stimulated the explorers’ interest and fantasies. Textual depictions of women were sometimes amplified by photography. Using obvious stagings, Specht manipulated posture and nudity to nourish sexualized imagery of Indigenous women that became widely disseminated in Europe thereafter. These photos were not merely “decorative.” They were a key part of the colonial discourse on Indigenous women and can be seen as an affirmation, in images, of the alleged “White man’s superiority.” These visual codes were often utilized in advertising—most notably for cars—and continue to be used today.

More broadly, it would be a mistake to view the toxic narrative of Africa and its people propounded by *The Black Journey*, as a phenomenon confined to the distant past. This discourse on Others has been consistently revisited and modified in various ways over the subsequent decades. In this respect, *The Yellow Journey* (1931–1932), also led by Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil, along with the 1931 Colonial Exhibition of Paris, also served as pinnacle moments for colonial propaganda. More recently, in 2017, I was shocked by a summer series of articles

⁵¹ Crozière, *Loulou chez les nègres*, 97.

published in a French weekly magazine (*Le Point*), titled “A Sexual Tour of the World. People from Mosuo to Zambia, from Hawaii to Tahiti, embark to discover the most ancient curious, practices.” Some of the titles of the articles in the series provide an idea of enduring colonial imagery about “Wild, native females.”⁵² Second, the debate in France concerning the new immigration law (2024), 40% of which has been censured by the French Constitutional Council,⁵³ illustrates the ongoing need and urge to deconstruct, even in the present, the colonial discourse over Indigenous people in general, and Indigenous women in particular.

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⁵² Examples include “The collective women of the Bashilele people (Democratic Republic of Congo)” (*Le Point*, 07/31/2017), “The beauty of the vaginal, little lips on the Chuuk Islands (Micronesia)” (*Le Point*, 08/08/2017), “The love room of the Kreung girls (Cambodia)” (*Le Point*, 08/10/2017), “The incomparable sexual generosity of the Canela women (Brazil)” (*Le Point*, 08/11/2017), among others. Source: <https://www.lepoint.fr/dossiers/culture/le-tour-du-monde-du-sexe>

⁵³ Decision 2023-863-DC of the French Constitutional Council, January 25, 2024.

Appendix

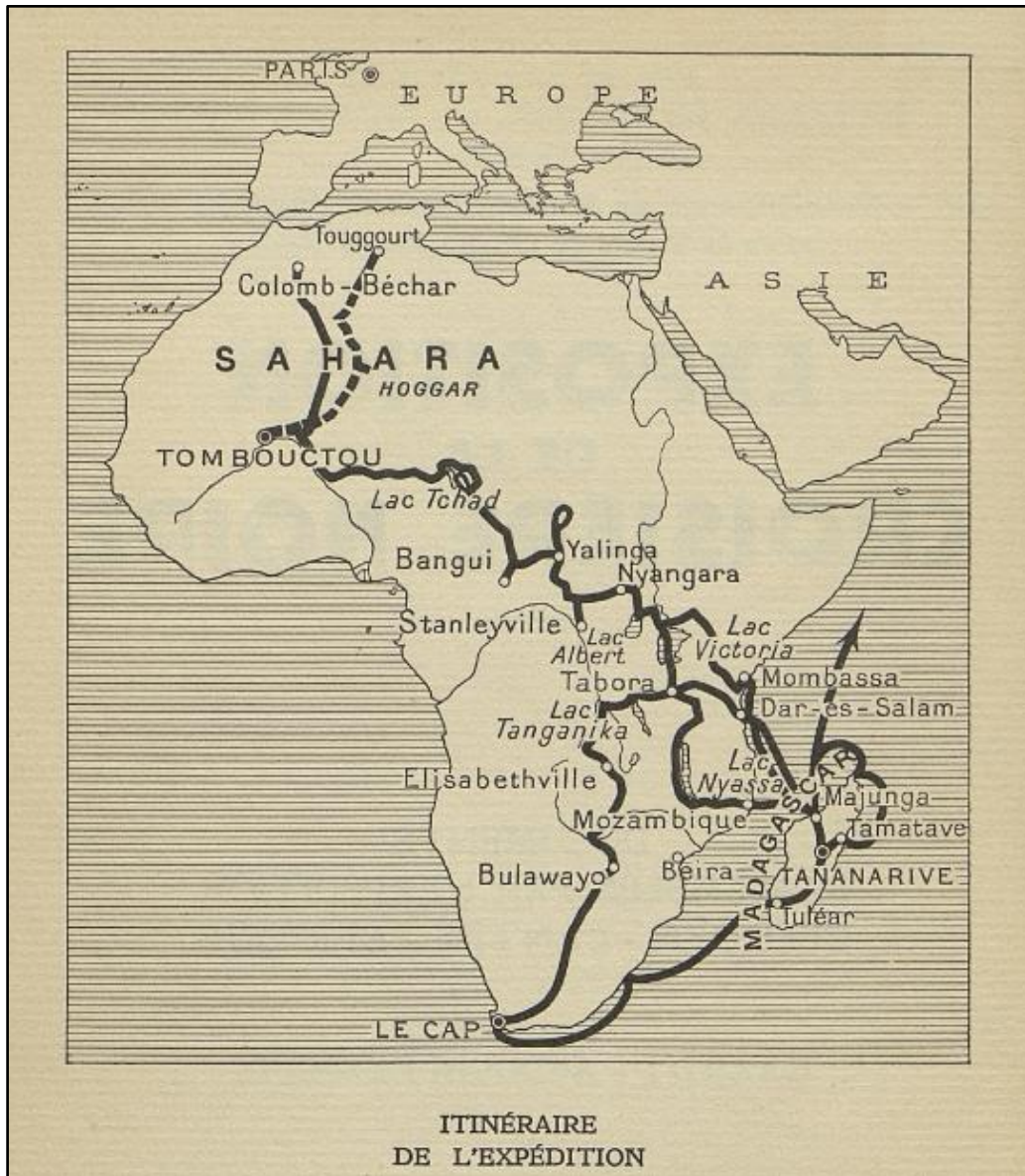


Figure 1: Itinerary of *The Black Journey* (1926). Source: City of Paris, Forney Library, Public Domain.



Figure 2: Princess Nobosodrou, Mangbetu tribe, 1925. Photo : ©RMN-Grand Palais/Croisière noire.



Figure 3: “Women Kanembou among spurges,” 1925. Photo : ©RMN-Grand Palais/Croisière noire.



Figure 4: “Black beauties” on the road, 1925. Legend of the photos: “*On the road between Ouada and Yalinga. Black beauty.*” Photo : ©RMN-Grand Palais/Croisière noire.



Figure 5: “Black beauties contest,” detail from Bruller’s drawing, 1929. Source: *Loulou chez les nègres*, 34. ©Editions Nathan.

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