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African, Chinese and Mexican National Museums in the United States Did You Say “National”?

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Abstract: This article explores how the model of the US cultural policies allows the creation of minority, racial and ethnic museums. It shows the difference between mainstreams museum and the community museums situated in peripheral neighborhoods in Illinois. It shows how the diaspora's recent museums in Chicago are questioning the imagined nations and how nomadic subjects are grounded and practicing a self-representation in US territory. The text places at the center of its analysis the case of National Museum of Mexican Art of Chicago and the contradiction of the assimilation of Mexican culture by the American hegemony. This article was originally presented in an international workshop about Migration and Museum in Paris, at the EHESS in 2009. The reader will find references to the French context throughout the text. This comparison is important because the French model of cultural policies doesn't allow a self-representation of minorities.

The political and cultural model of the United States allows the existence of national museums with an ethnic or racial character. The immigrant communities from African, Asian and Mexican origins have museums where they represent their own artistic and cultural heritage. But: what happens when the national assimilation project of the United States integrates as “national” the cultural treasures of immigrant communities? I will try to answer these questions briefly, based on case studies which I undertook in various museums in Chicago.

I. NATIONAL MUSEUMS

In the 19th century, the economic development of the United States not only accelerated the construction of industries and railways but also increased the emergence and development of museums. Criticized for their lack of historical tradition and heritage, the United States built up national museums with the aim of defining not only its economic power but also its cultural relevance to confront the cultural power of Europe. One of the instruments of the cultural power of the US is also the museum industry. In Europe¹, as well as in

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the United States, museums were developed to stimulate a national conscience and to build up a national imaginary. The idea of the national imaginary as a simple collective construction coincides with the theses of Benedict Anderson who characterizes “the nation” as an imagined construction:

It is **imagined** because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.²

National museums appeared to show the images and symbols that expressed the pride and made up the identity of every nation. If in the United States the notion of “museum of art” did not exist before the American Civil War, it is important to stress that Ninety-five per cent of existing museums are said to have been founded since World War II.³ But during the 20th century:

[...] there was a proliferation of small, low-budget, neighborhood museums, often concentrating on the culture of everyday life or local heritage; at the other, corporate museums, the development of museums “franchises,” “blockbuster” shows, iconic, “landmark” architecture, “superstar” museums, and “meta-museums” also flourished.⁴

Nowadays, the museum enterprises in

¹ The French museums are very good examples of these thesis. See Dominique POULOT, *Une histoire des musées de France, XVIII^e - XX^e siècle*, Éditions La Découverte, France, 2008.

² ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1st edition 1983, Verso, revised edition, London, NY, 2006, p.6.

³ MacDONALD S. *A companion to Museum Studies*, Blackwell Publishing, USA, UK, 2006. p.4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

the United States⁵, which are emblematic of the national art and heritage, coexist with the small community museums which are run by the younger generations of immigrant descent. But, how can a national museum represent itself through a “foreign” heritage? How can the imagined nation represent itself through the images and symbols of another national imaginary? Isn’t the fact of representing the American nation with museums and images of Chinese, Mexican or African origins a contradiction in itself?

II. COMMUNITY MUSEUMS

In the 20th century, museums with an ethnic or racial character have appeared all over the United States. The cultural heritage of the immigrant communities has become a museum object in exhibits, and an actual issue for shows as well. It is not a right exercised by the American State, but rather conquered by social minorities: Blacks, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, homosexuals and women, among others. These museums, named “community museums”⁶ pick up in their exhibits the symbols of the groups or societies of origin which they represent. In this way, they show the contexts of their past, without forgetting the cultural mutations of the present.

⁵ Serge Guilbaut explains how the power of New York’s cultural institutions has imposed itself to secure the “consecration and glory” of American art. See: *Comment New York vola l’idée d’art moderne*, Éditorial Jaqueline Chambon, Nîmes, France, 1996.

⁶ The term to designate this type of museum changes depending on the language and/or country. In the United Kingdom, the term employed is “neighborhood museum”; in the United States, “community museum”; in French, the term employed is “musée de communauté”; in Italian, “museo di quartiere”; in Spanish, “museo de una comunidad” and, in Portuguese, “museu comunitário, museu da comunidade.” See: *Dictionarium Museologicum*, edited by the working group “Terminologie du Comité International de l’ICOM pour la Documentation” (CIDOC), Hungary, Budapest, 1986, p. 62.

In the United States, one of the first community museums was the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum.⁷ This museum appeared in 1967 due to the growth of national museums at the time. Originally, the Anacostia was an initiative run by the marginal and poor community in Washington. Since its beginnings, the community has participated in the museological tasks. For example, on demand of the young friends of the museum during the 70s, the first exhibit about jazz was staged: "This thing called jazz."⁸ At the time, to choose "jazz" as a topic for an exhibit—a music so close to the popular Afro-American culture of the 70s—was without doubt an avant-garde gesture. For the first time, jazz was represented by the same community which saw the birth of this musical style. In contradiction to this, jazz is nowadays recognized as a cultural practice very close to "high culture." During many years and all the way to the present time, this museum has been working for a community that had been stigmatized in Washington. The African-American community was perceived as a "black ghetto."⁹ Nowadays, the museum has a library and a multimedia centre. It is a place for the education in applied arts, a meeting place for the groups of the neighborhood and a cultural and artistic centre where it is possible to sing,

dance, work and discuss social issues, to study and reproduce the practices related with Afro-American culture.

In France, Dominique Poulot mentioned the project of the urban museums (*museés de la ville*) as preliminary for the community museums. In his chapter *Le temps de l'histoire urbaine*, he writes that this type of museums appeared:

[...] in the decade of 1970 in North America, because they wanted to give to misrepresented social or ethnic groups the possibility to re-discover their own cultures and to take in their hands the representation of their everyday lives (work, drugs, hygiene or their children's education).¹⁰

Actually, in the United States, the discourse of "neighborhood museums" did not only represent the communities or groups which were not represented by the national museums, but they opposed themselves as well to the hegemonic discourse of the "public museum." In these museums the object was to celebrate the visibility of the non-white community, the heroic past of peoples which had been ignored up to the present, the struggles of groups which found themselves outside of the mainstream and the democratic achievements acquired by the communities. It was important to stress this point because, for a long time, these communities had been ignored and despised by power structures.¹¹

The affirmation of a "collective self" and the resistance to the assimilatory vision of the Occident was lived like a battle in the midst of the neighborhoods and the imagination of their leaders, which were backed

⁷ Nowadays, the museum is called: *The Anacostia Community Museum*. <http://anacostia.si.edu/>

⁸ George Henri Rivière analyses the pedagogical role of the museum in: "Rôle du musée d'art et du musée de sciences humaines et sociales," *Museum*, Vol. XXV, No. 1/2, revue trimestrielle de l'UNESCO, Presses Centrales, S.A., Lausanne, 1973, p.39.

⁹ Stuart Hall has tried to understand the question of race and the elements which compose the category of the "black" subject beyond the positive representation which the communities have built up around them. Hall proposes the end of essentialisms and a concrete transformation of the politics of representation. See HALL Stuart, "Nouvelles ethnicités" dans *Identités et Cultures. Politiques des Cultural Studies*, Paris, 2008, p.290.

¹⁰ POULOT, Dominique. *Musée et muséologie*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 2009, p.34. (My translation from French).

¹¹ Read this idea in the work of Karen Mary DAVALOS. *Exhibing Mestizaje*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2001.

up by the concerned populations. The communities put into place a new narrative and a new way of looking at themselves, which they told and showed. The museographic logic of the community museums in the United States, as well as their permanent collections, put in the narrative's centre the ancient history of their countries and continents of belonging. Also, they incorporated the new discourses that speak about their contemporary history. In this way, these museums are the containers of the conjunction of the present heritage of ambiguous identities, normally bi-national, fragmented and re-made. The community's actions recovered the chosen pieces of a past and at the same time they look forward to build up a narrative about the cultural and artistic identity of their own, which differs from the dominant national narrative and contests it. The clipping plane of exhibits in these kinds of museums was made to reconstruct a dignitary discourse for the younger immigrant communities.

In the context of a post-modern aesthetics of the world of global art, community museums reflect a turn towards the cultural materialism in the way of Raymond Williams's method.¹²

Raymond Williams defines his method as a "cultural materialism": this means, that he approaches cultural facts not as figures of the mind or as simple objects, but as a whole of practices and institutions, which are in close relation to the social classes.¹³

¹² WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Culture and materialism: selected essays*, Verso, New York, London, 1980, 2005.

¹³ LÖWY Michael, *À propos de Raymond Williams*, Culture et Matérialisme, in: La Revue Internationale des Livres et des Idées web, downloaded 09/07/2010. Url: <http://www.revue-des-livres.net/articles.php?idArt=550&page=actu>

Community museums display ethnicity not only with art objects but also with images, documents, photography and hand-made objects, which correspond to the popular culture. This method goes with the aim of bringing together the sense of identity and unity and to regard the community as singular but also as collective. Each community museum exercises, in its own way and with its own media, a politics of representation which allows them to locate themselves in a national category which has been remade: African-American, Chinese-American, Mexican-American.

III. CHICAGO AND ITS MUSEUMS

The city of Chicago is located in the state of Illinois in the northeast of the United States. It is situated in a border region with Canada. Chicago has a population of approximately three million people, including the peripheries. Chicago is the third most important city in the United States. On the 1st of January of 2006, the region had 1,331 French inhabitants registered in the region.¹⁴ Chicago is a city six and half times bigger than Paris.¹⁵ The history of immigration to Chicago is ancient. It begins with the European colonization and then with the African immigration resulting from the slave trade. In 1920, the immigrants came from Russia, Poland, Ireland, Germany, Italy and also from Scandinavian countries. The migration of the last 50 years consists mostly of Latin-Americans and Asians. Chicago is a territory which unites numerous racial and ethnic conflicts, and where "gang" violence is a

¹⁴ The French community in Chicago. (Consulted in April 2010). <http://www.france-expatries.com/Fiches/detail.asp?NewsID=4578&Nomcat=+Chicago>

¹⁵ HALBWACHS, Maurice. *Chicago, expérience ethnique*, dans *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 4e année, N. 13, 1932. pp. 11-49.



visible part of the long history of the city. This history of gang's violence or urban groups rivalry is still present nowadays and the fights take place every day and in different forms.

Chicago has one of the most important museum complexes in the United States. We find a concentration of museums of science and technology, museums of fine arts, museums of social history and museums of non-occidental cultures. A great part of these museums is concentrated at the heart of the city, which is named “*The Loop*.”¹⁶ The foundations, contemporary art centers, galleries, libraries and bookshops which strengthen the cultural life of Chicago can be found in that part of the city. The cultural agglomeration and concentration of Chicago is in tune with a modern and impressive architecture. Nevertheless, Chicago's architectural richness and the location of the museums in

¹⁶ *The Loop* is Chicago's economic, historical and cultural centre. See *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago* © 2005 Chicago Historical Society. <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/764.html> (consulted on the 30th of May, 2010).

this part of the city is no coincidence because the architecture makes the museum. Architecture makes possible the way of seeing, conceptually and physically, and determines the visitor's experience.¹⁷

The architectural and urban context of Chicago's centre, as well as the monumental iron structures dedicated to the buildings of finance and cultural institutions show the interest that this city has for the architectural heritage and the museums.

There are eight museums built up in properties of city parks. They are administered by the project Grant Park. We find the *Adler Planetarium*, the *Art Institute*, the *Chicago Historical Society*, the *Du Sable Museum*, the *Field Museum of Natural History*, and the *Shedd Aquarium*.¹⁸ Far from

¹⁷ GIEBELHAUSEN, Michaela. “The architecture is the museum,” in *New Museum Theory and Practice, An Introduction*, Edited by Janet Marstine, Blackwell Publishing, USA, UK, 2006, p. 42.

¹⁸ DAVALOS, Karen. “Exhibiting mestizaje: the poetics and experience of Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum,” in: *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*. Edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell, Blackwell Publishing, USA, UK, Australia, 2004, p.527.

the city centre, in the peripheries where a big part of the population lives, community museums have come to life. Although they have been conceived as monumental projects, they have been kept modest.

IV. THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY

The African-American Museum *Du Sable Museum on African American History*¹⁹ is a constituent part of the museum complex at the park, although it is located in a peripheral neighborhood, near to the Chicago University. It is a museum which is destined to narrate the past and present history of African-Americans in the city. At the beginning of the permanent collection, the museum shows an image of a far away "Africa" which is divided in four regions: north, south, east and west. The exhibit starts with the glorified history of ancient Egypt and its emperors. We find royal objects and portraits of men and women of the empire. The museum shows "Africa" as a whole, as a continent, without establishing any kind of divisions between the countries or the cultures distinctive of each region. All of Africa is integrated into the exhibit, which serves as a reference for African-American immigrants.

In the contemporary section, the museum presents portraits of social and cultural leaders of Chicago. We found Margaaret Burroughs, a scholar of arts and humanities. Afterwards, a big corridor takes us into the history and transformation of barber shops. For example, we discover a reproduction of a barber shop of the 1940 with its hairbrushes, mirrors and beauty products. This part of the exhibit is accompanied by posters which illustrate the evolutive history of African head dressing, a very important element of the image of African identity and a symbol of a racial

¹⁹ See *Du Sable Museum on African American History*, Chicago. <http://www.dusablemuseum.org/>

difference when compared to other identities and cultures. The core of the exhibit is located in the photographic and documentary archives. It is here that the history of domination and African slavery in the United States is shown. The museum shows evidence of the racism of "Whites" and the liberation struggles undertaken by the "Black" community. We observe this part of the history with examples of ancient attestations of slave property as well as with announcements to buy and sell human beings. The document of the abolition of slavery, signed by Abraham Lincoln, is added to the exhibit beside these documents, thus marking the end of this cruel period in the life of African-Americans. The exhibit ends in a photographic room that narrates the history of the struggles won and lost, like those of Martin Luther King, Malcom X or the *Black Panthers*.

The narrative of this national American museum is not part of the national pride of the *Wasp* American history. It tells more about a sad episode in American history. Nevertheless, the existence of a museum of this type shows how the American state and its segregationist politics have changed. It stresses that the history of African-Americans is, today, part of the national American identity. If the national American imaginary appropriates the continental history of Africa this is because of Chicago's particular history. Anyway, it is the burden of African-American community to tell their own history.

V. THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

The Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States in the 19th century. During the 19th and the 20th centuries, 80 per cent of Chinese immigrants were male.²⁰ Today,

²⁰ TOKARCZYK Michelle M. *Class definitions. On the lives and writings of Maxime Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros and Dorothy Allison*, Susquehanna University Press, USA, 2008, p. 58.

there are between 30 and 40 million Chinese immigrants dispersed in 136 countries outside China. The majority lives in south-east Asia, but it is in the United States where the largest population of Chinese has settled outside of Asia. At the beginning of the 19th century, in 1874 and after the anti-Chinese violence in San Francisco and Los Angeles, many immigrants of Chinese origin settled in Chicago.²¹ The people of Chicago thought that this was a particular population and that they could live in peace with them. At that time, fires were common, so many Chinese became American citizens thanks to the loss of the offices which extended birth certificates.²²

The cultural identity of Chinese immigrants is composed of many hybrid signs—because many Chinese became protestant and catholic. They did not remain Buddhist or Taoist. For a long time, the temples or monuments that represented their cultural or religious identity were not visible on the American territory. The only thing we find after 1940 is the “Mount Auburn Cemetery” which is the physical space to depose the dead of Chicago’s Chinese community.²³

Like the Mexicans who took the myth of *Aztlán* to give a sense of their new identity in American territory, the Chinese community of Chicago named itself: “The population of Tang street” in reference and honor to the Tang dynasty.²⁴ Around this neighborhood they created restaurants, boutiques, massage rooms, typical cloth stores as well as furniture and handmade crafts. The Chinese-American Museum, which is located in the Chinese neighborhood of Chicago, is one of the most recent community museums. It is made up by educated volunteers and academics of

Asian background. This small museum has a temporary section to show the history, archaeology, utensils and cultural heritage of Chinese (silk, tofu, ancient papers), but also the photographic social history of the illegal immigrants at the beginning of the century. The museum bought the building in order to perform its activities without the state’s aid. It is still not considered a national American museum, but rather a neighborhood museum made by and for the Chinese community, even if it is open for everybody.

VI. THE MEXICAN COMMUNITY

The Hispanic population represents 12.5 per cent of the United States, from which 60 per cent has a Mexican origin, which represents almost 21 million people.²⁵ 16 km away from the centre of Chicago, there are two neighborhoods identified as strictly Hispanic: *Little Village* and *Pilsen*. Long ago, Pilsen’s population had mostly a “polish” origin, and the neighborhood remained with the name due to the popularity of the beer. The grand majority of the inhabitants of Pilsen today has a Mexican origin. The administrative organization of the neighborhood, its management and its urbanism are American, but the commerce, *boutiques*, coffee shops, recreation centers, libraries, schools and radio reflect the life of a small Mexico installed in the United States. The teachers of elementary schools, like for example in the Orozco primary school, have declared themselves proud of putting a Mexican flag at the heart of an American city.

The National Museum of Mexican Art²⁶ (NMMA) was created in 1987 by two teachers, Carlos Tortolero, the current

²¹ HO, Chuimei. “Seeking a new World,” in: *Chinese in Chicago (1870-1945)*, Chinatown Museum Foundation, Arcadia Publishing, GB, 2005.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ ODGERS-ORTIZ Olga. *Problèmes d’Amérique Latine. Mexique. L’élan brisé*, “Flux Migratoire du Mexique vers les États-Unis: Changement et Continuité,” PAL No. 50, Auto-nome 2003, p. 59.

director, and Helen Valdez. It is situated at the heart of Pilsen, Chicago, and considered the most important Latin museum in the American nation. The museum has a vast collection of Mexican and Chicano art. It is financed by the city, as it is a member of the Grant Park even though it is located far away of the city centre and of the monumental museal complex of *Loop*. The Museum of National Mexican Art receives part of its financing from the taxes destined to the American parks. According to Pete Rodríguez—a collector and resident of the Pilsen neighborhood—if the NMMA is a museum open to all Americans and not exclusive for Hispanic immigrants, it does not work enough for the community which it is supposed to represent: “The people of the museum are only there to keep their jobs. The museum pays one dollar by year and this cheap location is possible because the community pays taxes.”²⁷ In fact, the museum’s existence has been possible thanks to the taxes which community pays. The institution follows the instructions of American museums by consecrating its mission to the development and education of the society in general.

The National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA), which wants to place “the Mexican beyond its national borders”²⁸ is divided according to different historical periods. The exhibits are usually organized in American territory with the support of specialists in art and in Mexican history. The exhibit’s schedule is divided in four principal spheres: the day of the dead, contemporary art, traditional art and Mesoamerican hand-made crafts. In its permanent exhibit, the museum shows the

topic of *La Mexicanidad*.²⁹ This exhibit shows paintings, models, pictures, sculptures and other art objects to explain, period by period, the national and official history of Mexico in different rooms. We find many moments in the exhibit. To begin with, we find the ethnic multiplicity of Pre-Hispanic cultures and, afterwards, the representation of the independence (1810), the *Reforma del Estado* (1857), the Mexican revolution (1910) and the political and artistic history of the Chicanos. In opposition of others Museums of the Grant Park of Chicago, the entry to the exhibits is free. In this way, the museum shows a different positioning toward the politics of cultural financing in the United States, because the act of guaranteeing the free entry represents a permanent struggle for the directory staff of this museum.³⁰

In its museography, the museum takes the mystique out of art by stopping the exhibit’s formalities and by going out beyond the “art status” which others American museums concede to art objects. For example, a piece of the famous photographer Alvarez Bravo is susceptible of being shown beside a hand-made object which does not have the status of an art work. The codes of the *mainstream* museum are contested by the Mexican museum, where “high” and “popular” culture come into contact. But it is not about anarchy in museography, as the rules of mediation exhibits are respected. For example, the support of texts and signals keep the same characteristics that those of Chicago’s *Art Institute*; they just place them a little lower to make them accessible to children. Gener-

²⁶ Webpage of the National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA) <http://www.national-museumofmexicanart.org/>

²⁷ Conversation with Pete Rodríguez, art collector in Pilsen, 18 Street, Chicago, 20 April 2006.

²⁸ These are the words of Carlos Tortolero, director of the National Museum of Mexican Art. Chicago, interview, April 2006.

²⁹ “*La mexicanidad*” is all of that which belongs to the Mexican identity and which can be translated by the symbols which represents this national culture: the flag, the independence heroes, the revolution, the day of the dead, the virgin of Guadalupe, the Aztecs and the Mayas among others.

³⁰ Interview with Carlos Tortolero, director of the National Museum of Mexican Art. Chicago, April 2006.

ally, the museum follows the rules of national museums except in the choice of the colors for the walls³¹ and in the way of valuing and showing its material and immaterial heritage.

The NMMA is a museum of the 80s, which implies that it was born after the New Yorker debates of the 70s, a period where the artists reclaimed the opening of the “museum-temple” toward more democratic forms, less elitist, less dogmatic and less religious.³² It was about crossing the doors of the museum and “converting” it. This means making the museum a space for all, a “forum.” The generalized petition of artists for the inclusion of their works in the museum/temples had been, since long time ago, a struggle for the artists coming from racial minorities in the United States. For this reason, the idea of the museum/forum was perfectly convenient to the social and political spirit of Chicago’s NMMA. After its birth, the museum was known as a Museum & Centre. It developed a rich program which showed the arts of spectacle with the participation of music, dance and the literary encounters representative of Mexican culture. The Museum & Centre invited a considerable number of Mexican celebrities like the writers Octavio Paz or Carlos Fuentes, but also Mexican-Americans like the performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña or Sandra Cisneros. The idea of the Museum & Centre of Mexican art based its cultural politic on the idea of the museum made up by the community. It opened its doors to artists who come from Latin-American minorities and established bridges with the major figures of art and culture in both sides of the Mexican-American border.

³¹ The walls of the exhibit in the museum are not white but purple, yellow or pink.

³² CAMERON Duncan. “Le musée: un temple ou un forum,,” dans *Vagues, une anthologie de la nouvelle muséologie*, Éditions W.M.E.S, France, 1992, pp. 77- 97.

VII. THE CONTRADICTION: FROM COMMUNITY MUSEUM TO NATIONAL MUSEUM

During almost 20 years and before being called the *National Museum of Mexican Art* (NMMA), this museum was the *Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum* of Chicago (MFACM). Under the subtle pressure of the administration and the assimilatory american politics, the Mexican museum had to change its name. The Museum & Centre became the National American Museum. With the aim of guaranteeing free entry to its premises, the museum had to give up to nominal change. And it is here where the contradiction between community museums and national museums unfolds. The affirmation of Mexican national identity within the American territory could not continue to be subsidized by the American state, since this was incompatible with the national American culture and politics. The message for the community was simple. The Mexican museum could continue to offer its visitors a free entry, but only if it became part of the American nation, this means, by giving up its image of being a Mexican community museum.

Actually, what we are witnessing here is the symbolic struggle of two national imaginaries where the battle field is the museum. It is about two antagonist national traditions. This shows a contradiction, because it is impossible until the present day to narrate and show a national history following the perspective of another foreign and different nation. The history of the Mexican-American museum tells about a power struggle where signifying practices and the appropriation of objects of history are in dispute. The struggle about the nominal change of the museum was run by the American nationalism which has restituted the Mexican collection as a treasure of the American



Ray Arroyo Di Vicino explains "*El día de muertos*" to the children.
Permanent Exhibition: "*La Mexicanidad*."
© Cristina Castellano, 2006.

nation. This does not mean that the symbols of Mexican culture will completely integrate into the American imaginary. Frida Kahlo is not American and the Aztecs have not become one hundred per cent³³ heritage of American history. This does not mean that the *Día de muertos*,³⁴ traditional folklore or the national Mexican imaginary will become more popular than Halloween,

today so typical of American folklore. Nevertheless, the rhetorical struggle for the name of the Mexican museum shows two neighboring imaginaries in tension, two different nations in territorial proximity.

VIII. MIGRATION AND REPRESENTATION: A COMPARISON WITH FRANCE

The history of migration is normally somber when war, poverty or conflict have been the causes of territorial displacements. But the experience is a very different one when migration obeys a sort of voluntary impulse which makes individuals or communities displace themselves. In the museums where we did our study, the process of migration is complete. The immigrants live physically on American territory, they are more or less Americans, even if the symbols and the cultural practices of origin are incorporated and transformed in different ways. It is true that the immigrant artists and communities that belong to these museums demanded a new history of the United States. They contested

³³ I found this idea of one hundred per cent Americanization in the text of Denis Lacorne which states that: "The one hundred per cent American is an enthusiastic, loyal and productive immigrant. He learns English in the evening after work; he does everything he has to do to obtain a quick naturalization; he is respectful of the authorities in place, he avoids engaging with the "reds," revolutionaries and other suspects; he endures all difficulties of industrial work without complaining; he does not go on strike due to feelings of national pride and he does not demand an increase of his salary; he forgets everything about his country of origin, his ancestors and his traditions with the aim of melting in and with the American nation. Briefly, he is a man of only one faith and only one slogan: America First." In Denis Lacorne. *La crise de l'identité américaine. Du melting-pot au multiculturalisme*, Fayard, France, 1997, p. 230 (my translation from the French).

³⁴ The "Day of the dead" is celebrated in Mexicans on the 1st and 2nd of November.

public museums and the representation that they made of communities. But this struggle is not only about ethnic communities, it is also a contestation of immigrants, women and all people who are not being treated like real citizens.³⁵

The minorities in the United States do not challenge the idea of the museum, but the hegemonic representation that the national museum makes of themselves. Community museums have shown that an alternative to the official and authoritarian representational practices exists. The figure of the museum, which up to the present day legitimated the universal representations of nation and art, has given the voice to other forms of representation which have been formerly ignored. For African-Americans, their museum meant a moment to openly talk about the past, genocide, slavery and social injustice. Other communities like the Mexican or Chicano community opened up the doors toward cultural difference, popular traditions and to the possibility of belonging to a culture which would not only have to be "Anglo-Saxon," but also "Hispano-American,"

In France, the "community museum" does not exist. There are only the museums "in the" French community or museums "of the" French community. This means that the immigrants, or the French people who have also origins outside from the French Republic do not have the right of self-representation or the right to associate themselves in "communities" which seem separated from the national space. With the aim of ensuring equality, the national sovereignty of the State prohibits the demarcation of ethnic and racial differences. The first article of the French constitution explains that:

³⁵ DAVALOS, Karen. "Exhibing mestizaje: the poetics and experience of Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum," in: *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*. Edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell, Blackwell Publishing, United States, UK, Australia, 2004, pp. 521-522.

France is a secular, democratic and social Republic which ensures equality to all citizens before the law without distinction of origin, race or religion. It respects all beliefs. Its organization is decentralized. The law promotes equal access for men and women to all electoral mandates at elective functions, as well as to all professional and social responsibilities.³⁶

The constitution looks for equality and universalism with the aim of favoring the access to all forms of civic representation. But, what happens when the French with a double cultural identity do not feel really completely represented in museums? How can this first article of the constitution grant to all the citizens the right to representation? Would a community museum really menace the sovereignty of the French state? Would it be pertinent to name the right to cultural representation and not only the citizen representation? This question is very difficult to answer and we cannot solve this dilemma here. But it is important to say that in France there are no community museums. The nearest category to this idea is the notion of *musées de la ville* (city museums):

[...] city museums constitute a complex type, wrongly identified since the beginning, between regional museums and ecomuseums (for example... In Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, the museum asserts itself as a "city museum" and shows interest in the heritage of the city from multiple perspectives: architecture, urbanism, history, geography, public art and ways of life; in Vitry, the MAC/VAL is a museum

³⁶ See 1st article of the Constitution of the French Republic. <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/constitution.asp> (our translation from French).

of contemporary art which opens as the fruit of the long investment of the General Council, meanwhile the project of a museum of the suburbs (banlieue) in Seine-Saint-Denis has failed. In any case, when the museum becomes a social forum, it opens the question of its political legitimacy. The difficulty tends more and more toward the ambiguities of the definition of the city, in terms of social groups, multiculturalism, and the social relation with suburbs.³⁷

To understand the major differences that exist between a city museum and a community museum, we have to think about the type of audience which museums want to address. The definition of city museums, in France, regards the museum as a place that addresses all inhabitants who are interested in discovering the environment or the heritage defined by the museum. The definition of the community museum in the United States is much more inspired by the culture of minorities, as these are the principal audience celebrating and sharing the symbols and the cultural practices exposed in community museums.

In France, the existence of a national minority museum is unimaginable because the concept of “minority” is not recognized by the state even if there are groups which reclaim this status.³⁸ A priori, the minorities in France do not exist and, if they exist, they are not represented as such in a national museum. The communities and social groups with hyphenated identities experiment their voices in music, art, jour-

³⁷ POULOT, D.. *Musée et muséologie*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris, 2009, pp.34-35 (our translation from French).

³⁸ BASTENIER, Albert. *Qu'est-ce qu'une société ethnique?: ethnicité et racisme dans les sociétés européennes d'immigration*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2004.

nalism and other types of media and cultural manifestations, but not in national museums. Nevertheless, in the museum, it is the invention of universality which poses several problems—even if it looks to conciliate the conflict and cultural difference. The notion of universality would assume that the chosen and exposed objects in the national museums represent the heritage of all populations, even if many populations do not feel concerned by this approach of cultural identification.³⁹

Contrary to this, in the United States, the museums administered by the minorities and for these minorities make believe that the problems of discrimination could be resolved. Paradoxically, the promotion of difference and self-representation of the communities at the museum has led to question other issues like the reproduction of clichés or folklore.⁴⁰ In the United States, the community museums built an “acceptable image of others,” by exhibiting and affirming the cultural singularities of a community. Displaying difference and singular cultural identities make meaning in a positive way.⁴¹ This kind of cultural contestation in the center of a nation also lead to the construction of prejudices (fixed identities) concerning a group. Finally, the real questions emerging from the analysis of community museums are: How to expose contemporary social history, different in the midst of a nation state which looks forward to negate or erase the differences? How to let cultural communities

³⁹ This idea of national representation as a universal value is contested in the work of Mary Karen Davalos who made an original, brilliant academic work about the Mexican Museum of Chicago. See DAVALOS, Karen Mary. *Exhibing Mestizaje*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2001.

⁴⁰ DAVALOS, Karen. “Exhibing mestizaje: the poetics and experience of Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum,” in: *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*, edited par Bettina Messias Carbonell, Blackwell Publishing, United States, UK, Australia, 2004.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

represent themselves without falling into the *clichés*, and thus going beyond the national and identity discourses?

IX. Conclusion

Contradictions are evident and dissimulate something. A national museum of a specific nation cannot be, at the same time, a museum that exposes the cultural traits of a foreign sovereignty or another nation. A national American museum cannot be, at the same time, a national African, Chinese or Mexican museum. If a national American museum is at the same time a Mexican museum, this is due to the fact that the immigrant communities reclaim their own ancient cultural rights in a new territory and nation. The affirmation of identity is in contradiction with the idea of the sovereign nation because the connotation of the national is constructed by putting limits. The idea of nation is grounded in the installation of physical and symbolic borders, which would keep the autonomy and the singularity of each nation untouched.

Contrary to this idea, a national museum could “have” and also “exhibit” the treasures which are found in its national collection even if they come from a foreign culture. If certain “community museums” in the United States are now “national museums,” it is because there exists a “relation” or “connection” with the immigration history that built America. The fact of having a “National American Museum” which would be at the same time African-American or Mexican-American allows just to narrate another piece of the American history and justify the development of the pluralist rhetoric.

The existence of community museums in the United States shows a political practice of free representation in institutions. This allows the expression of different cultural identities and minorities, but this

does not guarantee a real social change in the ways of seeing practiced by people in every day life; this does not change the racial prejudices. On the contrary, the fact of “rendering national” the histories, collections and narrations of minorities stressed the rhetorical national pluralism and hides a very radical politics of assimilation.

Nowadays, a central question is to know why nations which must find the pillars of their sovereignty in the political field would want to imagine their sovereignty based on culture. The question is to know if identities which call themselves nationals think themselves as a “fixed statement” living only in one specific territory. If this is the case, we must be careful with the nationalist speeches that could promote totalitarian discriminations against the communities or individual immigrants. It will be necessary to be attentive and avoid focusing on the national pride of cultural forms with the pretext of achieving sovereignty. At the end, the vital impulse that pushes people to go away from their homes, emigrate and reconstruct themselves again is part of the human condition. Migration, this desire to travel, to explore and to experience movement, is without doubt a human fact which has always existed, even before the birth of imagined nations.

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