Photographic Appropriation, Ethnography, and the Surrealist Other
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Photographic Appropriation, Ethnography, and the Surrealist Other

In September 1929, two photographs appeared on a page in Documents, a review associated with French surrealism and the avant-garde. At the top of the page, in the first photograph, a group of costumed, white women dance in front of a sequined curtain on a dark stage (Figure 1). There are three rows of women, and all arch their backs, stretching their arms up to form circles in the air. The women in the last two rows, about seven in each row, wear two-piece white satin outfits that look like bathing costumes, along with tap shoes and cap hats. The two blond women in the front row wear sparkly one-piece outfits that end in shorts, and white low-heeled dance shoes. Cascades of dark feathers fall from their helmet-like caps to the floor. Bessie Love, the actor playing the dancer who appears at the left of the front row, smiles coyly, tilts her head and casts a glance at her female dance partner. The caption reads: “Bessie Love dans le film parlant ‘Broadway Melody’ qui passera incessamment au Madeleine-Cinéma” (“Bessie” 219) [Bessie Love in the talkie “Broadway Melody” that will play soon at the Madeleine Cinéma].

Below the Hollywood film still, on the bottom half of the page, there is another photograph, equal in dimensions, that is much more somber in tone (Figure 1). The photograph pictures a group of young Melanesian boys who stand along the edge of a cliff. Their bodies form a line that, from left to right, decreases in height; they are arranged from tallest to smallest. They stand with their chins up, shoulders back, legs together and face the camera at equal distance from one another, their feet splayed in the same pose. Each boy holds what appears to be a wooden model of a rifle close to his left side. Their expressions are serious. A French soldier takes an identical stance (minus the rifle) at the end of the line, on the far right, next to the smallest boy. The sky in the top third of the photograph is bright in contrast to the darker foliage and mountains behind the children. The caption of this second photograph states: “Enfants de L’École de Bacouya, Bourail. (Albums de photographies de E. Robin, 1869–1871.—Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro)” (Robin, “Enfants” 219) [Children at the Bacouya School, Bourail. (Photography Albums of E. Robin, 1869–1871.—Trocadero Ethnographic Museum)]. It is an ethnographic photograph taken by Ernest Robin who photographed the Kanak people of New Caledonia in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.
There is a marked contrast between the flailing arms, twisted bodies and playful expressions of the adult female dancers and the rigid, ordered bodies and serious expressions of the schoolboys. At the same time, the photographs echo one another, for both present groups of relatively equal-sized bodies that stretch across the centre of the picture plane. In terms of color and contrast, the images reflect each other: light bodies against a dark background/dark bodies against a light background. These deliberate visual relationships, not at all subtle, create conceptual relationships between the two images. Why, then, did the editors of Documents construct this visual relationship between a Hollywood chorus line and a line up of Melanesian schoolchildren?

For James Clifford, the term “ethnography” in *Documents* denoted a “radical questioning of norms” (Clifford 129). He argues that both the subject of the photographs as well as the way they were organized in the review contributed to this questioning, which positioned the review as subversive. As the collecting of culture, *Documents* was “a kind of ethnographic display of images, texts, objects, labels, a playful museum that simultaneously collects and reclassifies its specimens” (Clifford 132). While I accept Clifford’s notion of ethnographic surrealism, I want to expand it to explore one photograph in the collection, the photograph of the Melanesian schoolboys. Clifford is concerned with the relationship between the review, its contributors and the emerging field of twentieth-century ethnography in France. I wish to explore the ways in which a nineteenth-century ethnographic document was collected and made surreal by its publication in the review. This transformation reveals both the instability of photographic representation, a representation that appears to be fixed, as well as the radical nature of the review.

The publication of the photograph of the schoolboys in *Documents* marked two levels of appropriation and two practices of collecting that cut across disciplinary fields and discourses. In the first instance, the image of the schoolboys was appropriated by a French photographer and collected by a French ethnographic institution. In the second instance, the editor of *Documents* appropriated a nineteenth-century ethnographic photograph and placed it on a page with a twentieth-century film still. Through its inclusion and placement in the review, new meaning for the ethnographic photograph is constructed, pinned down and held in place through surrealist discourse. This meaning, however, is not stable, not complete. It shifts. When looking at the juxtaposed photographs in *Documents* and attempting to decipher their potential relationships to each other and to the texts, several interpretations arise. If we consider Robin’s photograph simply as an ethnographic document, we might think of it as an appropriation of the Kanak people that designates them as colonized Other. It is important, however, to read this image of Kanak schoolchildren as a second-level appropriation. In its original discursive frame, in Robin’s album that belonged to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the photograph is an example of appropriation as colonial practice. Its appearance here in *Documents*, however, marks another level of appropriation, appropriation as avant-garde revolutionary practice, and we must consider the photograph as it appeared in an art publication, almost sixty years after it was taken.

This second-level act of appropriation, the shifting of discursive frames, along with the placement of the photograph next to the dissonant image of the dancers creates a state of agitation. The image itself—that is to say, what is depicted in the image—is neither disorientating nor agitating. It is one of thousands of ethnographic photographs taken by French photographers and collected by museums in the 1800s. The surrealist act of appropriation and the subsequent re-framing of the
image, however, created a sense of disorientation. In a collection of photographic documents that depict the colonization of New Caledonia, this photograph makes sense. It fits within the discourses of nineteenth-century French ethnographic photography and museum collecting practices. Removed from the place of Robin’s album, the meaning of the photograph is not clear—we are unable to read it. It has exceeded the discursive frame of ethnographic collection, and has become an object in a collection of a different kind. This excess destroys the illusion of completeness, revealing that photographic meaning is not contained within the image. Thus, the second-level appropriation undermines institutional power and reveals photographic meaning as unstable, as something that must be instituted through discourse. Yet, at the same time, the appropriated photograph resists interpretation.

PHOTOGRAPHY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND DISCOURSE

William-Frédéric Edwards, a naturalist, founded the Société Ethnologique de Paris in 1838, one year before Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre patented his photographic process. Twenty years later, in 1859, two new societies formed, each with its own focus. Neurologist and physical anthropologist Paul Broca established the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris, and Léon de Rosny formed the Société d’Ethnographie de Paris. In the most general sense, by the third quarter of the nineteenth-century in France, ethnology, a field that comprised philosophers, historians and linguists as well as scientists was concerned with studying all aspects of humans, including culture and society, whereas anthropology concerned itself with studying the anatomical characteristics of the races. Each of these words—ethnology, ethnography, anthropology—denotes an attitude and approach to studying human beings. According to Broca, ethnology, the science of races, was a part of anthropology, whereas ethnography, a description of races was not a science (Dias 22–23). Ethnography, then, was to be practiced by a diverse group of people including amateurs, whereas anthropology and ethnology were the territories of science. Documents from the Société d’Ethnographie de Paris, however, established its practice as the science of civilizations (Dias 53). Through the course of the nineteenth century, there was considerable debate over the meaning of these terms and the accepted domains of study. While it is not possible to outline them here, these debates demonstrate the interconnected nature of the theories, aims and practices of the three fields.

Despite their differences, each of these societies existed for the purpose of studying of the world’s people, an interest that was born from a desire to understand races and cultures that were newly “discovered” by French explorers. Thus, the practices of the nineteenth-century human sciences were inextricably linked to the discourses of colonization and imperialism. In addition, the practice of ethnog-
raphy, a field that relied on the collection of objects, was made possible by colonization and the resulting easy access to objects of study. Nineteenth-century human sciences, therefore, utilized power dynamics, rooted in colonialism, that made non-European people subject and submissive to science.²

These emerging fields of the human sciences in France depended upon the invention and promulgation of photography. From its inception, the practice of photography was linked to science and was valued for its supposed ability to capture the real. Daguerre's method of capturing and fixing the image in the *camera obscura* was announced at a meeting of the French Academy of Sciences in January 1839. Like the new sciences it supported, the invention of photography was situated within the positivist ideal of observation, an ideal that had become a central feature of European knowledge in the nineteenth century. Photography was valued as an objective, rational tool that accurately recorded what the scientist observed, producing scientific data.³ Nineteenth-century anthropologists and ethnologists aimed to build a universal scientific method that would allow scientists to learn about and analyze all of the world’s people (Jehel 9). Photography was an appropriate tool for this goal, for it allowed scientists to see and record physical traits that they could then easily classify and categorize. In this sense, the practice of collecting photographs reduced individual human beings to types and worked to create racial “knowledge.”

The study of human beings in France in the nineteenth century developed tangentially to another institution, the museum, with its discourses of exhibition, display and world expositions. In 1855, the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle created a Chair of Anthropology. At the same time, new structures for studying humans were instituted including laboratories and teaching areas (Jehel 15). In 1878, following the Universal Exposition in Paris, the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle founded the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. In addition to scientific research, anthropological and ethnographic study at the museum took on a new role—education. The museums focused on teaching the French population about so-called primitive cultures through the organization of public exhibitions. Like the discourse of the human sciences, the discourse of museums and public display operated in a complex relationship with French colonial rule. Ethnographic exhibitions sought to teach the French about the colonial Other, but at the same time they functioned as tools that maintained colonial rule and power and created French identity and nationalism by setting up an opposition between self and Other. The Muséum had used photography for research since its very beginnings, and Etienne Serres, the museum’s director from 1839–1855, bought one of Daguerre’s cameras to “make the first ‘ethnic portraits’” (Hamy qtd. in Jehel 16). By the end of the nineteenth century, French museums had amassed considerable archives of photographs of non-European people.

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Although the ethnographic photograph of the Kanak schoolboys that appeared in *Documents* belonged to a museum collection, it was taken by an amateur ethnographer. In September 1866, Ernest Robin, a Frenchman who was born in Le Havre, arrived in Nouméa, New Caledonia (Kakou 56). Although Robin’s hope of making a living solely by photography was not realized, for fifteen years he photographed the indigenous people of New Caledonia and the development of the new French colony, including views of the town of Nouméa, the penal colony of Île de Nou and the development of a system of delivery of potable water (Kakou 56–57, 169). Some of his photographic portraits of Kanak people were used as the source of drawings for the illustrated French periodical *Le Tour de Monde* in 1878 (Kakou 155–56). Robin’s photographs, while not taken explicitly for scientific purposes, were collected and preserved by scientific institutions. In 1889, Robin donated his photographs and negatives to the Société de Géographie de Paris, which today reside in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The photographs published in *Documents* belonged to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, which, in 1937, became the Musée de l’Homme and, in 2006, was reinvented as the Musée du Quai Branly.4

Robin’s collections of photographs read like visual travel diaries of the places he visited, rather than anthropological studies of human form. An album in the Département des Estampes et de la Photographie at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, for example, contains many more photographs of landscapes, villages and other scenes, than of people. When it depicts people, the album shows both colonizers and colonized, usually at work in the new colony (Robin, *Souvenirs*). While this album likely belonged to Robin’s personal collection (Kakou 169), the photographs differ little from those that were donated to the Society of Geography. These images are ethnographic rather than anthropological, for they are not concerned with classifying races according to physical characteristics. Rather, they describe the conditions of daily social and cultural life in New Caledonia, a colony that had only been occupied by France since 1853. Robin has been credited, however, with capturing some of the first photographs of the indigenous people of northern New Caledonia (Kakou 146–47). Because he worked as a commercial photographer, Robin’s images depict scenes that might have been of interest to travelers or to people who lived in the colony. An image entitled *Pirogue de la rivière de Monéo*, 1867, for example, pictures two Kanak men on a long wooden boat that floats leisurely along a wide river, heavily forested on both banks (Kakou 58–59). The river, reflecting the foliage on either side, stretches across the centre of the photograph, while two small mountains rise up in the background and a piece of driftwood twists artfully in the left foreground. It is indeed a lovely photograph.

Although many of Robin’s images of New Caledonia and of its people are picturesque, his photographs are not neutral depictions of everyday life. Despite its reputation at the time, such photography was neither neutral nor objective. As John
Tagg has demonstrated, nineteenth-century photographic practices in France and Britain were clearly bound up with newly developing institutions of state power, and “[a]t the time of photography’s development, the functions of the state were expanding and diversifying in forms that were both more visible and more rigorous” (Tagg, “Evidence” 61). As I have shown, Ernest Robin’s depictions of New Caledonian life in the 1860s and 1870s existed at the intersection of several new institutions of knowledge that developed in mid-nineteenth century France.

In an attempt to know the Other, all of these institutions—anthropology, ethnology, museums—collected images of indigenous people. As records, documents, and tools of learning, photographs, then, functioned as evidence of the differences between European and non-European people. The meaning of Robin’s photographs was contrived through their collection by these emerging institutions of knowledge. Institutional collecting is a discursive practice, and the act of collecting Robin’s photographs projected meaning onto them, a meaning that both instituted and supported colonial power.

**Appropriation**

Appropriation is a form of collecting. The first appropriation of the Kanak schoolboys by Robin, his camera and a French ethnographic institution served to collect visual information about colonized people to produce knowledge. Roland Barthes, writing about his reluctance with having his portrait taken, claims that a photograph turns a subject into an object (13–15). His hesitation derives from the ambiguity of ownership, and he wonders, “to whom does the photograph belong?” (13). While Barthes’ uneasiness stems from his desire for an “authentic” portrait, it also arises from photography’s potential to disempower through appropriation. This potential is even greater when the subjects are children, indigenous and subject to colonial rule. In this form of appropriation, the action of the camera and the taking of the photograph signify colonial power and mark the attempted capture of indigenous identity by a European gaze.

As part of a larger collection, the meaning of Robin’s photograph is determined by its relationship to other objects in the collection. Its place in the collection of Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro marks it as an ethnographic object, for its meaning is anchored by the word “ethnographic,” its location in the educational space of the museum and its status as scientific document. The power of this meaning comes both from ownership as well as from the opacity of the process of appropriation and the functioning of discourse. As part of the ethnographic collection, the photograph stood as evidence in a system of knowledge.

While the taking of the photograph and its assimilation to nineteenth-century museological ideals is certainly a significant form of appropriation and collecting,
the second-level appropriation interests me here, for it reveals something about the first-level appropriation and surrealist practice, as well as the nature of photographic meaning in general. The placement of these two photographs, one of dancers and one of schoolchildren, on the page marks a typical surrealist visual strategy that creates meaning through the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate images. This visual strategy, however, is augmented by the use of appropriated photographs. Paralleling other surrealist visual strategies such as collage and exquisite corpse, the gesture of appropriation was crucial for surrealist practice as it made possible an attack on reason through the disruption of traditional pictorial practices as they are attached to cultural norms. The appropriation of photographs from ethnographic collections and their subsequent re-framing in what was essentially an avant-garde art review was significant because it created a destabilizing effect that had revolutionary potential. It was this destabilizing effect that allowed Bataille and his collaborators to situate themselves outside traditional French culture, and position themselves as alien, as Other to the French norm.

Surrealist appropriation was destabilizing in two ways: first, it revealed the workings of photography, contesting the illusion of representation as a window either to the real or to the surreal; and, second, it revealed the instability of photographic meaning, disturbing what John Tagg calls “the discursive frame” that holds meanings in place (“Discourse” 351–73). Both disturbances derive from what we might call a confrontation with the frame (Tagg, “Discourse” 358). By tearing a photograph from its “original” discursive frame and forcing it into another, surrealist appropriation de-naturalized the discursive frame and struck at the foundations of traditional notions of representation. In this way, appropriation allows us to see the hidden ways in which meaning is instituted through discourse and projected onto an image. This is significant, for it interfered with the photograph’s power to function as evidence within an ethnographic collection and disturbed the notion that meaning is held within the edges of the picture. Because the act of appropriation shifted an image from one presentational space to another, incommensurable, presentational place, it disrupted the accepted notion that photographs represent the real—that the photograph carries meaning through its indexical relationship to a stable, unchanging referent. If a photograph can be both a document in a late nineteenth-century French ethnographic study that records the lives of the recently colonized Kanak people of French New Caledonia, as well as an illustration in an avant-garde art magazine, what is its meaning? Does it present the ordered bodies of schoolchildren as a lesson in imperial and racial domination, and as a document of lives made better, more “civilized” by colonial rule? Or, by placing it next to the undulating bodies of Hollywood dancers, does it criticize the very notion of civilization? By removing Robin’s photograph from its place in a collection of photographs that belonged to an ethnographic museum in Paris, and re-placing
the image in an avant-garde cultural review, the editors of Documents revealed the workings of ethnographic discourse, turned it on its head, and used it to create a new, subversive aesthetic that drew on the practice of collecting. Surrealist collecting, however, was not the imperial practice of collecting to possess; it was collecting as a process that sought to disrupt.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENT TO SURREALIST INTERVENTION

In 1929, the publisher, art collector and director of the Parisian Gazette des beaux-arts, Georges Wildenstein, founded a new journal called Documents. For the first three issues, its subtitle was Doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, éthnographie, after which doctrines was removed and variétés was added to the end. An editorial board composed of representatives of various museums was listed on the review’s masthead. Although Georges Bataille was listed as “secretary-general,” he was actually the de facto editor (Bataille, “Notes” 31; Hollier 4; Leiris “From the Impossible” 240–41). While the makeup of the editorial board appears to have favored academic and institutional affiliations, the list of contributors reveals somewhat different intellectual leanings. Men associated with the academy still appeared, but individuals such as Robert Desnos, Roger Vitrac, Georges Limbour, and Michel Leiris who were associated primarily with the surrealist movement also appeared. In fact, these men were recent refugees from the renowned disagreements that had begun to plague André Breton’s group in the late 1920s. Indeed, Documents has been called “a place for erstwhile surrealists” (Champagne 10).

Surrealism was a revolutionary avant-garde art movement that was launched in Paris in 1924 by André Breton and others. Because the surrealists wanted to free thought from the confines of reason, they were particularly frustrated with traditional French culture, a culture they saw as rooted in such Enlightenment values as rationalism, progress and order. According to the surrealists, French social norms were oppressive, and the best method for eradicating them was an attack on reason. Often, this attack on reason necessitated an attack on French institutions, including the Catholic Church, marriage, French literature, and—to a lesser degree—colonialism.

In 1929, the surrealist revolution was in the midst of a crisis. Various members had left the movement or had been excommunicated by Breton after bitter arguments. Relations with the French Communist Party, while always strained, became even more difficult. The future direction of the movement was uncertain. In February, Breton sent a questionnaire to all those who had participated in surrealism, asking about future collaborative endeavors. Georges Bataille replied, “Too many fucking idealists” (Nadeau 156). This was, perhaps, the beginning of the famous
rivalry between the two men that was played out in public.\(^8\) For Bataille, Breton
and the Bretonian surrealists did not take their criticism of French culture far
enough. However, in *Documents*, Bataille uses an aesthetic strategy that is *decidedly*
surrealist. This is not surprising, though, because many of his collaborators had
recently left Breton’s flock, or were about to be expelled from the official surrealist
group.\(^9\)

*Documents* published photographs from a wide variety of sources, including
the work of surrealist photographer Jacques-André Boiffard; stock photographs
from picture agencies; photographs of art objects; film stills and publicity shots;
and photographs of artifacts from popular culture. In addition, *Documents*
published many photographs taken from ethnographic studies, such as the images of
Haida totem poles in Canada or the photographs of W. B. Seabrook’s initiation into
Voodoo (1.6: 335; 2.1: 51–52). *Documents* was a significant publication for it marked
a convergence of art, popular culture and ethnography. Indeed, for many of *Docu-
ments*’ contributors, modern culture was to be studied as an ethnographic docu-
ment (Clifford, 129–33). This convergence was constructed and made visible by the
collection of photographs and their subsequent creative and systematic use in the
review. One only needs to glance at a few pages of a contemporary mainstream art
publication such as the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* to see how very different *Documents*
was. Robin’s image of the Melanesian schoolboys was only one of the large, unruly
collection of photographs that comprised *Documents*. To decipher the meaning of
“Children at the Bacouya School” as it appears in *Documents*, it is necessary to look
at it in relation to other photographs as well as to the written texts that appear in its
proximity.

“Children at the Bacouya School” was not the only photograph by Ernest Robin
that appeared in issue number four of *Documents*. In total, five photographs from
Robin’s Trocadéro album were appropriated and published in the September 1929
issue of the review. These five photographs appeared in the first half of the seventeen-
page section called “Chronique” [Chronicles]. A selection of shorter articles, news
items and reviews, “Chronique” was a regular feature of *Documents* and appeared
at the end of each issue following the longer articles. For example, in the first issue,
“Chronique” contained a short review of the work of contemporary artist Paul Klee,
an announcement about the reorganization of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Tro-
cadéro, a brief description of medieval manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale
de France, a review of an exhibition of Chinese art in Berlin, and a longer discus-
sion of the work of composer Igor Stravinsky. The “Dictionnaire Critique,” [Criti-
cal Dictionary] a sub-section of “Chronique,” premiered in the second issue.\(^10\) The
“Dictionnaire” was a collection of definitions of seemingly unrelated terms: man,
spit, factory chimney, eye, architecture, metaphor. By the time Robin’s photographs
appeared in issue four, the format was well established; “Chronique” began with the section entitled “Dictionnaire” and ended with shorter pieces on art and culture.

In addition to the photograph of the schoolboys, which appears on page 219, there are four other photographs attributed to Robin that appear later in the section. The first photograph depicts a group of Kanak workers on a break (223). This image heads up an article by André Schaeffner about an African-American jazz troupe, entitled “Les ‘Lew Leslie’s Black Birds’ au Moulin Rouge” [“Lew Leslie’s Black Birds” at the Moulin Rouge]. The next two photographs appear on a full-page display of four photographs portraying people of color (224). Two portrait photographs of Kanak people are interspersed with an image of an African-American girl and a photograph by Nadar of an elegant African-French woman who wears a riding costume. The fourth photograph by Robin depicts a group of prison guards (225). It appears directly above another group photograph, a publicity shot of the American Black Birds seated on the deck of a ship.

Because these last three photographs appear immediately following André Schaeffner’s article on the Black Birds, and the first appeared immediately above it, scholars have read Robin’s other four images alongside the article. Although she does not mention Robin’s photograph of the schoolboys, Mary Drach McInnes reads the photographs surrounding Schaeffner’s article as depictions of racial stereotypes that represent the “conflation of the African-American with the ‘primitive’” (75). She argues that placing images of jazz musicians and colonized Melanesians in the same section of the same issue of the review not only draws connections between the two, but equates them, reinforcing the racist notion of African-Americans as the “modern primitive” (75). Similarly, in Negrophilia, Petrine Archer-Straw also discusses Robin’s photographs in Documents. Archer-Straw reads the juxtaposition of Robin’s photographs with the jazz musicians and consigns them to the same fate:

[there is] a picture that appeared on a following page, “Canaques de Kroua, Kroua-oua, côté est,” a photograph of an African [sic] group in which the native blacks are shown resting easily in the bush. The bold title of the article immediately beneath the picture reads “Les ‘Lew Leslie’s Black Birds’ au Moulin Rouge,” a juxtaposition of text and image that implies that the Black Birds are nothing more than savages (these savages?) beneath their urban garb (153).11

Both Archer-Straw and McInnes argue that the use of Robin’s photographs and their juxtaposition with images of African-Americans allowed the editors of Documents to situate themselves as outsiders and as transgressive. Both writers claim that it was the association with outsiders (blacks in 1920s Paris) that made these images subversive. However, as Archer-Straw clearly shows throughout her book, there was
a mania for “blackness” in 1920s Paris. Thus, the publication of these images can hardly be construed as subversive. It was not the content of the photographs that transgressed borders but, rather, it was the ways in which the photographs were used and their relationship to each other and to the articles in “Chronique” that was subversive.

If Bataille, as editor, sought to equate African-Americans with the so-called primitive people of New Caledonia through the use of juxtaposed images, as McInnes and Archer-Straw claim, it is certainly likely that the correspondence he wanted to draw was one that critiqued the imperial power of France and colonial rule. It is quite clear that for both surrealists and the movement’s dissidents an attack on France’s traditional institutions of knowledge, power and control was at stake. Though it is well known that in 1929, Bataille and Breton were not friendly, the two men operated within the same intellectual, social, and political milieu. It is important, then, to read Robin’s images in *Documents* within the context of the intellectual left politics of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which included anti-colonial and anti-racist sentiments.

Less than two years after Robin’s photographs appeared in *Documents*, the Bretonian surrealists would stage a counter-exhibition during the 1931 Paris Exposition Coloniale Internationale. Where the Paris Expo Coloniale celebrated French colonialism by showing the reach of French imperial power across the world, the surrealist counter-exhibition endeavoured to show the “truth of the colonies,” which was the epithet for their display. Photographs of the surrealist counter-exposition were published in the surrealist review *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (n.p.). The photographs depict a collection of objects grouped to demonstrate an undeniably anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-racist message. For instance, one photograph shows a group of statues on a table—one of a South Pacific girl wearing a grass skirt; another of barefoot, black child begging for money; and the third of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus—with the heading “Fétiches Européens.” Another photograph that documents a gallery of African art is placed below a Karl Marx quotation that is painted on the wall. The quotation states: “un people qui en opprime d’autres ne saurait être libre” (Lot 5369) [a people that oppresses others knows not how to be free]. Given these politics—politics that were at the heart of the surrealist endeavour—it becomes clear that the juxtaposition of Robin’s ethnographic photographs with the words “Black Birds” and a collection of photographs of African-Americans consciously criticized the ways in which European imperial domination and colonial rule oppressed people of color. Although Bataille was not explicitly involved in the counter exhibition, it is fair to say that he and those working on *Documents* participated in the same intellectual milieu. Indeed, Bataille went to the Paris Exposition Coloniale and, in a letter to Michel Leiris dated 1931,
wrote that he saw black dancers there “enter on an elevated platform like cows in a wagon” (Letter 62–63). His disgust with the spectacle is apparent.

It was anti-colonial, anti-racist politics, rather than an affinity for jazz music and black entertainers as Archer-Straw claims, that set the surrealists, both dissident and official, apart from contemporary French society. Theirs was a politics of refusal—a refusal to accept social and cultural norms. However, although the result of appropriating and reframing Robin’s photographs in *La Révolution surréaliste* was an attack on French colonial power, it is important to note that such acts were not always altruistic and were, to a certain extent, self-serving. The use of photographs of people subject to French colonial rule did little for those people, but the gesture did indeed help the avant-garde to achieve its goals. In the 1931 letter to Leiris, Bataille was able to distance himself from the European organizers of the Expo Coloniale and state that if he did not feel categorically excluded from the spectacle at the Trocadéro, he would have become completely agitated. In a 1929 journal entry, Leiris wrote about an evening with Bataille: “la Revue nègre and what it symbolizes is always the centre of our preoccupations” (208). Leiris’s editor notes that the entry referred to Lew Leslie’s Black Birds, and that, in another entry, Leiris had called the revue an “admirable spectacle” (219). It is clear, then, that while Bataille eschewed the spectacle of black dancers at the Expo coloniale, he was obsessed with the performance of African-Americans in Paris. For Bataille and Leiris, *la Revue nègre* was important for the development of their ideas. Although both Archer-Straw and McInnes simplify this interest, it was, to a certain extent, motivated by intellectual rather than political concerns. At the same time, however, for both Bataille and Leiris, intellectual concerns were political, and Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds played a pivotal role in the development of a subversive anti-bourgeois intellectual climate.13

Understanding surrealist politics, however, does not fully explain the meaning of “Children at the Bacouya School, Bourail” as it appeared in *Documents*. Certainly the photograph can be read visually alongside Robin’s other photographs in the December 1929 issue of the review because all were taken by the same photographer. However, only “Children at the Bacouya School, Bourail” bears a caption that credits it to the Trocadéro. The visual-textual relationship of the photograph is complicated. Because the page with the photograph of the schoolboys and of the Hollywood dancers appears several pages before Schaeffner’s article and because its caption differentiates it from Robin’s other photographs, it does not obviously belong with the Black Birds. It falls at the end of the “Critical Dictionary,” which, in this issue, contains three entries: “Black Birds,” “Homme,” [Man] and “Oeil” [Eye]. However, there is no definitive connection between either “Children at the Bacouya School, Bourail” or “Bessie Love in the talkie ‘Broadway Melody.’” Other images in...
this section, such as, for example, Grandville’s drawing of giant eyes chasing a man to his death, are more clearly linked to the dictionary entries. The page under question falls at the end of the “Dictionary,” between two series of images that clearly illustrate the entry “Oeil.” None of the entries, including “Oeil,” however, refers to New Caledonia or to Bessie Love and Hollywood talkies.

It is difficult to make a definitive link between image and text. Robin’s photograph resists interpretation in part because of the absence of editorial records which were lost in the Second World War. It also resists interpretation through its placement in Documents whose context was determined by the surrealist pictorial practice of juxtaposition. The photograph’s meaning is fragmentary and elusive. Because it is placed below the photograph of the Hollywood dancers, the viewer attempts to draw a connection between the two images. The apparent relationship, however, stymies the viewer’s expectations. According to the discourse of the nineteenth-century human sciences, one would expect to see the young Kanak boys presented as “savages” and the white, American women as “civilized.” The placement of the two photographs and their visual relationship to one another, however, suggests a different reading. The contrast and contradiction between the expected relationship and the represented relationship highlights the peculiarity of the concepts of “civilized” and “savage,” revealing these concepts as constructed in discourse. It is plausible, then, to read these images in conjunction with Michel Leiris’s article “Civilization” that appears two pages after the page with the photographs of the schoolboys and the Hollywood dancers (221–22), for it deals with these very issues.

In the article that is, in effect, a review of the Black Birds production of Porgy, Leiris questions the continued existence of “civilization.” Using an image of the earth’s crust unable to contain its molten core, Leiris outlines the fragility of civilization and criticizes European culture’s idealization of it. For Leiris, civilization is ready to crumble at any moment, “allowing our horrifying primitiveness to appear in the interstices” (19). This revelation, Leiris believes, is the point of theater, whose purpose should be the erasure of any distinction between reality and fantasy. Indeed, he cites Giacometti’s suggestion that in the “only possible theater piece” a fireman would come onstage, shout “FIRE!”, and the audience would run, panicking, out of the theater (22). Theater, Leiris claimed, should bring us closer to our Stone Age roots (23). Leiris refers both to circus-performer Diavolina’s “leap of death” and the Black Birds production of Porgy as examples of theater that bring the audience closer to death, something that we all unconsciously desire (22–23). For Leiris, early twentieth-century “civilized” society could barely contain the fire underneath, a bright, raging fire that was ready to burst through to the surface, a fire in which, perhaps, Hollywood chorus girls danced. This barely contained fire, however, cannot be seen in Robin’s photograph of the schoolboys. Does the image,
as it is placed in *Documents*, show “primitiveness” beneath the surface of civilization, or does it show the savageness of civilizing colonization? Is it to be read in opposition to the photograph of the Hollywood dancers, or in conjunction with it? The photograph's meaning in *Documents* remains ambiguous, for the relationship between the images and the article is not clear. While the juxtaposition of the two photographs makes sense visually, it forces intellectual connections that continuously break down.

Further ambiguity ensues when trying to link the photograph to a third article on the Black Birds that appeared in “Chroniques” in issue number four of *Documents*. In a brief dictionary entry entitled “Black Birds,” Georges Bataille describes the American troupe’s performance as an “intoxicating insanity” where “the American blacks who are civilized like us and today who sing and dance” free us from a depression that has kept us all imprisoned in our homes, homes that are a great “communal grave” (215). Are the Hollywood dancers to be equated with the Black Birds? Are the schoolboys imprisoned in the communal grave of civilization? It is difficult to see the photograph of either the schoolboys or the Hollywood dancers related to the words “intoxicating” or as “peals of laughter” that Bataille uses in his article. The meaning of Robin's photograph remains undecidable, a characteristic of its status as an object in a surrealist collection.

**CONCLUSION**

Surrealist appropriation is never complete, for it is impossible to erase the meaning instituted through the original discursive frame. There is always a remainder. As it stands, here in *Documents* Robin’s photograph “Children at the Bacouya School, Bourail” remains a fragment, a fragment both of the original collection of photographs in the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, and of the collection of disparate objects that shaped the politics and the aesthetics of the review. It ceases to be an ethnographic document, but it resists full annexation to a cultural review. The undecidability of the image derives from its position in a collection made through the strategy of appropriation, where, torn from their first presentational place, photographs do what photographs are forbidden to do—they escape, if only for an instant, the limits and boundaries that inscribe their meaning and keep them in their place. As a kind of outlaw collecting that disrupted the rules of discourse, the appropriation of Robin’s photographs in *Documents* functioned as an attack on the viewer, destabilizing his or her sense of order. Removed from the discursive frame of ethnography, the photograph was not presented as a rational, ordered study that claimed to know the Other. It became part of a collection of another kind, a collection that included a photograph of Hollywood dancers, as well as images of mod-
ern art, obscure engravings, and pages from tabloid comics. It destabilized that rational, ordered collecting that French ethnography was; it called into question an ethnography that sought to know and to organize the humans it helped colonize. It was the act of photographic appropriation and the re-framing of the Robin photograph that was subversive, rather than the content of the image. Functioning as a transgression, the photographic appropriation in *Documents* positioned the review as Other, as outside traditional culture, as confrontational and threatening. By positioning themselves outside traditional culture, Georges Bataille and his collaborators forged a place from which they could confront what they saw as the oppressive nature of contemporary French norms and the idealism and rationalism inherent in that dominant culture.

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NOTES

1 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. *Broadway Melody* was an early Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical, directed by Harry Beaumont and released in 1929. It was one of the first talkie musicals produced in Hollywood.

2 European people were made to submit to science and photography through other newly developing discourses, particularly psychiatry and forensics. In *L’Uomo delinquente*, 1876, for example, Cesare Lombroso used photographs of those who were supposedly born criminals, and, in isolating their facial features and comparing them to those of university students, he produced the image of the criminal type. Other new uses for photography, including the Bertillon Card identification system for criminals, sought to scrutinize, classify and organize human beings of all races.

3 Because it was based on the *camera obscura*, a tool that aided in the rendition of perspective drawings, the photographic apparatus, like the perspectival system, presupposed a singular point of view that put both photographer and viewer at the centre of the world and arranged that same world according to a rational, ordered system.

4 In 1994, the collection of the photothèque of the Musée de l’Homme contained 125 photographs of New Caledonia and its people taken by Ernest Robin between 1867 and 1879 that were donated in 1889 (Jehel 109). Jehel lists the contents of a book of photographs by Ernest Robin that belongs to the Musée de l’Homme, but there is no description of a photograph like the one published in *Documents* (109). However, the *Documents* photograph, credited to the Trocadéro, that belonged to the Musée de l’Homme, today belongs to the Musée du Quai Branly and is available digitally on the museum’s “iconothèque” under the inventory number PP0048995. (To access the digital file, go to www.quaibranly.fr/cc/pod/recherche.aspx?b=2&t=1.)

5 Exquisite corpse was a surrealist game that drew on the collective participation of the players to make an image or a sentence. Each participant would write a word or draw part of an image, usually a human figure, on a piece of paper, fold it, and pass it to the next person who would then add his or her word or portion of the image. The product
would be a collaborative work transmitted directly from the collective unconscious of those who wrote it.

6 While there were board members who did not fit into this category, seven of eleven board members were affiliated with museums. These included the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the Louvre, and the Cabinet de Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, all of which were established collecting institutions.

7 In his preface to the re-edition of Documents that is translated as “The Use-Value of the Impossible” and published in October, Denis Hollier uses the term “dissenting surrealists” (7).

8 For example: Breton dedicated several pages to an attempt to undermine Bataille’s intellectual credibility in the “Second manifest du surréalisme” that was published in the twelfth and final issue of La Révolution surréaliste (15 Dec. 1929). Bataille, along with his Documents collaborators, published a scathing broadside entitled “Un Cadavre” (1930) that announced the “death” of Breton and pictured him as a Christ-figure, an insult to the leader of an anti-clerical movement. Although Georges Bataille was interested in disrupting traditional French culture, he also reserved a certain criticism for the surrealist revolution and its leader, whom he dismissed as “Icarian” and lost in the poetic (Bataille, “Old Mole” 41).

9 Bataille and his work in Documents apparently threatened Breton because in the “Second manifest du surréalisme,” he accused Bataille of gathering the ex-members of his group (Breton 132).

10 While the title “Chronique,” does not appear in the second issue, it reappears in issue number three.

11 Archer-Straw’s error in calling the Melanesian men “Africans” is significant.

12 This journal has been reprinted in a collection as Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution: Collection complète. Paris: J.-M. Place, 1976. The original copies of these images are among André Breton’s papers in André Breton, 42 rue Fontaine. Lot 5369 contains four photographs of the surrealist counter-exposition.

13 It is also important to make a distinction between a display of colonized blacks placed in an ethnographic museum during an Exposition that was, in effect, an ode to colonialism, and a performance that, while still a spectacle, managed to promote African-American culture. While not ideal, the intellectual and social climate in Paris in the 1920s did provide more opportunities for African-American writers, artists and performers than did that of the United States. Archer-Straw herself acknowledges this fact when she writes that the image of blacks in Paris “was changing to accommodate an increased awareness of urban African-American culture” (107).

14 I cite the translated version of “Civilization” in Leiris’s anthology Brisées: Broken Branches.

15 Archer-Straw insists that despite the anti-colonial sentiments of the contributors to Documents, the review idealized primitivism in way that denied blacks any “reality other than a historical one” and “established racist presumptions concerning savagery, sexuality and suppressed violence” (153, 153). While there are certainly racist elements to Documents’ idealization of primitivism, it is not clear that the review sought to equate all blacks with primitivism or that the notion of primitivism was even limited
to blacks. Certainly, in Bataille’s article and others, distinctions are made between so-called “primitive” cultures and black American culture.

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