Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in a Multicultural Nation: Contests over Truth in the *Into the Heart of Africa* Controversy

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In the world of the late twentieth century, global flows of populations and cultural forms have politicized notions of culture, history and identity. In this context, museums and other arenas of public culture attract new forms of scrutiny and challenge by individuals and communities who speak from marginalised, and often highly politicized, social locations and identities.[1] The dilemma for anthropologists is that just as our theories about the construction of culture and the invention of tradition reach new stages of sophistication, previously marginalised peoples are constructing heroic histories and mobilizing ideas about authentic identities, and doing so as *political strategies*. They are pounding on the door of the representational stage, demanding not just images of themselves but representations which are controlled and produced by representatives of the community. There have been fundamental shifts within museology and anthropology in the last decade, in response to what has been called "a crisis in representation"

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1. This analysis is based on documents and media coverage of the controversy from September 1989 to April 1991.

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(Said 1989); a diverse range of strategies has been proposed in order to deal with increasingly complex global and local realities.[2] Nation-states and national cultures have also responded in various ways to the increasingly visible heterogeneity of populations. For example, Canada has had an official policy of multiculturalism for over twenty years. However, as Carol A. Breckenridge points out, "new forms of transnational, cosmopolitan cultural traffic do facilitate, even create, *new* forms of control, of desire, and of terror" (1988:2).

This essay examines some of the new forms of control and resistance to challenge that elite producers of culture and representations are mobilizing in the local, yet radically transformed, representational arena. The focus of this article is an analysis of the cultural politics of a controversy concerning race, representation and history, that occurred in Toronto, Canada. The controversy centered on a self-consciously postmodern museum exhibit entitled *Into the Heart of Africa*. Although the exhibit attempted to present colonialism and museum collections in a reflexive and critical way—focusing on the worldview of the colonialist collectors of the objects—it aroused outrage and accusations of racism from black individuals and organizations in Toronto. Through analyzing the controversy I explore some of the limits of the increasingly sophisticated ways issues of difference and representation are articulated by elites, in this case through postmodern representational tactics and the Canadian version of multiculturalism.

Every week during the spring and summer of 1990 the Coalition for the Truth about Africa demonstrated outside the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The group, made up mostly of Toronto African-Canadians, charged that the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit, which was curated by a white Canadian anthropologist, was "racist," and "promoted a white supremacist view of Africa." In the beginning the Coalition simply wanted its views heard, specifically its views about the important contributions Africa had made to the history of "civilization." Later, although the exhibit addressed the past, specifically Canadian colonialism in

2. Over the past twenty years or so there has been an increased awareness of the ways in which anthropology was implicated in the colonial venture (Asad 1973). There have been many different responses to this, and, at the risk of simplifying a very complex field, I will cite two discussed by Edward Said (1989). One response encompasses Marxist and anti-imperialist thought: and another has been called postmodern anthropology. Postmodern anthropology, although certainly not homogeneous, tends to be focused on reflexivity. This approach would include works by Rabinow (1977), Friedrich (1986), Dwyer (1982), Crapanzano (1980), and discussions on this trend include Marcus and Fischer (1986), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Clifford (1983), Marcus and Cushman (1982). Provocative critiques are provided by Mascia-Lees, et al. (1989), Hartsock (1987), Chabram and Fregoso (1990) and Julie Marcus (1990). On museums in this context see Karp (1991, 1992), Ames (1991), Durrans (1988), Pearce (1990), Vergo (1989).

Africa between 1875 and 1925, the Coalition used the exhibit as a focus for discussing and mobilizing against racism in contemporary multicultural Canada. It renamed the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) the Racist Ontario Museum. Eventually, claiming to speak in the authentic voice of diasporic Africans, the Coalition demanded that the show be closed and remounted with the input of African-Canadians. In this struggle over representations of history, violence erupted between the police and the demonstrators on two occasions, eleven members of the Coalition were arrested, and the exhibit's tour was canceled. Finally, the curator left her teaching job when the conflict moved into the university. The controversy catapulted into months of heated debate in the press, on the street, and in anthropology departments and museums in Canada. These debates centered on contested views of racism, history, cultural appropriation, academic freedom, and the nature of multiculturalism in Canada. The exhibit received more press attention than any other museum exhibit shown in Canada, with the possible exception of the Glenbow Museum's *The Spirit Sings* (Schildkrout 1991).

One of the most ironic and difficult aspects of the controversy was that the curator's stated aims and intentions in the exhibit were to critique the "ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance" of the Canadian colonialists in Africa. She and the Royal Ontario Museum intended the exhibit to be on the cutting edge of new approaches to museology, art history and anthropology (Cannizzo 1990). The exhibit was meant to deconstruct, albeit very subtly and ambiguously, the worldview of Canadians during the colonial period and the truths and knowledges institutionalized by museums. In the exhibition catalogue the curator suggested that "By studying the museum as an artifact, reading collections as cultural texts, and discovering the life histories of objects, it has become possible to understand something of the complexities of cross cultural encounters" (Cannizzo 1989: 92). In short, her exhibit sought to integrate many postmodern assumptions and analytical practices concerning the construction of meaning, culture, history and identity—assumptions which have now become very influential if not dominant in the humanities and social sciences. What happened? The people calling this work racist were the very people whose ancestors were the subjects of the racist colonial discourses and practices the exhibit was intended to critique. Why were they calling it racist when it seemed the curator saw the exhibit as a form of cultural retribution for the past? What can examining this controversy contribute to our understanding of the cultural politics of public culture?

Truth, Power and Subjectivity

A central feature of the controversy surrounding *Into the Heart of Africa* was the way in which it brought into focus contrasting discourses about truth and

divergent claims to truth. The deconstruction [illegible]
part of the curator's approach to the exhibit, and is a principal preoccupation of postmodern theory and strategy. Jane Flax, for example, describes postmodern discourses as "all deconstructive"; they seek to distance us from Enlightenment beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power and the self, beliefs that are taken for granted within, and serve as a legitimation for, contemporary Western culture (1987:624). The Coalition for the Truth about Africa, as is clear by its name, was unequivocal about its possession of the truth and its moral right to promote it. The Coalition was widely ridiculed and pilloried by academics and by the press for what was seen as their unsophisticated and "politically correct" approach to history and identity.

In order to analyze these battles around truth and representation it is first necessary to consider not only the qualitative differences between the discourses deployed by defenders of the exhibit, and those used by the Coalition but also the range of social locations of the speakers. Immense social, economic, and cultural power buttresses the postmodern discourse of the exhibit and its defenders, whereas the Coalition speaks from a marginalised and oppositional position. Understanding the cultural politics of the controversy requires much more than examining the internal inconsistencies of the respective discourses and comparing them as if they were equal. Talal Asad's (1979) concept of "authoritative discourse" is useful here. He defines authoritative discourse as "materially founded discourse which seeks continually to pre-empt the space of radically opposed utterances and so to prevent them from being uttered" (1979:621). An important aspect of this concept is that discourses are perceived to be embedded in the material conditions which produce and authorize them. Discourses are thus explicitly linked to material relations of power. Further, Gill Seidel (1988a) makes a useful distinction between minority discourses and majority discourses *about* minorities. "Minority discourse" is produced by "relatively powerless groups, who occupy a different structural position in society," particularly women and minority groups. Minority discourse emphasizes the concept of oppression (Seidel 1988a:8–9). Both writers are concerned with discourse and its *effects* – with the social location from which it emerges, and its mobilizing power. Their ideas provide methodological strategies for highlighting the specificity, location and effects of minority and majority discourses in the controversy.

These approaches are particularly necessary in order to take into account my own social location and subjectivity in relation to the controversy. When I first saw the exhibit, before the demonstrations began, I liked it very much. I was excited by what I saw as its postmodern reflexive critique of colonialism. How-

ever, I am a member of the white European majority in [illegible], in postmodern anthropology; furthermore, at the time I had been reading up on the colonial history of Zimbabwe. My subjectivity was "hailed" in very specific ways by the exhibit. I was quite disturbed when the demonstrations began and spent a great deal of time during the controversy discussing the exhibit with other anthropologists, often defending it, and the curator, against charges made by the Coalition. Indeed, many of the strategies of control and defenses of power examined here were ones I myself used in those discussions. Asad suggests that "[s]trictly speaking, authoritative discourse is not a kind of social power of one will over another, but a discourse which binds every ego who recognizes himself or herself in it" (1978:626, fn. 21). We can all, depending on our social location, identify not only intellectually but subjectively with discourses, recognizing ourselves in them. For this reason the controversy elicited strong emotional as well as intellectual defensive responses among many anthropologists and others who identified with the curator's plight. Examining the controversy in more detail gave me the opportunity to see if critical analysis might disclose aspects of the exhibit of which I was initially unaware due to my social location.

Much of the scholarly writing about the exhibit focuses on "what went wrong," or, implicitly, on how to avoid such controversies in the future (Schildkrout 1991; Ames 1991), or on how the curator's intentions were misinterpreted (Cannizzo 1991). I look more broadly at the events, discourses and context of the controversy in order to examine the contests for interpretive authority which were enacted between its socially located agents. What does this reveal about the political and cultural effects of postmodern theories and practices when they are released into specific contexts? Such contexts entail a cultural politics which is not confined to interpreting texts, but rather can include violent confrontations between blacks and police on the street while anthropologists and experts wait inside. Finally, what is the significance of this controversy in the context of an official policy of multiculturalism?

Imagining Multiculturalism

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggests that communities (and hence nations) " are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991:6). Of central importance in national imaginings is how the relationship between the nation and its cultural or racial others, whether geographically within or outside of the national borders, is imagined. In this paper I discuss cultural politics in Canada, a nation-state whose

official national imaginings are explicitly "multicultural." They are imaginings of tolerance of diversity, imaginings which consider cultural and racial heterogeneity an integral part of national identity.

Canada has had an official policy of multiculturalism since 1971. The aims of that policy were to "help minority groups preserve and share their language and culture, and to remove the cultural barriers they face" ("Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada," 1991). Although an extensive discussion is not possible here, the original policy has been critiqued for many reasons. It has been described as a ploy by the federal government to "divert attention from Quebec separatist energies" (Hutcheon 1993:31). It has also been critiqued for maintaining the idea that being British Canadian is the norm, while other Canadians are viewed as "multicultural" in relation to them. Also, Aboriginal people and the Quebecois have argued that multiculturalism is not relevant to them. They maintain that their position within the nation-state of Canada is different from that of more recent immigrants because they have special status as either First-Nations peoples, or in the case of French Canadians, as one of the two "Founding Nations" (Mackey 1991). Furthermore, it has been argued that multiculturalism promotes fragments of cultures, constructed from folkloric and culinary remnants (Smolicz 1985:455). In this multicultural model of culture the cultural fragments become conceptually divorced from politics and economics, and become commodified cultural possessions; multiculturalism enacts a process akin to what Handler calls "cultural objectification" (1988). Kogila Moodley argues that Canadian multiculturalism promotes the "three Ss'" model of culture: "saris, samosas and steel bands"—in order to diffuse the "three Rs'": "resistance, rebellion and rejection" (1983:320).

The institutionalized ideology and policy of multiculturalism in Canada differs in fundamental ways from versions of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism in the United States and Britain. Recently in the United States multiculturalism is often twinned with the term politically correct, and refers to debates about decannonisation on university campuses. In Britain multiculturalism is also mainly an educational policy, although it does have further implications at local levels of government. Multiculturalism in Canada is much more widespread as an Institutionalized strategy for political legitimation. It is a federal policy and attempts to define Canada as a nation.

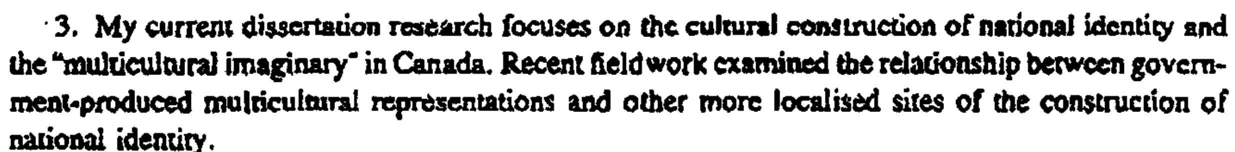
Since 1971 Canada's official ideology of multiculturalism has changed. It has, at least rhetorically, become much more rights-oriented, and, according to government documents, focused on transforming the dominant society. The discourse of helping remove "cultural barriers" has been transformed into one of "race relations." In 1982 the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guaranteed

"equal rights that respect the multicultural heritage of Canadians." In 1988 the policy was enshrined in *Bill C-93*, "An act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada." The act, among other things, "recognizes and promotes" the understanding that multiculturalism is "a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity" and "promote[s] the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist[s] them in the elimination of any barrier to such participation" (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*). There is a federal Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship which makes funding available for individuals, groups and institutions under programs such as Race relations and Cross-Cultural Understanding, Community Support and Participation and Heritage Cultures and Languages. According to the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship, the new Multiculturalism Act, "addressed to all Canadians, . . . is based on the idea that everyone, including the government, is responsible for changes in our society. This includes the elimination of racism and discrimination" ("Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada," 1991:6).

The focus of this discussion of the Act is not so much the policy of multiculturalism but its imaginary. How does the notion of Canada, imagined as a multicultural nation intersect with the discourses in the controversy? Although the imagined community is inclusive and pluralistic, and the federal government spends millions of dollars representing multicultural Canada to Canadians, what actually happens at an institutional level?[3] Below, I examine the practices and discourses within the controversy that symbolically reproduce and represent that imagined multicultural community.

Into the Heart of Multicultural Whiteness

Although the public controversy began a few months after the show opened, with the Coalition demonstrations in early March, it is revealing to go back and examine the history of the exhibit, and the Museum's relations with blacks in Toronto before the exhibit opened. Hazel De Breo (1989) discusses this relationship in an article published before the exhibit opened and before the public controversy started. She writes that in June, 1989 the Museum announced that it would finally



3. My current dissertation research focuses on the cultural construction of national identity and the "multicultural imaginary" in Canada. Recent fieldwork examined the relationship between government-produced multicultural representations and other more localised sites of the construction of national identity.

exhibit its collection of over 375 objects of African art that had been in its basement for over one hundred years. Because the Museum had never targeted the "black community" of Toronto, it hired a black consultant in publicity and marketing. It also decided to host a reception for "the black community"; although not standard practice, in this case "it was deemed wise" (Da Breo 1989:32–33).

Before the reception the Museum printed a brochure about the exhibit, indicating the show would present a view of Africa through "Livingstone's eyes." David Livingstone, now a colonial hero, was the missionary who most inspired the steady stream of Christians and missionaries from Canada who traveled to Africa. Before the reception the brochure made its way to the public, and a teacher of race relations made a complaint to a race relations and multiculturalism adviser at the Toronto Board of Education. Her complaint focused on the "tired, stereotypical" language "which subtly recalled the glory of the Imperial Age." In response, the team at the Museum set up focus groups to ascertain how "widespread the negative reactions were" (Da Breo 1989:32–33).

At the reception on June 28, 1989 several of the Museum staff and about fifty members of the black community gathered in the Museum's Members' Lounge. Speeches were "received dryly by those assembled" and the "Black Community was made to realize that the exhibition was a *fait accompli*. The ROM was not really seeking assistance or wanting input" (Da Breo 1989:33). De Breo describes the reception:

> [T]hose present from the Black community had issues they wanted to raise and when this avenue was shut they were understandably upset. . . . Would the exhibition have a balance between African and Western descriptions of function, meaning, and the historical significance of the artifacts? What was the ulterior motive of the curator? Who was doing the planning, discussing, deciding, and executing? Finally, to whom would the glory be given?
>
> The cacophony of voices just barely managed to stay controlled. Accusations were none too subtly hurled, insults were barely disguised—swords were clearly drawn. Some speakers on the Black side of the fence raged incoherently. Others, over-compensating, waxed tedious with socio-politico-ethno-art-historical pontificating. A handful were concise, controlled, and to the point. The Black community, they stated calmly, was thoroughly schooled in its own history. . . . [T]hey would do everything humanly or politically possible to ensure that their presentation to the public would be honest and not exploitative. Whether dis-

passionately or in full war regalia, the community was undergoing a collective seizure.

> The ROM, by contrast, held onto its business suit for dear life . . . . One had the impression that like the dinosaurs in their collection, the ROM directors were clumsily lumbering through unfamiliar, unfriendly territory. (Da Breo 1989:33–34)

As a result of this meeting the brochure was subsequently rewritten, in consultation with members of the "black community," and the Museum hired a black programme officer (Da Breo 1989:34).

Blacks as Conceptual Exiles from Nationhood

The Royal Ontario Museum—in its seventy-seven-year history—had never targeted blacks in Toronto. This oversight is a glaring exclusion, considering the long history of the black presence in Canada.[4] It is all the more surprising when one considers Toronto's large and vibrant black population and Canada's official policy of multiculturalism. The interactions between the Museum and Toronto blacks before the exhibition exemplify the practice of multiculturalism as distinct from its ideology. The Royal Ontario Museum—a powerful and influential cultural institution dominated by, and directed to, the white majority in Canada—organized an exhibit based on artifacts that white colonists had brought back (some say had stolen) from Africa. The Museum hired a white Canadian anthropologist to curate it, despite Toronto's large African-Canadian population. However, and more importantly, the Museum invited the black community to approve the exhibit after it was already completed. The Museum, a powerful agent in defining public culture, invited blacks to share in their culture (by approving the exhibit), but did not share any of the power to control and define the content of that culture. In other words, it refused to share any of its institutional power. Furthermore, the Museum and the exhibition excluded African-Canadians from the imagined community of Canada.

Museums have played a complex role since the sixteenth century in representing the story of Western expansion. One function of the museum in our culture is to represent nations, and nations' relationships with others, both inside and

4. Blacks have been in Canada for almost two hundred years. The first recorded arrival was in 1796, when a group of runaway slaves were shipped from Jamaica to Nova Scotia by the British (Ramcharan 1982:19).

outside their borders. Appadurai and Breckenridge write, "[M]useums, which frequently represent national identities at home and abroad, are also nodes of transnational representation and repositories for subnational flows of objects and images" (1992:44). As is the case with the *Into the Heart of Africa* controversy, this act of representing the nation (and the transnation) is extremely problematic because, as Ivan Karp points out, museum displays "are all involved in defining the identities of communities—or in denying them identity" (1992:19).[5] Bourdieu points out that the true function of museums is to "increase the feeling of belonging for some, and of exclusion for others" (quoted in Merriman 1989:163). Who does the imagined community of multicultural Canada include and exclude in the terms of this exhibit?

The stated focus of the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit was the white Canadians who took part in the colonial venture. It analyzed their worldview, not the worldview of Africans or African-Canadians. As a means of defense the Museum, the curator and the press argued that this was an exhibit about Canadian history, and that the Coalition just did not understand the exhibit was not about Africa. Indeed the opening text panel of the exhibit warned that the Canadian "experience of Africa, as seen in this exhibition, was very different from the way that Africans perceived themselves, their own cultures, and these events." The panel also informed viewers that the objects "remind us of a little remembered era of Canada's past." The first person plural pronoun here has "implicit exclusions" (Hutcheon 1994:212). The "us" in this sentence is subtly addressed to white Canadians—

5. The problem of comparison across geo-political sites, and the importance of taking into account specific national and local contexts is illustrated by the following example. An exhibit, of a very similar style and critical focus, was the centre of a fierce political battle in the United States in 1991. *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, at the National Museum of Art—an exhibit of American art that portrayed the nation's expansion to the Pacific—also took a critical, deconstructionist approach. It argued, in text on plaques, that the images were "carefully staged fiction" meant to "justify the hardship and conflict of nation building" (Walker 1991). Like *Into the Heart of Africa* the show's curators attempted to take what was previously seen as truth and reveal it as fiction. As in the case of the Royal Ontario Museum the exhibit elicited angry editorials in the press and its tour was cancelled. Although *The West as America* was undoubtedly less ambiguous and more directly critical, Native Americans, the group represented in the images, did not to my knowledge vehemently oppose the exhibition. Instead, senators from Western states objected to it and threatened budgetary retaliation against its sponsor, the Smithsonian Institution. They charged that the exhibit "effectively trashes . . . most of our national history . . . reducing the saga of America's Western pioneers to little more than victimization, disillusionment, and environmental rape" (cited in Walker 1991). It was seen as unpatriotic. Why did the deconstruction of the history of the imagined nation of the United States outrage the Right, whereas a similar, if less direct deconstruction of Canadian imagined innocence in colonialism, outrage not the Right but African-Canadians?

probably with all good intentions—as a critical strategy intended to inspire a reflexive critique of Canada's role in colonialism. However, by conceptually distinguishing Canadians from Africans, and then giving no space in the exhibit for the way that "Africans perceived themselves, their cultures, and these events," the exhibit not only excluded historical African voices, but also present day African-Canadian viewers, who locate and identify themselves as both Canadian and African or diasporic African. Further, in a news release about the exhibit potential viewers were told that in the Military Room they "will be able to understand Zulu warfare from the other side of the battlefield" (Hutcheon 1993:11–12). This *other* side is implied to be the Zulu side. By assuming that this side is that of white Canadians, the ideal viewer is presumed to be a white Canadian. In the process of hailing and interpolating white Canadians, the exhibit "othered" the Africans of the colonial time, as well as African-Canadians in Toronto in 1990. As Marlene Nourbese Philip writes:

> The ROM argued that this was a part of Canadian life that Canadians did not know about. This immediately begs the questions: Which Canadians did the ROM have in mind? European or African Canadians? Or was the ROM perhaps defining "Canadian" as someone from European heritage?
>
> This exhibit, was, however, also about African history and African Canadians, some of whom have been here for a few centuries. African Canadians know the history of colonialism in a painfully intimate way and often live its implications and repercussions every day of their lives in this country. It is, of course, a not-so-astonishing and racist oversight that the ROM would assume that the only meaningful audience of this exhibit would be white Canadians. (Nourbese Philip 1992:105)

African-Canadians, a group with a profound and legitimate interest in the history of the relationship between Africa and of Canada, were excluded both from the planning of the exhibit and implicitly from the position of the ideal viewer. The exhibit's mode of address, in its construction of a white community of viewers, marginalized African-Canadians and transformed them into conceptual exiles from Canadian citizenship, or perhaps, more specifically, Canadian identity.

However, this was not a direct and uncomplicated process of exclusion. As my description of the pre-opening interactions between the Museum and the black community shows, the Museum attempted to bring in the black community—if not as active participants in the planning process, well then certainly as viewers. For instance, the most common newspaper ads for the exhibit proclaimed: "*Into*

the Heart of Africa: An historical journey through the world of Sub-Saharan Africa from 1875 to 1925. Celebrate the rich cultural heritage of African life." This advertisement seriously misrepresents the exhibit. It did not celebrate the rich cultural heritage of African life, yet many African-Canadians came expecting this. One woman said, "All my life I have been looking for my roots. I came here looking for them and you gave me nothing" (Goldenthal 1991).

The new brochure, which was written in collaboration with the black community, now referred to "Africa. Birthplace of humanity. A continent of Ancient civilizations and complex cultures." In attempting to manage potential conflict, the Museum integrated into the revised brochure some of the discourses of the African-Canadians who had critiqued the original version. But the new brochure did not reflect the analytic thrust of the exhibit. In one paragraph it states, "The rich cultural heritage of African religious, social and economic life is celebrated through objects brought back by Canadian missionaries and military men over 100 years ago." The confusion and conflation of two foci, a celebration of Africa on the one hand and an examination of colonialism on the other, is evident in this sentence. There is no overt reference to the fact that the exhibit is supposed to be critical of the ethnocentrism of the colonialists. It seems that in trying to manage potential conflict and to please all sectors of the potential audience—African-Canadians, art historians, and white people who might remember or have relatives who partook in Canada's colonial or missionary past—the exhibit presented a perverse and confused melange of discourses that many African-Canadians found inflammatory and degrading. The Coalition argued at one point that the show was like an exhibit about the Holocaust from the Nazi perspective. Is the Museum's advertising strategy not akin to advertising an exhibit celebrating Jewish civilization for a show based on "artifacts" taken from Jews in the concentrations camps? Would it be possible to advertise an exhibit such as that (if anyone would do such a thing) without reference to the absolute horror of fascism? In any case, the Museum's attempt to manage, commodify and domesticate race in a volatile and rapidly changing context reflects some of the tactics, as well as limitations of a liberal multiculturalist framework. Although the exhibit was intended to be critical of what Canadians thought about Africans in the past, it excluded African-Canadians in the present from being potential viewers of the exhibit and active definers of culture in Canada. Instead, it constructed them as conceptual exiles from the Canadian community.

Museums and Truth

From the early critical coverage of the exhibit it soon became apparent that the curator's reflexive strategy of focusing on the worldview of colonialist collectors

of the objects, in order to critique colonialism, was backfiring. She intended for visitors to question the supposedly objective truths museums tell, by suggesting that the meanings connected to objects arise from various social locations. The exhibit utilised a postmodern notion of truth as contingent, multiple and eliding. However, many of the visitors experienced the exhibit as promoting a particular and a singular truth about Africa. For some visitors this perceived singular truth conflicted with their own. The irony and ambiguity of the exhibit was simply lost on many viewers; one could say that it critiqued the "cultural arrogance of the colonialists" (the curator's phrase) in an elitist, culturally arrogant manner, which was difficult for the public to read.[6] In fact, many critiques of the exhibit focus on its elitism, for instance, its use of irony.

The defenders of the exhibit continually argued that *Into the Heart of Africa* was meant to be understood as ironic—and cited the quotation marks around the words savage and barbarous as an example. However, Harry Lalla, an adviser for race relations and multiculturalism for the Toronto Board of Education, argued that "in dealing with issues as sensitive as cultural imperialism and racism, the use of irony is a highly inappropriate luxury" (*The Varsity* June 1990). Brenda Austin-Smith wrote that the irony placed another burden on blacks who felt offended by the exhibit: "Either black viewers submit to a white culture's model of ironic art, or they listen to art critics [or curators] tell them that they just aren't culturally literate enough to know irony when they see it" (cited in Fulford 1991: 24). One of the guards who had been on duty at the exhibition at least three times a week over its ten-month run said that although it had taken him a long time to figure it out he came to realize that it was a specialist show, comprehensible only to a select few, and open to misinterpretation by all others (Fulford 1991: 25).[7]

For example, a teacher who brought his students to see the exhibit said that one of the museum guides had told his class that "the missionaries civilized the pagans of Africa," and that the Zulus were "an extremely vicious tribe and that's why we would be looking at so many of their weapons" (McClelland 1990). Leaving aside the obvious question concerning the training of guides, clearly,

6. I thank Sue Reinhold for pointing this phrase out to me.

7. For example, I could be seen as an ideal viewer: white, educated in postmodernism, anthropology, feminism and colonial history. I could therefore read the subtlety and ambiguity of the exhibit, and appreciate the irony. I am not, however, in any way representative of the general public of Toronto or Ontario. This raises the question of the contradictions between museum curators' intellectual and aesthetic ambitions and their audiences and political environments (see Merriman 1989:54).

if the guides were reading the colonial images literally rather than ironically and deconstructively as intended, the general public could not be faulted for doing so too. The professional postmodern discourse of irony ignores the way museums are perceived by large sectors of the general public. The public's misinterpretation of the intentions of the exhibitors has a lot to do with the way in which many people experience the museum as an institution where one gains an understanding of "objective history" through the veneration of historical objects (Shelton 1990: 97).

In this context it is conceivable that many visitors to the exhibit felt they were being asked to venerate not only African art but simultaneously the ideology of its collectors. The curator's strategy of ambiguity was transformed in the eyes of the public into a problematic claim to truth. The institutional power of the Royal Ontario Museum authorizes the truth claims of its exhibits. Museums constitute, in Shelton's words, "the essential mechanisms of a ministry of truth" (1990:96). The exhibitors had attempted to critique—from within—the museum's status as cultural institution. Yet the public's perception of the museum as purveyor of truth overpowered this critique, and the show's use of irony: in other words, much of the public saw the show as a presentation of facts, rather than as a comment upon the truth value of those facts. Although the curator had attempted to utilise a postmodern notion of truth as constructed and multiple, many viewers, in particular the Coalition, saw the exhibit as promoting, within its institutional context, a singular and fixed truth.

Contests over Truth: Past and Present Oppressions

The controversy entailed two axes of contest in the discourses of the various agents. The first axis, as discussed above, was the struggle between the curator's conceived multiple truths, and the Coalition and other viewers perception of the exhibit as advancing a limited and singular truth. Within this battle over contested notions of truth, a central point of conflict was whether the exhibit should be interpreted in the context of the past, as the curator and the museum proposed, or in the context of current realities of racism in multicultural Canada, which is what the Coalition proposed. In the early period of the exhibit the oppositional discourses were focused on the past and on the perception that the exhibit assumed certain "truths" concerning African and colonial history. There was a major shift when the CFTA began to use the word "racist." It is at this point that the controversy began to attract full media coverage. The discourse of those opposed to

the exhibit shifted from a focus on the past to one which more directly addressed present day race relations and multiculturalism in Canada.

The Coalition's introduction into the controversy of the term "racism," based on an understanding of racial difference as historically specific hierarchical social relations, had great discursive weight given the silences of official multiculturalism. Within Canada's official multiculturalism, cultural difference has generally been defined as a benign variation rather than as historically specific and related to issues of power. Until very recently the dominant rhetoric of multiculturalism spoke of ethnicity, and not race or racism.[8] This silence about race is often characteristic of multiculturalist and cultural pluralist tendencies and is not politically benign. A move to the deracialization of discourse about minority groups and a shift to a focus on cultural rather than racial differences and on "harmony in diversity" has been argued to be part of the New Right's cultural interventionist strategy in both the United States and Great Britain (Mohanty 1990; Seidel 1988b). This more subtle form of racism is sometimes known as the "new racism" (Barker 1981, cited in Gilroy 1987:43) or "cultural racism" (Seidel 1987). Its novelty lies in the fact that it shifts the language of "race" from a focus on purely biological criteria to one which defines race using the language of culture and identity. Significantly, this new form of constructing fixed and apparently salient differences based on culture has resulted in a convergence between left and right, liberals and neo-conservatives, racists and some who call themselves anti-racists (see Gilroy 1987:43–71; Mohanty 1990:179).

One image that repeatedly cropped up in both the pro- and anti-exhibit discourse was the engraving entitled *Lord Beresford's Encounter with a Zulu* (Figure 1). It was blown up to an immense size and dominated one wall of the first room of the exhibit. The image is of a white soldier on horseback thrusting his sword through the shield and heart of a Zulu man. The response of members of the Coalition to this image indicates how representations of the past were read in terms of oppression in the present. The Coalition's pamphlet states, "The exhibit . . . reminds us too vividly of a past that is still not past" (Coalition for the Truth about Africa:1990). And comments from critics of the exhibit further emphasize this point:

8. At this time, perhaps in part due to the controversy, discourses within Canada have become increasingly more racialized and race is on the agenda in a much more profound way. Yet, simultaneously the Reform Party has recently emerged, a New Right political party which was only a few seats short of being the official opposition in the October 1993 election.

Figure 1. Exhibition panel: *Lord Beresford's Encounter with a Zulu*, which originally appeared on the front page of *The Illustrated London News*, 6 September 1879

> "[T]he photograph of the soldier plunging his sword into the African's heart is pretty chilling in light of the police shootings of (Lester) Donaldson and (Sophia) Cook in Toronto." (cited in Nazareth 1990)
>
> "To me it's a form of cultural genocide and I put it in the larger context of what's happening to black people in Toronto - the police shootings and the discrimination we face." (cited in Nazareth 1990)

For some African-Canadians the experience of institutionalized racism in Canada made them perceive many of the images in the exhibit not simply as representations of a past long gone, as I and many white Canadians may have seen them, but also as depictions of current oppression. As Nourbese Philip argues,

> The same text resulted in two contradictory readings, determined by different life histories and experiences. One reading saw these artifacts being frozen in time and telling a story about white Canadian exploitation of Africa; the other inserted the reader—the African Canadian reader—actively into the text, who then read those artifacts as the painful detritus of savage exploitation and genocide. . . . For the African Canadian, those objects are still connected to them as part of an ongoing struggle against white supremacy. (Nourbese Philip 1992:105)

Furthermore, at the time the exhibit was on in Toronto there had been an increase in public battles about race relations. The multicultural consensus and the silence on issues of racism seemed to be cracking. Race had become big news, and garnered more space in the media. Black groups were protesting that the police shootings of two black youths, Lester Donaldson and Sophia Cook, had been based on racism. Furthermore, on June 1, 1990 a Toronto policeman was charged with the attempted murder of Marlon Neal, a black youth who was shot for failing to stop for a radar speed trap (Lakey 1990). Apartheid was also in the headlines due to Nelson Mandela's release from prison in February 1990. The exhibit was seen by the Coalition within the context of these contemporary manifestations of racism and anti-racist struggles. Clearly, people do not regard museums as isolated cultural spaces, or the images within them as purely historic. The Museum's images were, for many African-Canadians, part of a broader "interocular field," interdependent with "various sites and modes of seeing, including those involved in television, cinema, sport, and tourism" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992:51). Furthermore, the experience of daily life as a black person in multicultural Toronto, where it is commonplace for blacks to be stopped by police, strongly influenced the perception of the exhibit's images.

Yet, when discussing the image of Lord Beresford, the Museum consistently asserted that it should be understood only as a representation of the *past*, and "in the context of the colonial period, not as a reflection of current thinking" (Museum director T. Cuyler Young, quoted in Pettit 1990). Its dominant discursive strategy throughout the conflict was to claim "historical accuracy" and "curatorial expertise." The Museum used this to counter the Coalition's claims that the exhibit should be understood as a manifestation of contemporary oppression. The assertion of authority on the grounds of history, history as the Museum defined it, is apparent in the press coverage. For example, a Museum spokesperson said, "The museum's position is that our exhibit is a historically based collection and

it's historically correct" (cited in Thompson, 1990). Another newspaper reported the following public statement:

> The statement says that the ROM exhibit "is getting a variety of responses from a variety of communities", some positive and some negative. The statement also emphasizes that the Museum uses materials from their own collection, and that it is meant to be specific to a certain time period—during the colonial era—in Africa, not to present day concerns.
>
> Young [the ROM director] maintained that while the Museum did consult several organizations about the exhibit, "no one point of view outside the realm of curatorial expertise can determine what the exhibit should be." (Pettit, 1990)

In *The Globe and Mail*, the Museum's publicity manager, Diane Kenyon, was quoted as saying: "It is historically accurate, and people are simply reacting to it in different ways" (Dranie, 1990).

Although the curator intended for the exhibit to question notions of truth and historical accuracy in a postmodern manner, the Museum, when challenged on the exhibit's truth value, pulled out predictable and dependable dominant discursive strategies. It hid behind a wall of so-called truth. The Museum's defense of its right to present an authoritative truth was based on the assertion that it possessed a certain expertise. Further, they attempted to deny the connections made between the past and the present by drawing a fixed and unmoving circle of history around the exhibit. The historical circle was, in this context, an exercise of power.

Postmodern Curatorial Truth

A marked shift in discourse can also be seen in the temporary curator's reaction to the exhibit's opposition. This shift is most apparent in the difference between the exhibition catalogue, which was written by the curator, and her public statements in response to the controversy. In the catalogue she wrote:

> [T]he meaning and significance of an object change according to the circumstances in which it appears and is understood. That transformational power [of context] is particularly evident in museums, which, like anthropology, are essentially 'fictional' in their nature. The meaning of their collections is generated in the interaction between the curator, the object, and the visitor. (Cannizzo 1989:12)

The curator also wrote that her approach to the exhibit made it "possible to understand something of the complexities of cross-cultural encounters," and "it has become clear that the past is part of the present" (1989:92). However, after the Coalition made a public statement claiming not only that the curator had lied, but that the exhibit was racist, and that they possessed a better and more morally just truth than hers, the curator's sophisticated critical discourse about truth became a discourse proclaiming truth. Her truth claims were, however, much more subtle and unmarked than those of the Coalition. She said, while discussing the engraving of Lord Beresford in an article in the *Toronto Star*:

> There have been occasional complaints about a couple of the illustrations and photographs used in the exhibition. One, for example, shows a Zulu warrior being attacked by a British horseman. It has been suggested that it promotes violence against people of color. Quite the opposite, it exposes a rather brutal historical reality. (Cannizzo 1990)

In the same article she unequivocally asserts, "The exhibition does not, as has been alleged, promote white supremacy or glorify imperialism."

If objects are perceived as gaining different meanings in different social contexts, an insight which in the catalogue she claims can contribute to a better understanding of "cross-cultural encounters," it seems she would have taken very seriously the Coalition's interpretation of the meaning of the exhibit. That the Coalition experienced the exhibit as it did is proof of the idea that meaning is contextual. Its response to the exhibit is in many senses perfectly in line with the curator's statements in the exhibition catalogue. Furthermore, if, according to her postmodern philosophical framework, there is no single truth, only located truths generated in specific locations and contexts, the Coalition's view should be seen not as less legitimate than hers, simply different.

There is a contradiction between the curator's postmodern claims of contextualized meaning—her claim that there is no fixed truth—and later statements she made to the press following the controversy. When challenged, she was not able to defend her earlier claims concerning the supposedly fictional nature of the exhibit. Furthermore, by using terms such as "allegedly" and "it has been suggested," the curator discounted the set of meanings generated by the interrelations among herself as curator, the objects, and an active sector of museum visitors (see van Dijk 1988:249). When publicly called into question by the Coalition, the ambiguity of the exhibit could not be sustained. When it became a political

battle, a single authoritative truth, not a multiple reading of truths in contexts, came to the fore as a strategy to silence opposition.

The Truth about Blacks

Paul Gilroy (1987) writes that one of the main ways that black people are represented in racist discourse is as either problem or victim. The majority discourses of the controversy positioned blacks in these roles. In both the curator's ambiguous discourses and the Museum's defense claiming historical accuracy, black people were presented as victims, either of colonialism or of their own savagery. In the exhibit's representation of the past whites were the focus and the agents. This was reversed, with negative results, in the press coverage of the protests. In the press the blacks involved in the controversy were largely portrayed as causing problems by "deliberately," as one *Toronto Star* writer suggested, "distorting the truth to suit their own ends" (Hume 1990). They were presented as extremists who were oppressing rational mainstream society. The shift in the press's attitude towards the protesters, which became less and less sympathetic to the Coalition's struggle can be seen in the marked difference between two quotes, one from the beginning of the controversy, the other from more than a year later, by reporter Bronwyn Dranie in the *Globe and Mail*. At first she writes:

> Unfortunately what thoughtful white Canadians see as an ironic examination of our great-grandparents' dubious and racist role in bringing Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization to "the dark continent", black Canadians see as a celebration of colonialism and an unambiguous demonstration of white superiority over native Africans and their cultures. (Dranie 1990)

One year later Dranie wrote:

> But what many visitors saw as an ironic and self-searching examination of white Canadians' historical intolerance toward Africa was viewed by a small number of radical blacks in Toronto as a perpetuation of those old racist attitudes. The dubiously named Coalition for the Truth about Africa . . . picketed outside the ROM's doors for months. . . . More moderate blacks, while not deeming the show racist in intent. . . . (Dranie 1991)

The first quotation implies that there is some legitimacy to the black Canadians' claims, and recognizes the validity of both opposing interpretations. Furthermore,

when Dranie states that "thoughtful" Canadians see the exhibit as critical, she is suggesting that there are many people who will not perceive it in this way. In the later quote she constructs the Coalition as isolated extremists, comparing the view of "many visitors" to that of "a small number of blacks" who are in opposition to the more moderate black majority.

Gill Seidel examines a similar process in her discussion of the British New Right's cultural racism. Cultural racism redefines key concepts such as racism as a "vulgar and banal catch phrase," thereby trivializing the analytic concept of race (1988b:131). This process involves what she calls the "criminalisation of anti-racists" through "semantic mythical reversals" (1988b:136). Anti-racists are described by the British New Right as "multi-racial zealots" whose behaviour constitutes "anti-British prejudice" (Seidel 1987:41-42). The more powerful group thereby constructs the minority group as the oppressor. Those in power come to be seen as victims. These processes ultimately deny the legitimacy and autonomy of "other (black) subjectivities and struggles" (Seidel 1988b:134–138). Indeed, in much of the later press coverage of the controversy protesters were constructed as dangerous to all the things "our" society holds dear—academic freedom, the integrity of history, and even cultural pluralism. The Coalition came to be seen as an aggressor besieging the apparently innocent Museum, and society as a whole. On August 10, 1990 the *Toronto Star* reported that the protesters "seem to have willingly misread" the exhibit, "and this is where the whole matter turns serious. For their attack on the exhibition challenges both academic freedom and the integrity of history" (Cayley 1990). An article two and a half months later in the *Toronto Star* stated:

> People who are troubled by the exhibit have every right to picket the ROM and to bring to public attention the reason why they object to the exhibit's particular approach. These are reasonable responses in a democratic society. However, by calling [the curator] a racist rather than simply viewing her as someone who has failed to emphasize things which they would have preferred to see emphasized, these people not only deny the complexity of life itself, but do grievous harm to an ideal which they claim to serve—pluralism. (Laframboise 1990)

The press and many others critiqued the Coalition for asserting that it held the "truth about Africa," especially in relation to the curator whom the press did not perceive as making any truth claims. For example, David Cayley in the *Toronto Star* declared:

> By calling themselves "the Truth about Africa" the protesters contended that one monolithic truth about Africa exists. [The curator] was more modest and intellectually honest—she clearly does not believe that there can be knowledge about Africa, or anything else, that exists apart from the particular context in which the knowledge is constructed and reconstructed. (Cayley, 1990)

Regarding the Coalition's claims to truth Donna Laframboise of the *Toronto Star* contended:

> The umbrella group which organized the protests against the exhibit calls itself the Coalition for the Truth About Africa. However unconscious they may be of the fact, such a name implies that there is *the truth* (their version) and nothing else. . . . While there is nothing wrong with insisting that other stories deserve to be told, there is something truly appalling about believing that only you have the right story—and that anyone who tells a different one is, by definition, evil. (22 October 1990)

These statements are typical of majority discourse about minorities. They discount, and essentially render invisible systemic structural inequalities, and belittle the experiences of marginalised people. They also construct an authoritative truth about the Coalition, labeling the group as a problem within an otherwise unified multicultural Canada.

Yet the significance of the two press quotations cited above goes beyond the fact that they attempt to discount and delegitimate the Coalition. The line of discourse in these quotes mobilizes a belief in the multiplicity of truths, and in the notion that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed in this process. These notions sound terribly familiar, in that they have become central to much recent anthropological thought. Here they are used in ways which, in this particular context of competing truths and socially constructed knowledges, support those in positions of privilege and power. The radical oppositional potential in the notions has been shifted; they have become weapons for silencing opposition.

The idea of multiculturalism was mobilized in a similar way. In a major group of pieces on the Opinions page of the *Toronto Star* (5 June 1990) both the curator and Charles Roach, a leading member of Toronto's black community end their articles on the controversy by referring to multiculturalism. However, the two authors attach very different meanings to this term. Roach argues, "In our multicultural society let us engage or invite representatives of the various communities

to be the exponents of their own cultural heritage." Central to his definition of multiculturalism is the word "engage," which implies active power by minority groups in defining their history. The curator writes, "Thinking critically about our collective past, and about one of our most important public institutions, the museum, as this exhibit does, is vital to the health and future of a multicultural democracy." Here the key verb is "thinking." Multiculturalism becomes an intellectual activity, which helps us to understand past events and the way museums represent these events. The curator's attitude here enacts a selective erasure of the Coalition's demand for recognition and actions in the present. She proposes an intellectual model of pluralism which negates the political accountability being demanded of the exhibit and the Museum. She constructs herself as an active proponent of multicultural thinking in the imagined community of Canada, from which the Coalition is implicitly excluded. By attacking her the Coalition is constructed as dangerous and opposed to the "health and future of a multicultural democracy." By mobilizing the concept of multiculturalism in this way, it becomes, as does postmodernism, an intellectual weapon used to bolster authoritative majority discourse. Multiculturalism and postmodernism are thus deployed offensively and defensively by powerful groups when their authority is being challenged by less socially or politically powerful groups.

Conclusion

At the outset the Royal Ontario Museum controversy seemed to involve a fairly clear set of oppositions. On one side were the proponents of a sophisticated and ironic postmodern reflexive discourse which proclaimed a distrust of metanarratives and questioned the fixed nature of meaning. In the opposing position was the Coalition for the Truth about Africa, whose discourse made unequivocal truth claims and constructed the history of Africa as an emancipatory metanarrative. Closer analysis reveals that *all* of the agents in the controversy made truth claims. Although the curator claimed to be actively challenging the idea of fixed truths in her postmodern exhibit, as the controversy intensified, she eventually did solidify her position and proclaim an authoritative truth. So did the Museum, and its truth claims were backed up by its institutional power. The Museum did not limit itself to discursive strategies; it also relied on legal tactics. The Museum won a bid for an injunction to keep protesters away from the Museum, and as a result the police arrested eleven protesters. Later, the Museum attempted to sue the Coalition for $160,000 in damages (*Globe and Mail*, 16 August 1990). Although the suit was eventually dropped, the mainstream press implicitly sup-

ported the curator's and the museum's claims to authority, and created their own authoritative truths about blacks as problems in multicultural Canada.

Amidst this cacophony of competing truth claims about the past and present, we can begin to contextualize the discourses of the Coalition. Although they were presented as the only ones in the controversy making truth claims, they were in fact surrounded by, even drowned out by, other less obvious claims to truth in the majority discourses about minorities (Seidel 1988a:8–9). Many defenders of the exhibit presented these as common-sense truths. The majority discourses about the Coalition were backed up by hefty resources of material and symbolic power. By contextualizing and examining the discursive battles in the controversy, I have mapped out the cultural conditions of the Coalition's discourse, which was oppositional minority discourse. Gilroy, in his analysis of similar oppositional groups in Britain, sees them as "urban social movements" and emphasizes that they are, at heart, defensive organizations (Gilroy 1987: 231). In placing oppression at the center of their discourse, the Coalition sought to publicize and challenge the ubiquitous and subtle domination blacks experience in contemporary Canada. The Museum controversy illustrates how the discourses of postmodernism and multiculturalism can be used both to mask and defend this domination.

That the Coalition proclaimed its case with assumptions dating back to the Enlightenment about history, authenticity and identity, raises other critical questions about the political limitations of some postmodern paradigms. Is it possible to have political action based on a postmodern notion of multiple and shifting truths and identities? Stuart Hall suggests that at times it is necessary to abandon momentarily those multiple identities for "more simple ones around which political lines have been drawn" (cited in Chabram and Fregoso 1990:210). Stable notions of truth, community and race can be important political tools, not because they necessarily correspond to biological or epistemological absolutes or eternal and fixed categories. Rather, they account for the importance of "the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition" (Gilroy 1987: 247), even if that tradition is invented. Both minority and majority groups mobilize these concepts, although, as I have shown, they do so in distinct ways and within specific material and social conditions. Majority and minority discourses cannot be examined as if they had equivalent mobilising power and the same authority. Some truths are less marked and yet more pervasive and powerful than others.

Social and institutional locations, as I have also shown, influence both the production and the reception of knowledge. Intellectuals and cultural producers have authority as makers of meaning and knowledge, often concerning less power-

ful groups. In the world of the late twentieth century this authority to produce meanings about others is more likely to be challenged. As a result, a salient and potentially productive tension can emerge between the institutional and social locations of producers of meaning and the political effects of their discourses. But that tension can also be destructive. Today in the West intolerance of and violence against those historically defined as "Europe's Others has again become more strident" (Asad 1993:306), and it can take many forms. My examination of the *Into the Heart of Africa* controversy reveals the emergence of novel and subtle forms of intolerance and symbolic violence. In this instance discourses of postmodernism and multiculturalism were mobilized to defend institutional authority, and to construct those who challenged that authority as being illegitimate outsiders of Canadian society. New forms of control and contest such as these, specific to public culture in the late twentieth century, deserve sustained analysis. Such analysis requires that we, as producers of knowledge, problematize how our own social and institutional locations inform our analytical categories and strategies, and that we account for the political effects of our discourses.

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