

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and  
Romania*

## “Lost in Translation”?: Tristan Tzara’s Non-European Side

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# “Lost in Translation”?: Tristan Tzara’s Non-European Side

Cosana Eram

“. . . je suis seul / je ne suis qu’un petit bruit . . .”

In his “Manifeste Dada 1918,” Tristan Tzara posed the question, “Comment veut-on ordonner le chaos qui constitue cette infinie informe variation: l’homme?” (*Oeuvres complètes [OC]* 1: 361) ‘How can anyone hope to order the chaos that constitutes that infinite, formless variation: man? (*Seven Dada Manifestos* 5). Among the figurations of the term “man” in the first part of the twentieth century, Robert Musil invented the concept of *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (“man without qualities”) with a “hovering life,” Jules Romains focused on *les hommes de bonne volonté* (“men of good will”), and Albert Camus was a proponent of *l’homme révolté* (“rebel”). In turn, according to the title of one of his books, Tzara foregrounded in 1931 the notion of *l’homme approximatif* (“approximate man”), that is, a person with tentative identity and with no objective representation for himself. It has been widely noticed that, while born Samuel (“Samy”) Rosenstock, he coined his pen name from the Romanian words *țară* (“country”) and *trist* (“sad”), therefore playing on the connotations of *trist în țară* (“sad in one’s country”). While assuming an excluded posture, Tzara found oblique ways to integrate his art and theory within a type of transnational culture (in today’s terms) in which Western art could not claim exclusivity. From the beginning, his assumed stance was that of a spokesperson. He sermonized an anonymous crowd touched by the “colorless wing” of doubt in an age when clocks and humans ticked without reason or motivation:

je parle de qui parle qui parle je suis seul  
je ne suis qu’un petit bruit j’ai plusieurs bruits en moi  
un bruit glacé froissé au carrefour jeté sur le trottoir humide  
aux pieds des hommes pressés courant avec leur morts  
autour de la mort qui étend ses bras  
sur le cadran de l’heure seule vivante au soleil. (*L’Homme  
Approximatif*, OC 2: 81-82)

I speak of the one who speaks who speaks I am alone  
I am only a little sound I have several sounds in me  
a frozen sound bruised at the crossroads dropped on the damp  
sidewalk  
at the feet of hurried men running with their deaths  
around death that stretches out its arms  
on the clockface of the hour alone living in the sun. (*Approximate  
Man* 27)

In the aftermath of World War One, European avant-garde artists shared with some African and Caribbean diasporic writers the notion of a discredited Western world depleted of creative resources and the vision of an imminent “collapse” of European culture. In his classic *Histoire du surréalisme*, Maurice Nadeau contends that the rhetorical conventions of the nineteenth century proved incapable of rendering the reality of the war. In this context, according to James Clifford,

unlike the exoticism of the nineteenth century, which departed from a more-or-less confident cultural order in search of a temporary *frisson*, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre, modern surrealism and ethnography began with a reality deeply in question. (Clifford 120)

The category of “primitive art” emerged as one of the main narratives of modernism and had close ties to its aesthetics and to art market connoisseurship. Several theorists discuss European modernism and its relation to primitivism.<sup>1</sup> The traditional claim is that primitivism was a rediscovery that allowed Europe to shun worn out traditions by returning to atemporal forms of tribal imagery. More recent accounts describe primitivism – a natural refuge from the corrupt civilization of the West – as a self-serving hoax used by Western artists to romanticize their work. Thus, their involvement with it is just another form of “imperialist thievery” (Varnedoe 183).

From his early days at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich to his late years in Paris, Tristan Tzara underwent a double process: he was an Eastern European who immigrated to the “West” and, conversely, a European who let himself be “colonized” and assimilated: he translated and collected

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<sup>1</sup> The story of the Western encounter with tribal cultures traditionally begins with Jean de Léry’s account of his visit to Brazil (1578) and Michel de Montaigne’s essay “Les Cannibales” (1580), and continues, for example, with eighteenth century travelogues, such as Antoine-Louis Bougainville’s, a character whom Denis Diderot fictionalizes in his “Supplément au voyage de Bougainville” (1772). For more on the modernist relation with primitive art, see Flam and Deutsch.

words, poems, and ultimately objects belonging to territories remote from his own continent. A Romanian Jew coming himself from a position of “accented” marginality (Naficy 2001), Tzara grounded himself by acting as an advocate for the radical, non-homogeneous, and non-European Other. It is my contention that, although never considered a *point de repère* in cultural criticism, Tristan Tzara’s life-long connection with the reservoir of African, Caribbean, and Oceanic creative manifestations and beliefs best illustrates his artistic self-positioning. This article emphasizes the relations among poetry, myth, anthropology, ethnography, and politics in figuring his attitude towards forms of non-European alterity. I am concerned less with charting an intellectual or artistic tradition (that is, the relationship of the avant-garde with primitivism) than with focusing on a seminal aspect in Tristan Tzara’s particular approach to culture, such as his “translation” of *Poèmes nègres* (“Black Poems”). I compare his *Poèmes nègres* with Jewish Torah incantation and with the oral tradition of Romanian folkloric charms. The way he performed these poems after re-appropriating them to another language also resembles stand-up comedy and minstrelsy. My challenge is to determine whether Tzara created an eclectic ethno-poetic “imaginary homeland” for his own artistic purposes or held an ideological position close to postcolonial thinking today. Would his mode of simultaneously translating and intervening in disjointed worlds render him inauthentic? Beyond what was *à la mode*, Tzara’s constant preoccupation with non-European art and artifacts was framed in multiple ways, from his early, indiscriminate interest during the period of World War One to his politically aware anti-colonial position in the late fifties.

The Dada movement that Tzara fostered has become the epitome of nihilism, encapsulating in its production the destruction of old forms of art and the mockery of any authority. Given the number of generic references to dadaism in general and Tristan Tzara in particular, many readers might be under the impression that everything about the author has already been said. In this context, critics usually analyze Tzara’s early work, particularly his manifestos, and do not focus on his other writings.<sup>2</sup> For instance, apart from his volumes of poetry, his production includes a lengthy manuscript that claims to discover the secret code behind François Villon’s writings (published posthumously as *Le Secret de Villon, OC 6*, 1991) as well as many essays on culture in general. These articles cover topics ranging from the pre-Colombian art of Mexico to the ancient civilizations of Egypt.

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<sup>2</sup> Since the 1920s, a commonplace in Romanian criticism has been to focus on Tzara’s political *fronde* and destructive gesturality and to overlook his other preoccupations. Recent examples include Morar, Pop, and Cernat. There have been few recent monographs in English; Stephen Forcer devoted a 2006 book and a 2012 essay to Tzara’s poetry, and Marius Hentea’s biography appeared in 2014.

Beyond simplistic models of expatriation and exile, I will bring to the fore the sometimes-camouflaged dynamics of the artist's multifarious preoccupations usually shaded by his focal position within the historical avant-garde. Unlike most existing scholarship, the following research unveils another face of the former Dada "parent" and a more positive outcome to his trademark generic negations. From this vantage point, my argument foregrounds Tzara's search for artistic innovation and interest in forms of alterity/Otherness (his own included). What matters most is his open cultural ideology, manifested in terms of language, theory, and collection practice. Since Tzara spoke several languages, he had access to translations from non-European traditions into and from French, German, Italian, and English. In order to measure Tzara's originality in relation to other artists who took an interest in primitivism, it is important to notice that he paid attention to scholarly evaluations of non-European cultural values. His documentation was erudite and carefully compiled. In his notes, we discover listed among his sources the most important Africanists and ethnologists of his time, such as Leo Frobenius, Carl Meinhof, and Carl Strehlow.

Few scholars have explored the historical reality of Tzara's engagement with primitivism. Elmer Peterson, the author of the first monograph devoted to Tzara in English, gives a schematic overview of the artist's interest in non-European art:

Surrounded by books, papers, paintings by his dadaist and surrealist friends, and pieces of African and Oceanic art, the father of dada worked patiently to discover hidden meanings in Villon, whose *Testament* has been called the "birth certificate of modern poetry." The man who is all too frequently dismissed as a destroyer of language, a dadaist literary terrorist, had become in fact a serious literary scholar. He was also a brilliantly perceptive admirer of things as diverse as African art (witness the invitation to him in 1962 to participate in the Congress of African Culture in Salisbury, Rhodesia) and Romanesque churches of Catalonia which Georges Sadoul claimed he knew better than anyone. (Peterson xxv)

Jean-Claude Blanchère in 1981, Henri Béhar (the editor of Tzara's complete works) in a 2005 monograph, and Marc Dachy, in a 2006 collection of Tzara's essays, offer a more thorough treatment of Tzara's *poèmes nègres*, his collection of non-European art, and his essays on this topic. Although they document sources and influences, neither Blanchère nor Dachy nor Béhar delve more deeply into the linguistic, philosophical, and anthropological impact of Tzara's critique of various representations of Otherness. Blanchère initially notes possible "racist" nuances in Tzara's approach to non-European cultures (131). While situating Tzara within the

progressivist ideological environment of the avant-gardes, he finds nonetheless no clear evidence, on the one hand, that Tzara's approach to non-European cultures is patronizing or, on the other hand, that Tzara takes any coherent theoretical stance. Tzara can be "exonerated," he concludes, since his purpose was not to deride the black world but to provoke his European audience; for Tzara, the non-European world possessed the secret of a world-view in which "le vrai et le faux cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement" (176) 'the true and the false are no longer seen as contradictory.' This interpretation of Tzara's intentions is in line with a tradition in which "primitive" societies provide an artist with access to a prelapsarian, utopian world that furthers that artist's aspirations for a transformation of human nature. As early as the 1890s, anthropologists such as Franz Boas argued for the complexity of primitive social and mental formations as well as the importance of context and history. One of Claude Lévi-Strauss's main claims was that primitive modes of thinking were not simpler, but just different from Western cultures. The anti-evolutionist cultural relativity of these views is evident early in the history of anthropology, and it competes with the notion of primitive societies as early and developing forms of human culture.

Tzara's "Note sur l'art nègre" ("Note on Black Art," 1918) avoids the racial stereotype of the black man's passivity and indifference to conquest. However, the author does fall prey to the cliché of simplicity, as he associates his "black brother" more with nature than with culture: "mon frère a l'âme aux branches aiguës, noires d'automne" or "mon autre frère est naïf et bon et rit" (OC 1: 394) 'my brother's soul has sharp branches, black with autumn'; 'My other brother is naive and good, and laughs' (*Seven Dada Manifestos* 57). He reaches the conclusion that the necessary ingredients for a new kind of art are outside Europe: "concentration, angle de la pyramide vers le point du sommet, qui est une croix" (OC 1: 394) 'concentration, the lines from the base to the apex of a pyramid forming a cross' (57). Peremptorily, his recipe includes "symmetrical" natural elements from the cosmic, mineral, and animal realms – "la lune, les plantes, le noir, le métal, l'étoile, le poisson" 'the moon, plants, darkness, metal, star, fish' – all of which primitive art explored. Tzara assumes prophetic knowledge of this alternative artistic world order: "Personne n'a vu si clairement que moi ce soir moudre le blanc" (OC 1: 395) 'No one has seen so clearly as I this evening grinding the white' (58).

His opening towards Otherness was more than a means of self-fashioning in relation to his fellow artists and writers; he gradually reclaimed "primitive" art as the exemplar against Western civilization. The abstract and short "Note sur la poésie nègre" ("Note on Black Poetry," 1918) underlines the functional character of African poetry and its harmonious relationship with the universe, despite the generic ethnographic orientation of his age

that privileged the masks and statues. It also criticizes the narrowness of the locally oriented points of view: “. . . car nous ne sommes Dieu que pour le pays de notre connaissance, dans les lois ou nous vivons l'expérience sur cette terre, des deux côtés de notre équateur, dans nos frontières” (OC 1: 401) ‘For we are only God for the country of our knowledge, within the laws of which we live our experience on this earth, on both sides of our equator, within our frontiers’ (*Seven Dada Manifestos* 69).

Blanchère contends that, as genealogical moment, it was Tzara's friendship with Hugo Ball that grounded the former's interest in non-European art and poems (145). Indeed, in Zurich, Ball and Huelsenbeck introduced Tzara to German expressionist painters and sculptors associated with the movements *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*, who were among the first in Europe (together with the Fauves) to use black art as an aesthetic model in their search for a new representation of objects.<sup>3</sup> Since Ball was the first to perform “phonetic” poetry at the Cabaret Voltaire, Blanchère views him as the catalyst of Tzara's devotion to black poetry, as well as the initiator of the forms of subversion that he perfected through the years.<sup>4</sup>

Tzara's idea to make use of African or Melanesian languages may have indeed originated in Ball's sound poetry largely devoid of explicit signification. The former used non-European idioms not only as a means of subverting Western culture but also out of a sincere fascination with Otherness. In a collective volume on the European avant-garde, Kai Mikkonen argues that Tzara, like Marinetti, created a pseudo-Africa. Mikkonen argues that both Tzara and Marinetti considered the two continents as “man-made entities,” “ideas and concepts that could be freely reinvented, even though they referred to existing realities as well” (392). He also notes that Tzara replaced the phrase “art nègre sans humanité” ‘Negro art without humanity’ from his 1916 “Manifeste de Monsieur Antypirine” with the single word *ventilateur* in the version published in *Sept Manifestes Dada* in 1924 (399). The Finnish critic ascribes this modification to “a general shift within the avant-garde movements of the time” (399), which acted like a seismograph tuned to the latest fashions in intellectual history: in this case, it was the “primitive” that became popular. Black art was for Tzara a site of

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<sup>3</sup> In 1903, artists from *Die Brücke* visited an exhibition organized by the Ethnographic Museum in Dresden presenting African statues; the 1912 almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* reproduced African and Oceanic pieces; in 1915, the German writer Carl Einstein published his considerations on *Negerplastik*; in 1917 Karl-Schmidt Rottluff sculpted a “Blue and Red Head” and in 1918 painted his “Young Girl from Kowno” inspired by African masks. Tzara himself acknowledged the value of German expressionism in a series of articles written in 1922 and published in the American magazine *Vanity Fair*.

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Choucha claims that this interest may have been inspired by Wassily Kandinsky's book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*) (40).

imagination and creative inspiration, as Mikkonen writes. However, by simply stating that the image of the *nègre* that Tzara “reinvents” has “nothing to do with the economic, social and symbolic realities in the African colonies at that time” (405), Mikkonen may run the risk of simplifying Tzara’s contribution, since there are more complex interplays at stake here, as this essay will show. To Tzara, *art nègre* signified an art opposed to a civilization governed by rationality, and its particular syntax and elliptical style provided an answer to his own aesthetic interrogations. On the other hand, Mikkonen’s early chronology is a good starting point for a deeper analysis of Tzara’s sociological, ritual, and symbolic preoccupation with non-European cultures.

Initially, Tzara’s interest in primitive art undoubtedly involved a degree of idealization and abstraction; nonetheless, he was among the first to ascribe value to exotic cultures in a Western context. Among the avant-gardists, the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was the first to claim unmediated access to another world (via the breast of his Sudanese nurse). His childhood in Africa surfaced in his manifestos and novels, such as *Mafarka le futuriste: Roman africain* and *Gli Indomabili*. In turn, as Tzara carefully fashioned himself as collector and promoter of African, Caribbean, and Oceanic art, he underlined his opposition to the European cultural tradition, which he declared dead under the artillery of his Dada manifestos. Early on, he eagerly wrote about publications such as the album devoted to *l’art nègre* by Paul Guillaume, the first French art dealer and critic to organize exhibitions and publish books and articles on non-European art. Later in life, Tzara offered an indirect eulogy to primitivism in his introduction to a 1950 edition of Tristan Corbière’s poems, *Les Amours jaunes*, in which he contended that folklore and primitive cultures were pure signs of communication and modes of expression (OC 5:125-35). Unlike other modernist artists, Tzara consistently avoided indiscriminately referring to non-European artifacts as mere “*art nègre*” and thoughtlessly reproducing a series of racist tropes.

Among Tzara’s early influences, two significant individuals are Jean Ephraïm, the owner of Cabaret Voltaire, and Francis Picabia, the French-Spanish artist. Ephraïm, who had spent time in Africa, provided the cabaret with some of its *chants nègres*.<sup>5</sup> While in New York for the Armory Show in February and March 1913, Picabia started to assemble a large collection of non-European artifacts and painted two *Chants nègres*, abstract compositions inspired by his listening to the blues in a restaurant. Also, important for Tzara were Russian avant-garde artists such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalya Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, and Alexandr Shevchenko, who were

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<sup>5</sup> In his memoirs, Ball notes: “The melodies for “Chant nègre II” were composed by our esteemed host, Mr. Jan Ephraïm, who had been involved in African business for some time a while ago” (58).



already preoccupied with what they called “neo-primitivism.” They grounded their work ethnically and nationalistically in peasant art, crafts, and icons.

The Swiss journal *Anthropos* was Tzara’s most important source for primary material in his work on what he would call *poèmes nègres*. Whereas his fellow avant-garde artists treated the art and poetry of Africa, Madagascar, and Polynesia as a barely differentiated whole, Tzara privileged the poems in *Anthropos* that belonged to Australian tribes, such as the Loritjas or Arandas. This act of selection was in tune with the ethnographic fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a Pacific tribe such as Arandas (Arundas or Arantas) was considered the “quintessence of primitivism.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the original African or Oceanic poems entered an economy of exchange which transformed them into second-hand cultural products. In general, ethnologists publish the original version of the poem, chant, or tale by transcribing in Latin characters the phonemes of the original language. Then, they make a literal translation that respects the syntactic particularities of the original. In Tzara’s time, such translation circulated in several languages, attempting to render in German or French the literary effects found in the initial text. According to Henri Béhar, *Anthropos* published several poems collected by missionaries and translated into German, French, Italian, and English, which the young Romanian studied and transposed again from one language to another (6).

Roman Jakobson’s essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” written over half a century ago, is one of the first to contend that translation does not entail mere word-for-word replacement. Jakobson discusses three ways of conveying meaning: intralingual (“rewording” in the same language),<sup>7</sup> interlingual (translation proper from one language into another), and intersemiotic (“the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems”) (233). Tzara’s lyrical “transcriptions,” inaccessible without his mediation in the first place, belong both to the intralingual and intersemiotic type of translation. Initially, like most people interested in exoticism, he did not give regard to the conditions of their production, and his treatment was purified and ahistorical. Tzara did not strive for fidelity or accuracy. His own distortion of the poems in translation had unexpected effects: Tzara’s collage-like poetry effectively contested any established artistic conventions, such as those consecrated by European lyrical tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Émile Durkheim discusses the tribe in these terms in 1912. In the 1960s, Mircea Eliade critiques the phrase “quintessence of primitivism” that early-century missionaries such as Carl Strehlow promoted and considers it a leveling cliché.

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner and Jacques Derrida refer to the concept of “rewording” in *After Babel* (436) and *Psyche* (209), respectively.

This strategy calls attention to the *poietics* of his production, which becomes, in Michel Foucault's terms, a heterotopia, that is, a symbolic space with the power to juxtapose several "locations" that are in themselves incompatible (Foucault 46).<sup>8</sup>

Tzara's first *poèmes nègres* can be dated as early as 1917.<sup>9</sup> According to Marc Dachy, they are related to a "happy confusion" between, on the one hand, black and, on the other, the abstract poetry privileged by the dadaists (15). I disagree with this point of view that implicitly considers Tzara "lost in translation" in his attempts to take European poetic style as a point of reference. He did not show any intention to make these poems more accessible to his readers and audience at the Cabaret Voltaire. From a stylistic angle, he re-rendered the literal translations (primarily from German to French) and retained all the obscure and rough sentences without taking into consideration poetic effects accessible to Western sensibility, such as carefully contrived form, imagery or symbolism. He chose poems that seemed closest to the source and the oral tradition, almost like a prose paraphrase of themselves. A typical example of rough repetitions and unpolished verse in French is *Chant de l'absent* (Iles Kej):

Gardée est notre maison; Babooi se trouve à Séram  
Baboi ne te plaît pas, hé, Nengai se trouve à Banda  
Celle de Banda ne te plaît pas, hé, choisis donc Movien de  
Amboine  
Amboine: construis dans ta maison sa chambre  
Maison, chambre, chambre construis dans ta maison sa chambre, sa  
chambre

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<sup>8</sup> "Il y a également, et ceci probablement dans toute culture, dans toute civilisation, des lieux réels, des lieux effectifs, des lieux qui sont dessinés dans l'institution même de la société, et qui sont des sortes de contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles les emplacements réels, tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inversés, des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux, bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables. Ces lieux, parce qu'ils sont absolument autres que tous les emplacements qu'ils reflètent et dont ils parlent, je les appellerai, par opposition aux utopies, les hétérotopies. . . ." (Foucault 48) 'There are also, probably in every culture, every civilization, true places, effective places, places that are figured in the very institution of society, and that are kinds of counter-sites, kinds of effectively realized utopias in which the true sites that may be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted, kinds of places that are outside of all places, even if they are effectively localizable. These places, since they differ absolutely from all the sites that they reflect and of which they speak, I call heterotopias, in opposition to utopias.'

<sup>9</sup> They were never published as a collection Tzara envisaged, but were only posthumously included in the first volume of his *Oeuvres complètes* at Flammarion.

Ta besogne est d'aller où tu la retrouves.  
Même un Hollandais sa besogne est d'aller où pour la retrouver?  
Après les Hollandais les gardes vont pour la retrouver  
Où vont-ils pour la retrouver?  
Iront-ils la maison dedans?  
La maison au dedans le pays qu'ils le visitent

Finale

Je visiterai comme loin un peu Aroe et Keij  
J'irai au loin nous engagerons la barque à feu qui se meut au  
moyen de roues  
Au moyen de roués; mouillera dans notre rade Nammeo. (OC 1:  
457).

Guarded is our house; Babooi is at Séram  
You don't like Babooi, right, Nengai is at Banda  
You don't like that of Banda's, right, choose then Movien of  
Amboine  
Amboine: build in your house his room  
House, room, room build in your house his room, his room  
Your task is to go where you'll find it.  
Even a Dutchman his task is to go where to find it?  
After the Dutchmen the guards go to find it  
Where do they go find it?  
The house, will they go into it?  
The house in the country that they visit it

Finale

I will visit far a little Aroe and Keij  
I will go far we will take the boat with fire that moves on wheels  
Rounds on wheels; drop anchor in our harbor Nammeo

Tzara's purpose was not to induce a trope of authority. Moreover, linguistic identity became in this context conjunctural and not essential. Lacking knowledge of African or Oceanic languages or the means to learn them, he performed a metaphorical rather than a linguistic translation from German into French, or even from French into French. This particular "invasive" gesture elides the otherwise inherent differences between linguistic and anthropological studies.

### **"What's in a name?"**

Even before arriving in France, where jazz and *l'art nègre* were reaching the height of their popularity, Tzara shared the Parisian fascination with

exoticism. For the spectacles at Cabaret Voltaire he first used the word “nègre” in the context of *musique nègre* on 26 February 1916; he repeated it in “bruits, musique nègre (trabatgea bonooooooooo oo ooooo)” on 14 July 1916 and in “musique et danses nègres” on 14 and 28 April 1917. In his own recounting in “Chronique zurichoise,” his *poèmes nègres* appeared for the first time in the programs of Soirées Dada on 12 May 1917 at Zunfthaus zur Waag after the Cabaret Voltaire was closed: “Galerie Dada: Soirée Alte und Neue Kunst Dada 12.V.1917 . . . Poèmes nègres. Traduits et lus par Tzara/Aranda, Ewe, Bassoutos, Kinga, Loritja, Barongoa. . . .” (OC 1, 565) ‘1917 – May 12 *Galerie Dada* Evening recitals OLD AND NEW DADA ART . . . NEGRO POEMS Translated and read by Tzara / Aranda, Ewe, Bassoutos, Kinga, Loritja, Baronga. . . .’ (“Zurich Chronicle” 25-26). Around the same time, in preparation for the first issue of the journal *Dada* in July 1917, he announced the “imminent” publication of a volume of *Poèmes nègres* in his “translation.” This book was never published.

Therefore, *Dada 1* included a transposed “Chanson du cacadou” (OC 1: 451) followed by Tzara’s original lyrics. However, the poems appear on the page as a continuum, separated only by Janco’s drawings, a visual ambiguity that allows Tzara to project his authorship in all cases. The second issue (December 1917) presented two *poèmes nègres* of the Loritja tribe, one unnamed and one called “Chanson du serpent” (OC 1: 452). These were authentic poems collected by travelers or missionaries, which the author “translated” in the Dada French idiom, that is, he adapted them for his own performative purposes. Around the same time, his “Notes” on *art nègre* and *poésie nègre* were published in the journal *Sic*. (Lacking a receptive audience, they were only reprinted in 1963 among the “Lampisteries” in the appendix to *Sept Manifestes Dada*.)

Tzara’s operations of random cut-and-paste took advantage of series of words or entire poems that were meant to sound exotic to the untrained ear. His rhetoric advocates for a haphazard manner, but his original manuscripts show that he was much more considered in drafting and correcting his work. He preserved several non-capitalized words that are in fact first names or geographical locations in present-day Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia, such as: haramnyanga, muyombeke, hinda kulunghi, naba. Tzara was interested in the transfiguring sonority of the poem, because, as he famously said, “la pensée se fait dans la bouche” (OC 1: 379) ‘Thought is made in the mouth.’ As he proudly confessed in a private letter addressed to Jacques Doucet, “Totovaca” did not have a correspondent in reality and was “un poème abstrait . . . composé de sons purs inventés par moi” (OC 1: 643) ‘an

abstract poem composed of pure sounds which I invented.’<sup>10</sup> However, in “Totovaca” a Romanian language speaker can spot nouns and interjections such as “pipi,” “vaca,” “haha” and “tata” (OC 1: 454). The author bridged the gaps across linguistic differences, which were skewed by the peculiarities of the interactions he created. The origins of these processes could be sought in his early years in a Jewish community in Romania. Following this intuition, Andrei Codrescu notes that the reading of a verse in the Torah several times makes it lose meaning and become pure sound, “referencing something primal and unknown” (111). Tzara’s memory of his early days in a Jewish-based Romanian context could have laid the ground for such a technique of repetition in his performances. On the other hand, Henri Béhar’s research into the documents at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris attest that Tzara compiled and used original Maori sounds as well as translations from German made by his Romanian friend, the poet Ilarie Voronca.

Tzara’s use of multilingual techniques yield defamiliarizing, almost otherworldly artistic effects that could be compared to the world of primitive charms.<sup>11</sup> Like charms, Tzara’s foreign words float freely and anonymously and reveal several binaries between ritual and written text, poetry and common language, verbal and non-verbal, “primitive” and Western. Deeply rooted in a performative context, they require the audience or reader to move beyond a conventional text-based literary analysis. Lori Ann Garner gives the following definition of charms:

Providing explicit ritual instructions alongside verbal incantations, the charms are verse incantations that functioned as part of rituals performed to cure disease, improve crops, and even return lost or stolen property. (25)

Unlike epic poetry, riddles or lyrics, charms are performed toward specific practical ends and “their mode of operation is performative” (Garner 26). In the Romanian folkloric tradition, their equivalent can be found in blasphemies or maledictions. These are special forms of superstitious oral imprecations that invoke the rage of a supernatural being against someone. A person who uses blasphemies is a social actor on the side of devil, which corresponds on a metaphorical level to Tzara’s desire to provoke havoc and *épater le bourgeois*. Ultimately an exercise in persuasion like charms or blasphemies, his non-semantic use of words and interjections creates

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<sup>10</sup> Among all avant-garde artists, Kurt Schwitters was the boldest in his exploration of sonorous atoms detached from meaning (see his *Ursonate* in 1932). Also, Marinetti distinguished among various types of onomatopoeia in *Les mots en liberté futuristes*.

<sup>11</sup> See also Gumbrecht, Mazilu, and Roper. Roper defines charms as “the verbal element of vernacular magic practice” (1).

disorder and negates the authority of official languages and idioms. Tzara's *poèmes nègres* blur the distinctions between the oral and literary, indigenous tongue and German or French, metrical and non-metrical, poetic and practical, conscious and unconscious, even sensical and non-sensical.

Before Tzara was reciting his *poèmes nègres*, the Dada group at Cabaret Voltaire specialized in what they called *poèmes simultanés*. These were, in Ball's definition, "contrapuntal recitatives" in several voices in which the performers spoke, sang, whistled and made noises in several real and imaginary, recognizable and unrecognizable languages. Associated in their aesthetics with cubism, these poems allowed the listeners to associate freely whatever elements they could cast their attention upon. To give only one example, after a show on 23 March 1916 that featured futurist poems, plays and bruitisms, on 30 March the Dadas performed for the first time a program that, according to Ball's memoirs, fit all their purposes. Against the background of a drumstick and a kettledrum, Huelsenbeck declaimed "Negro" poetry with raised eyebrows, trembling nostrils, and a cane in his hand. He then recited with Tzara and Janco the simultaneous poem "L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer" in three different languages, French, German, and English, to the accompaniment of rattle, whistle, and bass drum. As in Bakhtin's heteroglossia, languages did not exist separately, but they intersected in many different ways on several planes (Bakhtin 291). Afterwards, the performers dressed in black cowls and sang/danced/recited "*Chant nègre*" I and II during increasing protests on the part of the baffled audience.<sup>12</sup>

According to Hugo Ball, almost all "wonderfully plaintive words that no human mind can resist come from ancient magical texts" (66-67). Ball, who never forgot the mystical dimension of things, contended that Dada poetry was characterized by the use of "grammalogues," that is, enchanted floating words and resonant sounds, images irresistibly and hypnotically engraved on the memory (67). Tzara's performed poems, emerging from the practices described above, were neither textualized nor contextualized but utterly recontextualized. Using Jakobson's distinctions again, he went beyond

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<sup>12</sup> Theatrical explorations of simultaneity, the art of noise, or attempts to agitate the audience were not an entirely a new practice. Futurism had baptized noise as an art form. The dadaists pushed the limits even more and attacked the cultural sign system with bruitist concerts that consisted of any noise that the human vocal chords could produce. Such primitive dramatic spectacles were the most important tool that the dadaists employed in order to promote their critique and radical subversion of modernity. Surprise or shock tactics, as well as the use of background white noise, poetry, or prose are aggressively anti-logical. No wonder then that the Dada circus, "both buffoonery and a requiem mass" (Ball 56), was subject to objections on the part of some members of the public who shouted, booed, and demanded their money back.

“rewording” and reached the level of “transmutation.” In his use of this new idiom, Tzara appears as the prophet of a new linguistic order.

Tzara’s self-conscious performances unrestrained by social norms resemble the black minstrel shows at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>13</sup> He put himself in the position of a stand-up comedian supposed to entertain the audience at all costs. This is a condition that Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire would later identify as the colonial and neocolonial relationship between blacks and whites, in which the latter expect the former to perform and present spectacles both comic and tragic in nature. In these terms, Tzara’s impersonations resemble diasporic genres such as the *revue nègre*, but also *doudouisme*<sup>14</sup>, *mistrelsy*, *carnival*, and even the blues. Hans Richter best describes how Tzara presented himself in front of the Zurich audience:

He declaimed, sang, and spoke in French, although he could do so just as well in German, and punctuated his performances with screams, sobs and whistles.

Bells, drums, cow-bells, blows on the table or on empty boxes, all enlivened the already wild accents of the new poetic language, and excited, by pure physical means, an audience which had begun by sitting impassively behind its beer mugs. From this state of immobility it was roused into frenzied involvement with what was going on. This was Art, this was Life, and this was what they wanted! (Richter 19)

In a Romanian interview, Marcel Janco later confirmed that he and Tzara transferred to Switzerland a revolt characteristic of the social and cultural climate in Romania, paradoxically imbued by an atmosphere full of humor, permeated by a certain amount of absurdism recognizable in popular stories and naïve peasant paintings (Bârladeanu 42). It was a creative potential based on a structural and morphological connection with the world of Romanian folkloric mythology, legends, and tales.

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<sup>13</sup> Several cultural critics, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kimberly W. Benson, discuss the self-consciously theatrical elements of black culture. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois viewed performance as both a vital part of everyday life and a traumatic undermining of the self’s coherence.

<sup>14</sup> On *doudouisme*, supposedly part of the Caribbean folkloric tradition but developed within the context of a booming tourist culture in Martinique, see Gerstin. *Doudouisme* produces “stock characters” who act out “demeaning stereotypes” in the manner of U.S. minstrel shows: there is always the *doudou* (“sweet-sweet”) or lover man, the happy-go-lucky, sex craving “*biquine*,” the “young, sexy, untrustworthy *mulâtresse*,” and the “raunchy market woman” (134).

## “Dada opposait une conception plus large...”

After Ball left the Dada movement, Tzara lingered three more years in Zurich before leaving for France. There, he gathered a new Dada momentum by merging his creative energies with those of the group of young French writers who would, in a few years, found the surrealist movement. Tzara moved to Paris when France was very much the acknowledged source of all modern critical concepts. The development of artistic theory coincided with a growth of anthropological study and collecting, as scholars and curators sought to “make sense of the various appropriations of empire” (Harrison and Woods 15). Metropolitan France was one of the vibrant places where African-Americans, Antilleans, and Africans were able to interact in the context of what Brent Hayes Edwards calls a “diasporic *décalage*” (14). French music and poetry were impregnated with Africanism, which did not result from affinities only: the intercultural encounter prompted European artists to regenerate their own styles. The word *nègre* itself had multiple connotations.<sup>15</sup> In “*Mélanophilie ou mélanomanie*,”<sup>16</sup> Apollinaire analyzed this phenomenon spreading across France. Apollinaire attributed the trend to artifacts brought back by French troops who had fought in Senegal, the visit of the American black expeditionary force, and the jazz fashion embodied by Josephine Baker. In Apollinaire’s view, the Negro statuettes taught modern European artists a “moral lesson” and helped them formulate their artistic aim.<sup>17</sup>

Writers adhered to the new fashion. Among them we can count Georges Fourest, with his very popular booklet of pamphlets printed in multiple editions, *La Nègresse blonde* (1909), Philippe Soupault with *Le Nègre* (1927), and Michel Leiris with his travelogue, *L’Afrique fantôme* (1931-1933), in which he wrote about the subjective conflicts and political constraints of cross-cultural study. To give only one example of this type of lesser-known parody, the image of the woman in Fourest’s short and snappy poems is that of an anthropophage, undistinguishable from the natural world:

Cannibale, mais ingénue,  
elle est assise, toute nue,  
sur un peau de kangarou,  
dans l’île de Tamamourou!

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<sup>15</sup> Lamine Senghor in his 1927 essay “Le Mot Nègre” offers the most virulent critique of its usage. Aimé Césaire is the first writer of African descent who changed the value of the term, turning it into the proud *négritude* on the eve of World War Two. In 1937, Léon Damas writes *Pigments*, a book lamenting the black “colonized personality.”

<sup>16</sup> Also published in *Mercure de France* on 1 April 1917 under the rubric “La Vie anecdotique”.

<sup>17</sup> On the *négraphilie* of the 1920s, see Rosenstock.



Là, pétauristes, potourous,  
ornithorrynques et wombats,  
phascolomes prompts au combat,  
près d'elle prennent leurs ébats!  
Selon la mode Papoua,  
sa mère, enfant la tatoua:  
en jaune, en vert, en vermillon,  
en zinzolin, par millions  
oiseaux, crapauds, serpents, lézards,  
fleurs polychromes et bizarres,  
chauves-souris, monstre ailés,  
laid, violets, bariolés,  
sur son corps noir sont dessinés.  
Sur ses fesses bariolées  
on écrivait en violet  
deux sonnets sibyllins rimés  
par le poète Mallarmé,  
et sur son ventre peint en bleu  
fantastique se mord la queue  
un amphibène.  
L'arête d'un poisson lui traverse le nez:  
de sa dextre aux doigts terminés,  
par des ongles teints au henné  
elle caresse un échidné,  
et parfois elle fait sonner  
en souriant d'un air amène  
à son col souple un beau collier  
de dents humaines  
La belle Négresse, la Négresse blonde! (Fourest 2: 23-24)

Cannibal, but ingenuous,  
she sits, entirely nude,  
on a kangaroo skin, on the isle of Tamamourou!  
There petaurists, potooroos  
platypuses and wombats,  
phascolomes quick to do battle,  
near her engage in scuttle!

In accordance with Papuan fashion,  
her mother tattooed her as a child:  
in yellow, in green, in vermilion,  
in reddish purple, millions of  
birds, frogs, snakes, lizards,

polychrome and bizarre flowers,  
bats, winged monsters,  
ugly, purple, multicolored,  
are drawn on her black body.  
On her multicolored buttocks  
were written in purple  
two sibylline rhyming sonnets  
by the poet Mallarmé,

and on her blue-painted belly  
fantastically biting its own tail,  
an amphisbaena.  
A fishbone passes through her nose:  
her right hand with fingers ending  
in hennaed nails  
caresses an echidna,  
and sometimes she jingles,  
smiling affably,  
a beautiful necklace around her supple neck  
made of human teeth.  
The beautiful Negress, the beautiful blond Negress!

Tzara's *poèmes nègres* bear striking similarities with Fourest's style, but do not share the same ideological angle or purpose. Fourest had a paternalistic perspective akin to Blaise Cendrars' in *Anthologie nègre* (1921), an offspring of 19th century European travel narratives and early ethnography, which reflected the generic tone of the age. According to Brent Hayes Edwards, René Maran later termed such an approach *anthroponégrisme*: "the vulgar collection of black cultural and biological 'data', with a prevailing and almost bureaucratic pretention to objectivity, in a manner that at once exoticizes and distances the black subject into a premodern or infantile specimen" (Edwards 71). The "blonde"/ "black" odalisque, purposefully rendered as oxymoronic, belongs to a non-familiar and burlesque universe, inscribed onto her body like a tattooed Noah's Ark.

Paris represented such crossings and extensions of the horizon for those who, like Tzara, did not venture directly into exotic territories. However, Tzara soon became associated with the circle of the journal *L'Esprit nouveau*, dominated by what James Clifford calls a taste for "ethnographic surrealism" (88). In this context, Tzara encountered different attitudes towards primitivism from that exemplified by Fourest. Fascinated by Lévy-Bruhl's book, *La Mentalité primitive* (1922), the surrealists saw in that work confirmation of their ideal of a way of life that placed value in dreams and existential options to which the Western world did not have access. They

traveled abroad extensively and took a keen interest in the work of Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Bronislaw Malinowski in search for possible rapprochements between the European and non-European mindset. For instance, Easter Island was the center of the surrealist map of the world (1929); the mission Dakar-Djibouti, directly explored by Leiris, became the topic of the second issue of *Minotaure* (1933); in time, Mexico appeared as the most inspiring territory; and native American, especially Inuit, art fascinated André Breton all his life.

Tzara lacked the scientific and scholarly inclination we find in Breton. He nonetheless theorized his distance from the surrealist manner of approaching primitive art. In his article "Marchez au pas," written during his early Paris years, he expressed his disappointment with surrealism, a movement that, he felt, involved giving up individuality and freedom of thought for the sake of belonging to a group. The surrealists were interested in tribal objects not in order to collect them but to find out how to "interrogate" them and take advantage of their magic power. For Breton, such a possible dialogue was more important than any collection in itself. However, Aragon and Breton himself did function as art counselors for the collector Jacques Doucet. Thus, the surrealists' relation to art and its consumption differed from Tzara's. Tzara claimed (rather inaccurately) that the surrealists' cerebral approach did not give due attention to Oceanic art, which he himself favored. He wrote in "Découverte des arts dits primitifs": "La signification, pour eux, de l'art océanien tient plutôt du domaine de la connaissance que de celui d'une esthétique idéaliste sujette aux fluctuations du goût et de la mode" (OC 4: 301) 'For them, the significance of Oceanic art has more to do with the realm of knowledge than with that of an idealistic aesthetics subject to the fluctuations of taste and fashion'; Tzara's interest in such art served a different agenda, that of poetic novelty: "Si l'art africain avait surtout pu servir de support aux recherches plastiques des peintres cubistes, c'est à travers la poésie nouvelle que fut découvert l'art océanien" (OC 4: 302) 'If African art could above all serve as support to the artistic research of the cubist painters, it was through the new poetry that Oceanic art was discovered.'

Tzara contrasted surrealist interests with the more idealistic Dada preoccupation with non-European art as reflecting the only authentic way of life, untarnished by the masks of civilization. Only Dada, he claimed, pursued the quest for the ultimate sources of poetic function, which his improvisational performances already exemplified:

Dada opposait une conception plus large où l'art des peuples primitifs, imbriqué dans la fonctions sociales et religieuses, apparaissait comme l'expression même de leur vie. . . . Dada a essayé de mettre en pratique cette théorie reliant l'art nègre, africain et océanien à la vie mentale et à son expression immédiate au niveau

de l'homme contemporain, en organisant des soirées nègres de danse et de musique improvisées. (OC 4: 301)

Dada was opposed to a more widely held view that the art of primitive peoples, embedded in social and religious functions, appeared as the very expression of their life. . . . Dada tried to put into practice a theory that connects African and Oceanic *art nègre* to mental life and its unmediated expression in contemporary man's existence by organizing *soirées nègres* of dance and improvised music.

In "L'Art et l'Océanie," one of his early essays initially published in *Cahiers d'art* in 1929, Tzara wrote about the logical and temporal framing of Western perception: "entre la vue et la croyance, entre la vie et sa projection sur l'écran sommaire de l'horloge, - je parle de l'horloge, celle dont les aiguilles serrent durement un globe qui n'est pas prêt à céder -, entre le mythe et l'objet" (OC 4: 310) 'between seeing and believing, between life and its projection on the summary screen of a clock, -I speak of the clock whose hands roughly shake a globe that is not ready to yield- , between myth and object.' His main contention was that the West was dominated by various technological advancements that framed its tempo, while "backward" peoples remained tied to the traditional past and inherited mythical structures. In a way, Tzara rephrased the usual cliché that non-European cultures could not advance because of their lack of technology. But he reversed the argument: it was precisely technology that impaired Europeans. Its lack redeemed other civilizations: living with nature as a witness of their culture allowed them to live at an enchanted level.

Tzara's writings on *art nègre* after World War Two helped him crystallize his views on European painters, writers and sculptors. Like many, he saw Henri Matisse and the Fauves as holding preeminence in manifesting "exotic" influences in their work. Stating that every age had its "double" in terms of exemplary correspondences (such as impressionism and Japanese gravures or fauvism and primitivism), Tzara identified the original moment of this "strange encounter" as the year 1907, when Matisse bought an African sculpture in the shop of "père Heymann, rue de Rennes" (OC 4: 299). Tzara critiqued Picasso's approach to *art nègre* and claimed that the painter's interest was only perfunctory. In fact, Picasso himself, whose "epiphany" about cubist style was triggered by an African mask, later allegedly declared when *l'art nègre* was in vogue: "*L'art nègre. Connais pas!*" (qtd. in Clifford 148).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams also describes his disappointment after his meeting with Picasso in the 1950s when the artist regarded him merely as a possible object of inspiration and told him "you have a fine African head" (qtd. in Gikandi 470).

Tzara's late essays on non-European topics migrate between the local and global. Written in the 1950s, in the age of neocolonialism and around the time when many Francophone countries gained their independence, they adopt the language of anti-imperialist ideology. For instance, in a short piece called "Liberté est un nom vietnamien" (Freedom Is a Vietnamese Word), Tzara takes a stand against the French military intervention and for the liberation of the people in Vietnam (OC 5: 101). Himself long banished by Breton, he took umbrage here at the manner in which surrealists had lost their revolutionary ideals by taking over the title of a 1947 surrealist pamphlet and complaining about their inconsequential involvement into politics. In an essay published in *Les Lettres françaises* and entitled "Quelques Considerations sur l'art precolombien du Mexique" (1952), Tzara highlighted yet again the compensatory, redemptive value of non-European art that could deliver the Western world from its "fallen" condition. He commented on the relation between "intentionality" and the "privileged moment" of magic, this time in Latin American art:

C'est à une identification du même ordre, entre l'objet fini et l'intention qui a présidé à son élaboration, qu'il faut attribuer la force magique dont ces œuvres ont été dotées aux yeux de leurs contemporains. (OC 4: 303)

One must attribute the magic force with which these works were endowed in the eyes of their contemporaries to an identification of the same order, between the finished object and the intention that presided over its elaboration.

In spite of Tzara's promise of liberation and deliverance, the world paid more attention to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Aimé Césaire's criticism of European civilization and racism in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955). These books, examining psychic, cultural, and social damages inflicted by colonialism, overshadow Tzara's contribution to the range of protests against colonialism. Perhaps after his vocal early years, the world was no longer tuned to his performative protests. In August 1960, one year after the Fifth Republic had been established by President Charles de Gaulle, at a time when French forces confronted the Algerian rebels, together with Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and other intellectuals, Tristan Tzara addressed a letter of protest to Premier Michel Debré concerning France's refusal to grant Algeria its independence (Adler 233-34).

A group that Tzara accepted wholeheartedly was art collectors. Together with Charles Ratton, Tzara organized an exhibition of non-European artifacts at the Pigalle Gallery in 1930. According to the catalogue of this exhibition, most items were Oceanic or African masks and objects related to everyday activities (Dachy 14-15). Throughout his life, he remained an

authority in the world of art collecting and took a keen interest in African and Oceanic artifacts. Henri Béhar describes a few items from Tzara's collection of Oceanic artifacts, among which he notes a Kwele mask from Gabon, with oblique and very sad eyes (Béhar 5):

Témoin les magnifiques appuie-tête océaniens acquis auprès de Jacques Viot en 1928, le bouclier des îles Trobriand acheté à la vente Rupalley en 1930, la statuette de l'île de Pâques ramenée par Pierre Loti, et le paradoxal tambour en sablier du Détroit de Torrès qui sommait sa bibliothèque. (6)

Witness the magnificent Oceanic headrests acquired from Jacques Viot in 1928, the shield from the Trobriand Islands purchased at the Rupalley auction in 1930, the statuette brought from Easter Island by Pierre Loti, and the paradoxical hourglass drum from the Torres Strait that held a commanding position in his library.

Perhaps the role of masks in supplanting one's identity attracted Tzara the performer. Masks lack the sense of individuality visible in the portrait of a chronotopically-situated character. Non-marked in figurative terms, they are used in ritual ceremonies, which are complex choreographic gatherings intended to order the world and periodically regenerate time and space. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, masks represent hierarchies, such as archetypal images of kings who are less a depiction of an actual person than a means of preserving the memory of an event related to him (Laude 409).

As Tom Sandqvist examines Eastern-European spiritual elements in the cultural background of Romanians at the Cabaret Voltaire, he rightly points out that Tzara and Janco (the creator of masks at the Cabaret Voltaire) were familiar with phenomena of peasant culture such as the *colinde*, a Romanian winter festival celebrated every year around Christmas and New Year in which masks play a prominent role (254). Linked to myths of initiation and rebirth or ancient fertility rites to protect harvests, *colinde* are a syncretic folkloric carnival that young masked village boys still perform in rural Romania today. Tzara was a spectator of such popular shows during his youth spent in the small town of Moinești. He may have subliminally retained in his mind these images that resembled the masks in his collection.

As early as 1914, Wilhelm Dilthey compared the understanding of cultural forms to the reading of texts. He discussed the notion of *Verstehen*, a critique of empathetic experience translated into interpretation of exotic artifacts. Like his performances and *poèmes simultanés*, masks served Tzara's artistic purpose: to create a complete and indelible moment caught in the perpetual present of modernity. Tzara's effort to assemble an African and Oceanic art collection has to be understood as an attempt to preserve a ritualistic way of life by creating an emotional halo that delays the ineluctable moment of disappearance. In 1962, one year before his death, and

the same year that Lévi-Strauss published *La Pensée sauvage*, Tristan Tzara finally visited Africa for the first time on the occasion of a *Congrès pour la culture africaine* held in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe). The *African Studies Bulletin* in 1961 had already mentioned the event as the first biennial International Congress of African Culture.<sup>19</sup> During his visit, the writer permitted some of the artifacts in his collection to be publicly displayed. After his return to France, he discussed his journey in an interview with Charles Dobzynski in which he stated again his open engagement on behalf of anti-colonialism. His radicalism appears here as the result of a long process of reflection upon Western culture, art, and politics. He relates racism to the existence of the “black proletariat” and also expresses his regret for the absence of folkloric song collections reflecting the African “*joie de vivre*” (OC 4: 560-69).

The life-long story of Tzara’s connection with non-European art symbolically ended on 9 April 1989, when his “exotic” art collection was sold by the art auctioneer Guy Loudmer. Loudmer released a catalogue with most of the African and Oceanic pieces in the collection, entitled *Importants Tableaux modernes et sculptures. Collection Tristan Tzara et à divers amateurs*.<sup>20</sup> Browsing through the catalogue is the only way we can get a glimpse into this extinct assemblage.

Tzara’s strategies of self-representation regarding primitivism or “exoticism” are the most substantive manner in which he engaged in the French intellectual milieu both before and after World War Two. He acted like a modern ethnographer of conjunctures, constantly moving among cultures. I have explored his profound adherence to what James Clifford called the early twentieth-century’s “new ethnographic subjectivity” (93). In fact, according to Clifford, “ethnography is an explicit form of cultural critique sharing radical perspectives with dada and surrealism” (12). Collecting African and Oceanic art, an activity that began as a strategic accommodation to the primitivist fashion of his time, turned out to be Tzara’s lifelong interest. As the historical avant-garde took a theoretical interest in art as a form of knowledge and research, Tzara was dedicated to using methods that produced unexpected artistic effects such as his subtle work on the *poèmes nègres*. Tzara did not assume the scientific accuracy of an ethnographer *per se* who focuses on research and arranges complex data. Instead, through his idiosyncratic translation he assembled codes prone to

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<sup>19</sup> “The Congress will meet for two weeks in April-May 1962 while art exhibitions, music and film sessions will continue for two months. The general theme will be a ‘festival of African and Neo-African Art and Music and Influences on the Western World’” (“News and Notes” 46).

<sup>20</sup> The same year in March, Loudmer published the catalogue for the auction of Tzara’s personal library.

critical and creative recombination. He used non-European sources in order to construct linguistically non-hierarchical intersections between Western and non-European words, cultures, and ideologies. In this substitution and transmutation of poetic material, it was the translation of the translation that became the privileged object. Notwithstanding his Dada instrumentalization of the “unbearable lightness of being,” Tzara’s goal was to recreate a syncretic moment of experience, in which all aspects of art were comprised. From today’s perspective, when cultural difference is no longer a stable, fixed Otherness, *l’homme approximatif* was a re-oriented man who assumed a threshold condition between European and non-European cultures. Had it been known earlier, the “primitive” aspect in Tristan Tzara’s artistic work would have brought a significant early contribution to the project of rethinking the grounds on which transnational comparisons might be made between European art forms and those of different cultures and epochs. Self-exiled on his own continent, Tzara found in the exploration of “primitive” art a form of travel and dwelling in a world where Western, Eastern and non-European experiences have now gradually become less distinct.

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