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A Beautiful Grave: Innocent Objects, Museums, and the Modern Self in Driss Chraïbi's *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...* and the Ben M'Sik Community Museum

Abstract

Two-thirds through Driss Chraïbi's 1972 novel *La Civilisation, ma Mère!... 'Mother Comes of Age'* about an un-named Moroccan woman and her path to modernity, the Mother makes a powerful statement that innocent objects from her past deserve a beautiful tomb and preservation from ridicule. In this article, I discuss the idea of innocent objects – innocent in terms of unknowing, and innocent in juridical terms as absolved from guilt in a crime and undeserving of punishment – in relationship to the Mother's tomb and the 2006 Casablanca Ben M'Sik Community Museum (BMCM). Both the novel and the museum house seemingly worthless objects – from combs to old teapots – that nonetheless testify to the creation of the modern self. In the case of the BMCM, a museum whose role is to document oral history in Casablanca's formerly largest *bidonville* 'shantytown,' inhabitants have been stepping forward, uninvited, and bringing objects to the museum. Much like Chraïbi's Mother, these inhabitants are eager to preserve the innocence of their past in the face of modernity – for them, a modern urbanism that is destroying their neighborhood to produce new public housing, and an on-going state discourse that has labeled them as dissidents, criminals and even terrorists.

Keywords

Museums, Driss Chraïbi, *La Civilisation ma Mère*, *Mother Comes of Age*, Ben M'Sik, Morocco, Innocent

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In the period from late colonialism through the early decades of Independence, a rapidly modernizing Moroccan society often condemned innocent objects to a social death.¹ Moroccan critic Edmond Amran El Maleh describes the time as one of “Shame and refusal in the blind adoration of that which would be new, modern. One of my friends confided in me that his mother, an otherwise dignified and intelligent woman, did not want him to come to her house to pick up her weaving loom, lest the neighbors see this thing—a symbol of the past. And it was not merely a case of generation. The youngest Moroccans were haunted and possessed by phantasms of modernity” (13).² Modern identity was often tied to the consumption of objects from Europe: furniture, clothing, cars and luxury goods. While bourgeois society rushed headlong into this superficial modern culture, a deeper engagement with modernity occurred as Moroccan thinkers and cultural critics worked to dismantle the philosophical tenets of the Enlightenment that defined both European modernity and colonialism, and embrace what was most liberatory.

Set during this period, Driss Chraïbi's 1972 novel *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...* (*Mother Comes of Age*) is about an un-named Moroccan woman and her path to modernity. The novel recounts how, through the help of her sons, the Mother transforms from an unschooled child-bride with no sense of herself or the world around her into an educated political agent for societal change and women's rights. Midway through this profound life transformation, the Mother decides to bury her possessions, declaring that innocent objects from her past deserve a beautiful tomb. This is not an act of shame or blind adoration of all that is new in her life and the society around her. Rather, the simple gesture is meant to ensure that her past is preserved from ridicule. The Mother exclaims: “Vous avez une belle sépulture, à la mesure de votre passé fruste et crédule” (142) ‘Here by the Ocean you have a beautiful grave in keeping with your simple and devoted past’ (96). In one of the foundational texts for museum studies, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has theorized the traditional museum as a “form of internment—a tomb with a view” (57). Indeed, when the Mother in Chraïbi's novel buries her past, the tomb she creates functions as a museum intended to preserve innocent objects from the transformations of a rapidly modernizing Morocco.

In this article, I discuss the role of museums and innocent objects—innocent in terms of unknowing, and innocent in juridical terms as absolved from guilt in a crime and undeserving of punishment—in the processes of modernization present in twentieth and twenty-first century Morocco. I compare the tomb-like museum in Chraïbi’s novel to another safe harbor for innocent objects: the Ben M’Sik Community Museum (BMCM) founded in 2006 to document oral history in Casablanca’s historically largest *bidonville* ‘shantytown.’ Since the opening of the BMCM, neighborhood residents have been stepping forward, unsolicited, and bringing seemingly worthless objects from their homes to the museum. From old combs to teapots, both the Mother’s tomb and the BMCM house relics from a non-modern life that testify to the creation of the modern self. Much like Chraïbi’s Mother, Ben M’Sik residents are eager to preserve the innocence of their past in the face of an aggressive modernity—for them, a modern urbanism that is razing their neighborhood to produce new public housing, and an on-going state discourse that has labeled them as dissidents, criminals, and even terrorists.

In Chraïbi’s novel and the Ben M’Sik museum, the modern self is not linked to a private or individual accumulation of objects of the past. Rather, the link between accumulation and modernity is formed through the relinquishing of objects to a protective space within a greater public sphere. Museums, even in their most tomb-like manifestation, are machines of modernity—institutions that define and protect value while history moves at new speeds and with unexpected consequences.³ If modernity, as Timothy Mitchell defines it, is a representational practice that stages the contested line between the modern and the non-modern, museums offer an important view of that process by providing a stage upon which the line is drawn. In the words of Donald Preziosi, museums provide the space for “the material residues and relics of the past and the adjacent empty space that the future is imagined to be, demanding to be filled” (40). No matter how obscure or insignificant, the objects museums preserve out of the hands of the individual testify to the larger processes of modernity and history. The museum in Chraïbi’s novel and the BMCM not only preserve the past, but also create active participants in and critics of modernity. Burying her objects in a subterranean museum clears space for the Mother to see and define her future as a modern woman. Donating their stories and household objects to the BMCM enables Ben M’Sik residents to enter into the modern city and its dominant narratives and not remain excluded at its margins.

Burial and the Preservation of Innocence in Driss Chraïbi's *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...*

La Civilisation, ma Mère!... is a novel that has received relatively little critical attention. Those who are interested in Driss Chraïbi's literary oeuvre focus on other early novels such as *Le Passé simple* (*A Simple Past*, 1954). Where the politics of *Le Passé simple* are relatively easy to decode as a critique of abusive patriarchal structures in Moroccan society, *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...* poses some unexpected problems for its postcolonial readers. Before analyzing the dynamics of accumulation, burial and modernity in the novel, I would like to introduce some of these problems: namely the representation of the central female character and the use of French language and civilization as the route to self-actualization and "liberation."

Set in Morocco from the 1930s through the height of the French Protectorate in the 1950s and concluding after Moroccan Independence in 1956, *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...* is the story of a woman, identified solely by the name Mother, as told by her two sons. It is divided into two parts, the first narrated by an unnamed son and titled "Etre" 'To Be,' and the second narrated by her other son Najib in the form of a letter to his brother and titled "Avoir" 'To Have.' In mostly humorous vignettes, the sons recount how at first the Mother believes that a radio is actually a spirit, then how she steps outside the house and goes to the cinema for the first time, how she learns to read, and how she becomes an educated militant for universal rights and peace who leads a crowd to confront Charles de Gaulle in the upper-class Casablanca neighborhood of Anfa. At the end of the novel, after Moroccan independence, the Mother decides to leave Morocco and travel to France to expand her horizons and find her first son, who is studying engineering there. Najib stows away aboard the ferry to protect her, and in his words, keep her laughing—laughter being a central act of resistance in the novel.

The book is described as a story of liberation of the Moroccan woman: "A warm and tender plea for women's freedom and right to education" (Harter 6) and "The story of a Muslim woman's liberation, through the gentle but determined action of her two sons" (Brée x).⁴ But that the Mother's story, like her body, is protected and passed between the hands of two benevolent men from her immediate family produces a problematic mediation and a glaring absence of the Mother's own voice in the novel. The lovingly humorous descriptions of her naïveté are at times difficult to read. Therefore, two intertwined questions arise: Is the book's treatment of the female protagonist unforgivably condescending and sexist? And is Chraïbi really valorizing French civilization as a way out from the represented stasis of Moroccan society?

In one of the rare critical treatments of this novel, Hasna Lebbady addresses these questions through the lens of language. She argues that Chraïbi's choice to write in French was typical of his generation of writers, an act of rebellion against what was seen as patriarchal and static classical Arabic (147). And, in turning to French, he effectively missed the importance and also the power of oral society, especially female orality and its critical interventions in discourses (146). The novel thus only presents a representational shadow of Moroccan women: "The woman herself does not in any way endow that center with her own oral virtues [...]; she is not allowed to blow the life force into it, so to speak, but can only inhabit it [...] by completely transforming herself and conforming to the norms of the literate medium that imposes itself on her" (146).

I agree with Lebbady's critique regarding orality and the representation of Moroccan women; however, I would also argue that the novel's linguistic choices are not made uncritically and that the norms of literacy are not unquestioned: French language and civilization are never simple escape routes to a valorized Western-defined liberation of the self.⁵ For the Mother and other characters in 1940s Morocco, modernity and the modern are clearly linked to France and French civilization; however, this link is not accepted uncritically. Throughout the course of her French education in the second half of the novel, the Mother starts to question French cultural values and representations of her culture. When reading a French book about Muslim and Moroccan cultures, the Mother laughs at the absurdity of the book's representation of the subject at hand. While Chraïbi doesn't give the Mother's orality any power of resistance, her laughter is a form of critical intervention and refusal to accept the terms of an accepted discourse:

— Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, maman ? qu'est-ce qui te prend ?

— Lis-moi... hohoho... lis-moi... arf... arf... lis-moi ça, pour l'amour... l'amour de Dieu... hohoho... hi...

Je prenais le livre et déclamaï :

— « Les Mahométans se font raser le crâne, à l'exception d'une frange médiane, persuadés qu'ils sont qu'après leur mort Mahomet les empoignera par cette touffe pour les hisser au Paradis. » Tiens ! je n'en savais rien, mais puisque c'est écrit... Il faut que j'aille chez le coiffeur.

— Oh arrête !... arrête !...

[...]

— Page... page... hihohohoarf... continuait ma mère... page 147... hohoho mon Dieu !... (Chraïbi 152-53)

"What is it, Mama. What's the matter?"

"Just read... ho ho ho... read this... arf arf... read this for me... for the love of heaven... ho ho ho... hee hee..."

I picked up the book and read: “Mohammedans have their heads shaved except for a median fringe. This is due to their firm belief that after death the Prophet Mohammed will grasp them by this tuft of hair to lift them up to Paradise.” Well, I never knew anything like that, but since that’s what the book says, I guess I’d better go to the barbershop!

“Oh stop!... Stop!”

[...]

“Page... page... hee hee ho ho hoarf... continued my mother... page 147... ho ho ho... Oh my heavens!” (101-102)

The Mother’s responses to the anthropology books she is studying are recorded as a series of verbal guffaws and ellipses. She never actually articulates what is wrong with the text, but rather confronts it with laughter. On the one hand, the text is too ridiculous to engage. At the same time, it is not until her education is “complete” that she can begin to speak using the French language and its academic disciplines back against themselves. As Helen Tiffin writes, “Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from a cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified ‘local’” (101). While the Mother is actively mapping, reading and exposing the assumptions of dominant discourse, her laughter serves as a form of resistance and subversion.⁶ But she has yet to “speak” in order to dismantle the language of dominance.

The book’s representational fissures open important critical conversations about language, gender, postcolonial resistance, and the creation of the modern self—through what means and by whom. The creation of the modern self, I would argue, is not the fast-paced and often insensitive education that the two sons undertake to “liberate” their mother into a new modern Moroccan subjectivity. Nor is the creation of her modern self necessarily located in the mad rush to buy new objects and modern furniture to fill her house. Rather, I would argue that this creation takes place outside the education and consumption process in a poignant scene of burial and loss instigated and directed entirely by the Mother. This is a short scene in the novel, but one that deserves generous attention.

Two-thirds of the way into the novel, the Mother and Najib head to the beach with a trunk of her possessions. The Mother asks her son to dig a deep grave by the sea in the direction of Mecca (140). Like many seaside cemeteries in Morocco, the burial site is one of reflection and peace: she chooses a space that her oldest son often came to in order to think about his life. When Najib has finished digging, they gently place various objects from her life into the tomb: dresses, combs, a polished steel mirror, a doll, and other relics. Najib describes the process of burial as a strange animation of the objects before their death, an

infusion of blood into lifeless things. What he witnesses, but cannot yet understand, is how the Mother identifies these objects as part of herself, and how she gives value to what he and others might consider worthless about them, and ultimately her, in their new modern world:

Chaque morceau de son passé, elle le tenait à bout de bras et le considérait longuement dans le soleil couchant—et je sais maintenant que les choses inanimées prennent la couleur du sang au moment de leur mort. Les vieilles robes qui l’avaient rendue sans forme pendant des années, le miroir en acier poli où elle avait vainement cherché son image, ses flacons de parfums, le bol de faïence où son rouge à lèvres à base de coquelicot stagnait depuis son adolescence, le fer à cheval qui était censé conjurer le sort, sa poupée de chiffon, les coquillages que mon frère lui avait rapportés de cette même plage, ses babouches, ses mules, son peigne en os, ses bagues—tout, oui, tout est devenu rouge devant ses yeux rougis. Et, avant de me le tendre, elle embrassait chaque objet. (141)

As she held each piece of her past at arms length, she pondered it there in the setting sun. Now I know that inanimate objects take on the color of blood at the moment of their death. Everything, every single thing turned red before her tear-stained eyes, the old dresses that had made her shapeless, the polished steel mirror where she had searched her reflection in vain, her perfume bottles, the earthen bowl where she had kept her lip rouge since her adolescence, the horseshoe that supposedly brought good luck, her rag doll, the shells my brother had brought her from this same beach, her babouches, her house slippers, her bone comb and her rings. But before she gave them to me, she kissed each object one by one. (95)

While the son can only see her possessions as objects that have obfuscated her true identity and blocked her path to self-knowledge, the mother sees them clearly as part of herself. The red color, or the blood, of the objects is linked to her blood-shot crying eyes—in the French her tear-stained eyes are described as red—and we can read how each object has become a physical part of her body. In the introduction to his translation of the novel, Hugh Harter goes so far as to call this a symbolic suicide (6). In burying this part of herself, the Mother makes room in her body as well as in her mind for a new modern identity. As she covers the tomb with earth, she prays over the objects as though they were human, and also, innocent victims:

Paix à vous tous, vieux compagnons d'enfance et de jeunesse, au nom de l'avenir qui commence ! Je vous ai aimés, oh ! oui. Vous avez été mes confidents, nous avons ri et pleuré ensemble. Mais, vous comprenez ? il est préférable que je vous enterre avant que vous ne deveniez des témoins gênants pour notre siècle. Si je vous préservais de la civilisation, vous seriez comme des vieillards dans un asile de vieillards. Vous ne voudriez pas cela, dites ? Vous ne voudriez pas qu'un jour on vous jette dans une poubelle ou dans une décharge publique—ou encore qu'on vous relègue dans une arrière-boutique d'antiquaire ? Les générations futures vous montreraient du doigt, en riant : « Haha !... regardez-moi cette défroque ?... Haha !... ». (Chraïbi 141-42)

Peace be with you, dear companions of my childhood and youth, in the name of the future which is about to begin. I have loved you, indeed I have. You have been my devoted friends. We have laughed and cried together. Now you must understand that it is better for me to bury you than for you to become an embarrassing symbol of our century. If I were to shield you from civilization, you would be like the old people in an old people's home. You wouldn't want that, now would you? You wouldn't want to be thrown into a garbage can or onto a dump some day, or even worse be stuck in some dusty corner of an antique shop, would you? Future generations would point a finger at you and laugh: "Ha ha ha! Just look at that old clothing." (95-96)

The objects she buries are innocent: they have done nothing wrong, and remain pure and harmless in her mind. They should not be treated with ridicule, nor should they become mere refuse, useless things on the trash heap of history. She argues that one day in the future, when archeologists find them, these objects will be recognized and given the respect they are due as relics of a life before modernity. But they cannot be understood at the time of their burial, neither by individuals nor by society as a whole. There is no space for them in that world.

The Mother accepts the markers of a Moroccan bourgeois modernity: forks, European dresses, restaurant dinners and French furniture. In fact when she returns home after the burial, she sells everything else in the house. As the son explains, "Meubles, tapis, tentures, coffres, vaisselle—même mon lit. J'y étais né pourtant" (143) 'Out went the furniture, rugs, wall-hangings, coffers and dishes. Even my bed, the one in which I was born' (96). However, she does not accept these markers and modern products uncritically. With the superficial trappings of French modern culture in place, she continues her deeper exploration of modernity through its ideas—through books, conversations and debates.

As mentioned above, the novel concludes with the Mother leaving for France to widen her horizons and to distance herself from her society. It can also be understood that she is leaving to understand and further question the very category of the modern, and perhaps unmoor it from its French definition. The objects she has buried should not be judged until the dominant “civilization” that has the power to judge is scrutinized for *its* assumptions, suppositions and cultural values. In a sense, it is only in *that* postcolonial moment, when both the Moroccan postcolonial bourgeoisie as well as French colonialism and its civilizing mission, have finally been questioned, held to light, and put into perspective, that the time would be right for the objects she buried to be reconsidered and revalued by society and the world at large. The Mother’s collection ought only be removed from its protective tomb once the objects are safe from quick judgment and prejudice.

Orhan Pamuk discusses the idea of saving innocent objects from the prejudices of individuals and society in his work on the Museum of Innocence.⁷ In the catalogue to his museum, entitled *Innocent Objects*, Pamuk writes about the “massacre” of Ottoman and Greek objects (as well as entire neighborhoods and communities) during modernization in 1950s Istanbul:

As the city grew wealthier and more modern between 1950 and 1980, the things left behind from its Ottoman past and its non-Muslim inhabitants—printed matter, almost unlimited quantities of photographic equipment, and vast amounts of papers, furniture, books, old money, and other assorted knickknacks that filled the used bookshops, antique shops, and flea markets across the city—were incinerated, pulped, or otherwise destroyed. The only survivors of this massacre were those lucky objects that were useful or pretty enough to find a place in the daily lives of Istanbul’s fluid, constantly evolving population. (43-44)

Pamuk’s use of the term “massacre” conjures up the image of blood-infused objects that the Mother buries to protect from a rapidly changing Moroccan society and a generation of Moroccans obsessed by the new. Like Pamuk, the collector, she is careful that their blood not be spilled due to modern tastes.

Pamuk explains that collectors in 1950s Istanbul were considered by the society around them as hoarders, as somehow ill for clinging to objects of seemingly little value or historical significance. Their purpose was to protect these innocent objects from destruction in the hopes that one day their value would be recognized. As Pamuk describes, despite their ridiculed status, these “sick” collectors were “honestly convinced of the importance of their contribution to the very society that mocked them. One day Turkey too would be wealthy, and museums, libraries, and archives would be set up, just like in the West. And when

that happened, everyone would realize the value of objects, and the pitied hoarders would become figures of admiration” (49-50). And so, as Pamuk puts it: “Despite all their idealistic talk about history and memory, the first collectors did not set out to preserve the traces of a past life, but to fashion for themselves a new identity—and a new future to go with it” (46).

Pamuk’s collectors hope to transform their collections, and in turn themselves, from objects of pity to admiration, and in the process become active participants in the definition of their society’s future. The fashioning of this new identity is a dynamic shared by the Mother who wishes ardently that her past not be entirely lost to the future. Instead, through her studies and activism, she hopes to create a new future that will recognize the value of her past and perhaps even admire her for it. The Mother’s objects are, in her words, simple and modest. Though her family belongs to a nascent bourgeoisie, the objects she buries come from a poorer background, accompanying her from her rural childhood into the urban household of her husband. In the second part of this article I focus on another community that has made this transition from rural to urban, and how certain members are working to preserve the innocence and value of modest objects and people in their midst.

From Fiction to Reality: Testifying to Innocence in the Ben M’Sik Community Museum

Media depictions of Casablanca tend to present the city as a site of corruption, greed and poverty—modernity run amok.⁸ When these texts portray the urban poor or the city’s shantytowns, their daily struggles are often conveyed through a lens of violence. In 2003, and again twice in 2007, Casablanca was shaken by suicide bombings. Even though on each occasion, these bombings were quickly identified by the State as terrorist acts fueled by the North African branch of Al-Qaeda, attention in the Moroccan and global press turned to the poorest neighborhoods of the city as spaces that produced the terrorists. On all three occasions, both the people and the spaces in which they lived were seen as somehow guilty. The Ben M’Sik Community Museum seeks to counter these representations of guilt—guilt of terrorism and crime, and guilt of poverty in a modern city. Through its collection of oral interviews, and donated yet unsolicited objects, the museum stages the innocence and value of the neighborhood and its inhabitants.

In 2006, the BMCM quietly opened its doors near the oldest and formerly largest shantytown in Morocco, Kariane Ben M’Sik. The shantytown of Ben M’Sik was founded in the 1920s French Protectorate when rural migrants arrived in Casablanca for work. Now with over one million inhabitants, Ben M’Sik is widely seen as a zone of migration, dissidence, and crime. As Reda Benkirane

describes it, “official urban planning has long considered this area a ‘ville en négatif’” ‘a negative space’ (Benkirane). The neighborhood is marginalized, and often simply unrecognized, by dominant groups in the city.

Since the 1970s, the Moroccan State has worked to manage Ben M’Sik with the aid of various international agencies. A USAID report from consultant visits to the neighborhood in 1978 and 1979 described it as at high risk for uncontrolled fire and with serious sanitation problems, but razing the space was not recommended as it would result in “serious social risks and will probably have little effect on unemployment, the one problem at the root of all the others” (Waltz 17). In 1979, under the auspices of the World Bank, an urban development project to renovate the existing structures of the shantytown was started. However, after the 1981 Casablanca riots, in which the neighborhood played a significant role, the restructuralization project was halted by the State and a new project that would resettle and raze the shantytown was adopted in 1985. The link between the political dissidence of the neighborhood and its material existence was clearly drawn by the State. The neighborhood became one that the State would rather erase and forget.⁹

In 2009, one billion of the world’s people lived in shantytowns (Tuhus-Dubrow), and as architect Teddy Cruz has stated, “We should not dismiss them because they look ugly, they look messy. They have sophisticated, participatory practices, a light way of occupying the land. Because people are trying to survive, creativity flourishes” (qtd in Tuhus-Dubrow). It is this focus on creativity and participatory practices that shapes museological practice at the BMCM, where curators, students, and neighborhood residents are working together to catalogue life and memory, and to actively imagine the future.¹⁰ The museum seeks to document the richness and diversity of a neighborhood whose memory faced state erasure, and to exonerate the identity of its inhabitants from life sentences for unproven crimes.

In terms of building a collection, oral interviews are the heart of the museum. The stories and memories of the people who live in Ben M’Sik are most valued by the institution, and the museum is interested in showing how the shantytown has produced citizens, not criminals and terrorists.¹¹ In this sense, the interviews it has collected testify to the innocence of its inhabitants. With twenty-four questions, the student workers gathered information that falls into several categories: 1) the history and lived experience of the material space, 2) descriptions and comparisons of the neighborhood that seek to understand how the community is perceived and experienced by its inhabitants, 3) material and immaterial patrimony in the community and how that patrimony is site-specific and/or national, 4) linguistic identity and practices, 5) religious identity and practices, and 6) valorization, praise, and criticism of the neighborhood. With few exceptions, respondents tended to stress their commitment to the neighborhood

despite its problems and described it as a space of shared culture and heritage. The museum's first exhibit, drawn from interviews, sought to show that Ben M'Sik had produced famous politicians, doctors and artists, and focused on people who, through hard work and despite the absence of any meritocracy, all succeeded in creating valuable, or valued, public lives. Ultimately, the exhibit testified to an aspirational model of Moroccan modernity at a time when the promises of modernity (education, human rights, freedom of religion and the press) continued to remain often glaringly absent from the lives of the urban poor.

While the museum-initiated collection of oral histories is the heart of the institution, the museum has also become a safe haven for what I interpret as innocent objects in the face of modernity. Community residents have been stepping forward, unsolicited, and offering objects from their homes that testify to neighborhood history. While rarely of high quality, the bowls, inkwells, and teapots are valuable samples of the material culture and history of a community of rural migrants. When I interviewed the museum director, Samir El Azhar, in 2011, he showed me one of these objects: a small bowl with some wool in it. He explained that the wool would be burned in order to make ink—an old rural method. The objects are displayed on wooden shelves with simple identification labels. Mr. El Azhar seemed proud and moved that community members would see the museum as a safe space for their stories and their past. He showed no disdain for the quality of the objects, no sense that they were not worthy of a museum setting. Instead, he recognized them as carriers of history, and innocent bystanders in the societal changes lived by their owners.

In Chraïbi's novel, the Mother collects and buries her innocent objects in order to save them from the ridicule that they would face in a rapidly modernizing 1950s Morocco. Why are Ben M'Sik inhabitants collecting and saving their objects? I argue that, as in Chraïbi's novel, these objects are caught up in the modernization of their owners. The museum, like the tomb, is a protective space where the non-modern can be placed while room is cleared for the future. Where the Mother in Chraïbi's novel sought to fashion a modern identity while placing her non-modern past out of harm's way, the inhabitants of Ben M'Sik are also eager to preserve their past from scorn while adapting to the exigencies of being modern in the city. Additionally, by placing these objects out of the hands of the individual into a museum, an institution that assigns values, the objects can testify to a certain type of worth that is not afforded to their owners, people living within modest subsistence means and often targeted as dissidents or criminals despite their innocence. While the average Casablancon may not appreciate these citizens or acknowledge the value of their lives, histories, and shared practices, the museum can and does.

Global Museumification and Political Engagement

To conclude, I would like to place the Mother's museum-tomb and the Ben M'Sik Community Museum into the larger framework of increased museumification that has been associated with modernity and our contemporary time. In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Pamphlets and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen argues that since the 1970s, Europe and the United States have seen the birth of a "voracious museal culture" industry (1)—one that combines historical narratives, trauma and memory entertainment to sell the past so that we do not have to think about the future. He argues that the museum, now no longer just a physical institution but also a way of life, "offers traditional forms of cultural identity to a destabilized modern subject" (23). However, according to Huyssen, this stability is but a conservative ruse that "fails to recognize that any secure sense of the past is itself being destabilized by our musealizing culture industry and by the media that function as leading players in the morality play of memory" (24). According to Huyssen, we are obsessed with memory and with our fear of the impermanence of memory, and this leads to the de-politicization of the public sphere. Simply put: "Perhaps it is time to remember the future rather than simply worry about the future of memory" (29).

In *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Paul Williams also traces the global obsession and industry boom in museum building around the world. At the end of his study of museums devoted to remembering genocide, terrorist acts, state-suppression and civil war around the globe, he asks the important question: "What is it today that makes us want to create, support, and live with permanent, concrete markers of violence?" (163). Like Huyssen, Williams is concerned that the personalization of grief and mourning that posits individual healing over substantive action in many memorial museums may too easily silence productive social and political thought about the future (165).

In a sense, both the Mother's tomb and the Ben M'Sik museum participate in the anxiety surrounding the future of memory that Huyssen and Williams describe. How can archives of the past be formed to record and value innocent objects in an unstable time? Will their stories be lost in the future? Both museums are also concerned with violence—the violence inherent in the Mother's transformation into a "modern subject," and the twin violence of state-sponsored urbanization and state neglect in the lives of the Ben M'Sik inhabitants, as well as the violence of terrorism that has been associated with their neighborhood. But both the Mother's museum and the Ben M'Sik Community Museum do something more than memorialize for the sake of (false) stability.

In the case of the Mother, the safeguarding of her past is the first step in her political future. Rather than persistently dwelling on the past and the loss of supposedly stable traditional structures, with her innocent objects appropriately

preserved, she is free to fully engage with both her contemporary environment and also its future. The novel shows her becoming an activist for women, traveling around Morocco listening to their problems and talking about the future that they desire and need. As Najib describes it: “Ma mère avait institué avec ses amies les ‘déjeuners-débats hebdomadaires par roulement’” (Chraïbi 161) ‘Mama and her women friends had inaugurated a series of meetings that she dubbed “weekly luncheon-debates on wheels”’ (108). During these meetings, the Mother:

mobilise les femmes en groupes d’études de trois à quatre personnes chacun, va de l’un à l’autre, surveillant, animant, sans cesse en mouvement et en fièvre. [...] Ce qu’elle a appris au prix de sa volonté, elle le leur donne plutôt qu’elle ne le leur communique, séance après séance, aux quatre coins du pays. (164-65)

cuts the meal short and mobilizes the women into study groups of three or four, going from one to the other, overseeing, urging them on, constantly moving with feverish excitement. [...] What she learned by her own volition she donates rather than communicates to them, session after session, in the four corners of the land. (111)

With her past secure, she becomes an active participant in her own future and in the formation of citizenry in a newly independent Morocco.

In the case of the BMCM, the personalization of the neighborhood through the collection of individual voices and objects does not replace the desire for substantive political action either. In many respects, it is the hope of the museum to serve as a community center that aids the community in defining its needs and wants in the twenty-first century. To this end, BMCM staff have asked what programs neighborhood inhabitants would like most to be implemented, and in response, university student workers at the museum recently began a long-term tutoring program for local primary school children in computer literacy, English, and math. In forsaking neoliberal desires for the easily consumable, the monumental and symbolic, the Ben M’Sik museum works to create what theorist Tony Bennett has dubbed a “conversable civic space” of engagement and reciprocal practices of participation (“Pedagogic Objects” 370-71). Describing the change in the inhabitants and students due to the museum in their midst, Abdelmajid Kaddouri writes, “their connection with the daily and inertia have unconsciously changed” (8).

In both *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...* and the Ben M’Sik Community Museum, objects and people are extricated from narratives that define them as worthless. The museums that are formed present safe spaces from hostile

dominant cultures, and ultimately, by protecting the past, they help enable those who are associated with them to become actors in the process of modernity and agents of change.

Notes

1. Morocco was a French Protectorate from 1912 to 1956.
2. Unless noted, all translations are mine.
3. Much has been written about museums and their connection to modernity. For further reading see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*. In the Moroccan context, see my book *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Post-Colonial Morocco*.
4. The text on the French book jacket adds the following caveat: “Elle sait conduire, s’habille à l’européenne, réussit tous ses examens. Elle est toujours semblable: simple et pure, drôle, et toujours tendre” ‘She can drive, dresses like a European woman, passes all her exams. She remains the same: simple and pure, funny and always tender.’ In addition to the general sexism implied in this sentence—simple and pure, the woman may be “free,” but she remains uncomplicated—this also exhibits essentialist and Orientalist attitudes towards Muslim women too often present in French book marketing.
5. In fact, if we read this novel in the context of Chraïbi’s earlier novel, *Les Boucs* (*Butts*) about the dehumanizing experience of immigration to France, then France can never function simply as a promised land of self-fulfillment.
6. There are numerous studies that explore the potential of laughter as resistance and subversion, from the work of Bakhtin on the carnivalesque to the work of scholars on African-American and Chicano literature. Whether laughter is effective political resistance is not the focus of this essay.
7. In 2008, Pamuk published a lengthy novel entitled *The Museum of Innocence* that traces the obsessive love affair between the protagonist, Kemal, and Füsün, a distant cousin. The novel follows Kemal as he collects objects that remind him of Füsün in order to keep her memory alive in him. Along the way, Pamuk paints a rich portrait of the tumultuous 1970s in Istanbul. However, the novel is not the only part of this project. In 2012, Pamuk opened a real museum in the Çukurcuma neighborhood of Istanbul that presents the fictional love affair and the objects it

produced and collected. While the novel's love affair is its central preoccupation, the museum is noteworthy in its collection of small and incidental objects from the city's past, pointing to Pamuk's own lengthy love affair with the city of his birth. In the interest of space, in this essay I will only discuss the physical museum that Pamuk created in Istanbul and not the novel. For a fine essay that discusses the novel, see Yin Xing, "The Novel as Museum: Curating Memory in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*."

8. See my article, "Nostalgia and the New Cosmopolitan: Literary and Artistic Interventions in the City of Casablanca" and Valérie K. Orlando's *Francophone Voices of the "New" Morocco in Film and Print: (Re)Presenting a Society in Transition*.

9. In one interview, a Ben M'Sik inhabitant named Mr. Daif told his story from the 1981 riots and how he was made to disappear and imprisoned without trial for over ten years (Thorne).

10. See my article "Participation as Patrimony: The Ben M'Sik Community Museum and the Importance of the Small Museum in Morocco."

11. An initial set of interviews and interview questions can be found at <https://commons.kennesaw.edu/mcca/content/results-findings>.

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