

# FIGURATIONS OF ALTERITY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE ARCHIVE

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*Abstract:* In this work I ponder about the archive based on three images from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the drawing of a monster from the Teratology collection of the Museo Nacional de México preserved today in the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia; the photography of animals that are part of what was the collection of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo and that today protects the Fototeca Nacional; and the copy of a drawing of a hysterical woman that is part of the iconography of the French hospital de la Salpêtrière and that was reproduced in Mexico in a scientific journal. With the perspective offered by the “archival turn”, these individual images speak about the procedures of classification, hierarchy and exclusion that organized the knowledge system. They also show three ways of articulating madness, the bestial and the primitive, three figures of the Other from the West, three paths that lead to the “Indian”, that descendant of the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the American continent on whose erasure was erected the scientific normalizing discourse and the nation-state.

*Keywords:* archive, monsters, women, animals, primitive.

*And, in the same way, every time our  
gaze alights on an image, we should reflect  
on the conditions that prevented it from be-  
ing destroyed, from disappearing.*  
(Didi-Huberman 2006: 22)

Isolated from the outside, with no chance to get out into the city streets, and thus obliged to reminisce, all the archives that I have consulted in recent years suddenly appear before me<sup>1</sup>. I call them “archives” in order to name something I have been constructing over time out of documents, objects, mixed up and disjointed bits and pieces that I encountered at one point or another. These are fragments, loose pieces held at different institutions (the Biblioteca del Museo Nacional de

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Antropología, the Archivo del Hospital Siglo XXI, the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad, the Museo de Historia Natural, the Archivo General de la Nación) that nevertheless assume a degree of coherence to the extent that I arrange them in a chronology: first there was the collection of monsters exhibited at the Museo Nacional de México at the end of the nineteenth century; then a series of dossiers on inmates at La Castañeda, a mental institution, during that same time period; and finally, the animal collection at the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo in the first half of the twentieth century. At the least, such a chronology makes it clear that those fragments are all linked to scientific discourse: medicine, psychiatry and natural history. But chronology aside, what they share – and what makes it possible to construct an “archive” out of them – is paradoxically the dearth of evidence, the paucity of documentation that remains of large collections that once constituted an enormous trove<sup>2</sup>.

At least that is the sensation that the archive produced when I came across it, as if the encounter had revealed to me a naked, painful question, as if, in this case, the very absence of any archive was exacerbated. I kept asking myself the same question: what had happened to the immense collections of stones, plants, animals and bones that had spent more than fifty years in the galleries of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo? Where did it all end up (Gorbach 2008)? Where is the two-headed goat, the portrait of Salmerón the giant, and the rest of the teratological specimens that the Museo Nacional had exhibited at the end of the nineteenth century (Gorbach 2021)? Where were the voices of the hysterical women in the asylum (Gorbach 2011)? These questions were accompanied by others, related to writing history: what was there to say about specimen-objects that no one had wanted to keep, voices that no one had heard, bodies that do not speak because they never had a chance to appropriate language?

That double absence did not, however, stir in me an interest to continue compiling archival materials (photographs, medical studies and clinical files, desiccated specimens, specimens preserved in formaldehyde), in order then to imagine methodologies that would offer ways of accessing the other,



such as a certain historiography has generated in recent decades. I preferred to defer such a search, to pause and catch my breath, as it were, and to trace the contour around that which had disappeared, that which once existed and no longer does. I was particularly intrigued by a possibility opened in Ashis Nandy's book *Regimes of Narcissism, Regimes of Despair*, namely, to regard the past from the standpoint of what Nandy calls the sense of loss, that component of modernity that social scientists cannot understand (Nandy 2013: 173). I accepted the challenge posed to us as historians, above all to those of us who have done history with an idea of the archive understood in the manner of nineteenth-century European historiography, as an institution entrusted with conserving cultural records, like the deposit of national identity, since in that conception there is no place for loss. I wanted to experiment and in that sense take a tack that would allow me to make the archive no longer the tool of the trade that offers the historian "sources" that are supposed to preserve the memory of the past, but rather an object of knowledge in itself. To adapt a phrase from Ann Stoler, I sought a way to move from the archive-as-source to the archive-as-subject (Stoler 2002: 93).

That was the challenge: to analyze documents, images and objects in terms of an expanded notion of archive, infiltrating, to the best of my ability, what has, since the 1980s, come to be known as the "archival turn", a reflection that tied the Archive to the history of power and shook the foundations not only of history but also of social anthropology, literary criticism, feminism, and cultural studies (Rufer 2020; Tello 2018). As a result of that turn, the archive appeared as the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements (Foucault 1972), as the theoretical agency that escapes the "source" (Stoler 2002) or as the stage on which history is shaped and from which it produces meaning (Khanna 2003).

Thanks to this change of viewpoint, I was able to see how the heterogeneous materials that make up "my" archive were revealing the procedures of classification, hierarchization and exclusion that organized the system of knowledge and subjects' perceptual schemata at the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, monsters, women and animals laid out the

puzzle that shaped by the modern mode of being of knowledge; as constitutive pieces, they shaped the interpretive screen that, since at least the nineteenth century, structures our habits of thought (Taussig 1995: 74).

Similarly, using that expanded notion of archive I began to see how those materials figured the Other; how they alluded obliquely to the “Indian”, that descendent of the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Americas upon whose erasure the normalizing discourse of science and the nation-state was erected. From that perspective, the monsters, animals and women constituted an archive not only because they were all characterized by a dearth of evidence but also because each of those bodies/concepts into which scientific discourse intervened silently put the Indian at the center of the system of knowledge. The “primitive assumption”, Fabian would say, “root metaphor of knowledge” (Fabian 1983: 160); race, according to Tello, “the classificatory root of the historical cultural archive of the West” (Tello 2018: 16).

Even as the archival turn enabled me to start to see other things, it also raised several questions, which I must now formulate explicitly if I aim to write a history that would reflect on the archive at the same time. First, there is a question about the relationship between “Archive” and “archive”: how to build bridges between the theoretical agency and the objects of the archive? If we agree with Koselleck that the conditions of production of the Archive are not in the archive itself (Koselleck 1989: 320), how, then, do we keep the interpretive frame from flattening the materials’ heterogeneity? Conversely, how do we recuperate the idea of historical configuration, of totality, without losing sight of an archive’s particularity? Secondly, there is another question related to loss and the writing of history: how are we to include the void left by a lack of evidence? How do we narrate histories of what has been forgotten, abandoned, disappeared? How do we make room for that sensation, more tactile than logical, engendered by an archive that has gaps in it, or has disappeared, or been lost? In sum, how do we write history about the ground of something that has been lost or disappeared, something that has been “ruined”<sup>3</sup> by the forces of nature and history?



These are enormous questions and I would not be able to answer them directly, so I had to turn to the image, a register different from that of the text – one that is marginal, considering the secondary place it has occupied in historiography; surprising, because it constantly calls out to the imagination and tends to appear right when words do not suffice; and also pleasurable, since it sometimes answers to the mere pleasure of looking. But above all, since the image appeals to a lack of fit between word and gaze and emerges in the gap that opens up between representation and that to which it refers, it offers the gaze the possibility of wandering among divergent spaces and connecting times that are irreducible to chronology.

I thus present three images from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries: disconnected images on a spectrum tied to practices and scientific discourses, partial samples of nineteenth-century science's classificatory project, different ways of articulating madness, animality and primitiveness. The first is a drawing of a monster from the teratological collection of the Museo Nacional printed in a catalog, the only remaining copy of which is now held at the library of the Museo Nacional de Antropología. The second is a photograph of a set of animals that are part of the collection of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo, and which is now held at the Fototeca Nacional. And the third is a copy of a drawing of a hysterical woman that is part of the iconography of the French hospital Salpêtrière, reproduced by Dr. Enrique Aragón in a 1915 study.

I chose these images because there is something that does not quite fit in each of them, as if a singular, unique, unrepeatable and therefore indefinable point (Barthes 1977) unleashed ambiguities, discursive inconsistencies, contradictions in the way of ordering the system of knowledge. These images reveal something that keeps one from using them to construct a homogeneous explanation. That is why I would not know what to call them: whether “postcolonial images” in that they are products of modern knowledge and simultaneously show its impossibility (see Pratt 2018), or “baroque images” in Bolívar Echeverría's sense of the term, in that they express a discordant world that moves back and forth, “eaten away by its



own inconsistency, that contradicts itself and gets worn down to the point of being completely spent” (Echeverría 1998: 14). With these baroque images I thus attempt to outline the world of postcolonialism in nineteenth-century Mexico.

I ended up adding a fourth image that I nevertheless refrain from reproducing. It is a family photograph that I came across by way of the image. I could not avoid it: I fell into the provocation of the image and ended up confusing archive with memory, or what Diana Taylor calls the archive and the repertoire, the former understood as printed and material culture – documents, objects, images – and the latter as the forms in which we witness and participate in the production of knowledge and the transmission of memory (Taylor 2003). I got caught up in the provocation, and then times got mixed together and distances distorted; a baroque provocation, Martin Jay would say, in which the body “returns to dethrone the disinherited gaze of the disincarnated Cartesian spectator” (Jay 1993: 123). What I mean to say is that the image is guilty of entangling my own history and the image of the West’s Other, for it turned out that at a given moment the distance that must supposedly separate the past from the present was diluted in an interpersonal time – “coeval”, Fabian would say – that meets “the Other on the same ground, in the same Time” (Fabian 1983: 165).

Figure 1 shows one of the 55 drawings that make up the *Catálogo de anomalías coleccionadas en el Museo Nacional*, a small book published in 1896 and meant to accompany visitors on their way through the exhibition (Ramírez 1896). The drawings were done by the Swedish artist J. Enberg, whom the Director of the establishment had invited to “illustrate” the specimens in the teratological gallery of the Museo Nacional<sup>4</sup>. I chose this drawing in particular somewhat arbitrarily, captivated by a visual image of something unfamiliar that nevertheless, or precisely for this reason, impels us to gaze at it. Or I could say, rather, that the drawing chose me when it suddenly leapt out at me from the rest and lodged itself in my memory. When I saw it, it made an impression on me, so much so that for a moment I could not tell what I was looking at, whether it was a specimen in a jar of alcohol or a living being





Fig. 1. One (by J. Enberg) of the 55 drawings that make up the “*Catálogo de anomalías coleccionadas en el Museo Nacional*”.

being who looked at the world with its single eye, whether it was a being that belonged to mythology or merely the semblance thereof. Looking at the image again, I believe it was the lone eye that provoked my desire to scrutinize it. But that impression lasted only a second and, in a kind of vivisection, my eyes immediately proceeded to separate out the human from the inhuman traits, the living from the dead, the real from the artificial, while my memory recalled images of any number of monsters: Aristotelian monsters that break with the natural course of things; medieval monsters that confusedly mix kingdoms and species; as well as the object-monsters of nineteenth-century science. Next, in a preliminary attempt to con-

textualize the drawing, I framed it in relation to the rest of the illustrations; then framed those illustrations in relation to the Catalogue, and the Catalogue in relation to the exhibition. It then seemed to me that those three registers – image, text, object – established amongst themselves contradictory and sometimes incoherent relations, as if by superimposing themselves on each other they revealed ambiguities that had at first glance gone unnoticed. First, there seemed to be an inconsistency in the relationship between those drawings and the objects exhibited at the Museo. I did not understand why these Mexican naturalists had decided to invite a foreign artist to draw biological monsters and effectively discarded another set of drawings that had been “made from the originals by the meticulous draftsman Mr. D.J. Figueroa” (Ramírez 1896: ii), especially given that scientists were generally looking for ways to subordinate art to the needs of science during that time period (see Zarzoso, Morente 2020). Why, then, had the naturalists decided to publish Enberg’s drawings rather than the ones by Figueroa, who had had the specimens at his disposal? What was the point of that process of double translation that took the specimens first to the draftsman’s lines and thence to the artist’s creations? I also wondered about why they included images in a catalog that was meant to serve as a companion for visitors to the exhibition. Why include the image if the visitor was able to look directly at the object? This choice appears even odder in light of the fact that the catalog of these anomalies is practically the only such catalog produced by the Museo Nacional to have images<sup>5</sup>.

Looking through the Catalog raised other questions about the relationship between image and text. Everything seemed to suggest that the function of the text was to establish an explanatory frame to which the drawings would be subordinated, but at some point, the latter were able to free themselves from their illustrative function. For example, if we follow the sequential order of the catalog and open it to the first page, we read an introduction by the director of the museum, followed by “Nociones de teratología”, a text in which Dr. Román Ramírez<sup>6</sup> explains what teratology is, what causes a monster to be born, and the classification most widely accept-





ed by science. In this case the drawings do no more than illustrate the order of discourse and the Cyclops is nothing more than “figure 16”: “Cyclocephaliano cyclocéphalo (GSH) – Cyclops megalostomus arrhynchus (Gurlt). A young calf with a single eye and a cutaneous sac on the forehead” (Ramírez 1896: 15). Nevertheless, when the Catalog is opened to any of the pages with an image, the gaze detaches itself from the explanation and starts to wander, following not the order of the classification but rather the movement of a procession of singular forms, each of which leads to a specific interpretation.

There is a temporal ambiguity here. As long as the images are subordinated to the text, they underscore the monster’s belonging to the project of nineteenth-century science, but when the Cyclops captivates all of our attention and the singular forms follow, the concept of the monster gets tossed back toward its etymological origin – *monstrum*, from the Latin “to show” – at which point the image no longer serves to emphasize the postulates of scientific discourse, no longer provides proof that, its singularity aside, the monster is a regular object, on a continuum with normal human beings. Separated from the text, it actualizes the rule that the only way to know a monster is by showing it. It is as if the Catalog interlaced two times, the time of science and the time of tradition, the time that affirms the monster’s belonging to the general laws of nature and the time that carries in tow all the monsters that have accompanied the West.

Still more questions arise as the images of the Catalog point toward the exhibition space. One of them is unavoidable: what was a collection of biological monsters doing at the Museo Nacional, a space dedicated to praising the Nation through collections of natural history, archaeology and national history? One hasty answer might be that the teratology gallery responded to the interests of both physicians and natural historians, some of whom sought to demonstrate the regularity of monstrosity while others wanted to answer the question that was by then circulating everywhere: what is the origin of the Mexican race? In its way, the exhibition put two concerns on display: on the one hand, to arrange the monstrous specimens in keeping with the principles of classification and thus

show their regularity; and on the other, to place those specimens within a universal developmental sequence. That is, a taxonomic and evolutionary table established the norm that habilitated the monsters in order to stand up to other objects of the same kind, while at the same time presenting the process by which species transform and new races arise in nature<sup>7</sup>.

And if we turn from that taxonomic-evolutionary grid to Enberg's drawings I would say that the latter are like their effect, inconsistent and ambiguous. Thus, when they are subjected to the directives of the text they pick national particularity back up and make explicit the question that no physician-naturalist dared to ask: are Indians monstrous? But when they are liberated from it, they aestheticize the monsters depicted by way of their singularity, inserting them within the tradition of "universal" history and thereby offering a way out of the association that the Museo Nacional was constructing between Indians and monsters. It is as if the drawings in the Catalog had succeeded in disclosing the ambiguous plot of a nation that interprets the other in terms of radical alterity and thereby constructs its own origin. If they point toward the specimens of the Museo Nacional it is in order to remind us that the monster constitutes the "cyst that destroys the nation's most fertile promises from within" (Mbembe 2019: 53)<sup>8</sup>, that the Cyclops who appears in the image that chose me recalls Columbus's diary, where the Admiral avers the existence of Cyclops in the New World, those "men with a single eye or people who had an eye in their foreheads" (Rojas 1992: 86).

Figure 2 is a photograph of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo, the destination for the natural history collections that had erstwhile been stored at the Museo Nacional de México. In 1909 thousands of stones, plants, animals, bones and monsters left in a sort of exile from the Museo Nacional, which thereafter showed exclusively collections of archaeology, ethnography and national history. More precisely, what we see in this photograph is a portion of the collections that were on display at the Museo del Chopo until 1975, at which point the building was turned into a cultural center and the specimens effectively disappeared (Gorbach 2021).





Fig. 2. *Photograph of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo.*

I chose this photograph in part because it condenses the totality of the contents of the Museo del Chopo and in part because it illustrates what natural history used to be in Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. But above all I chose it because there is something in it that confuses me, as if it combined two opposed readings, two way of conceiving nature that do not fully mesh with each other. In one reading, the image displays the three kingdoms of nature: a glass display case in one of the bottom corners holds the minerals; the columns feature pictures of plants; and in the center, on tables, shelves, and chests of drawers of varying sizes, are animals – both stuffed and in photographs. In the other, careful observation reveals an evolutionary sequence that crosses the image from one end to the other, starting from the minerals in one corner and running to the opposite side, where Man appears, divested of clothing and skin, nameless: a skeleton, two skulls, and an image of the muscular system.

It is thus that the photograph presents at the same time the taxonomic order of natural history and biology's inclination to tell the history of things from beginning to end through

an uninterrupted sequence of development that goes from the simplest to the most complex forms, from minerals to plants, animals, and Man. But what confuses me is how difficult it is to make out where the emphasis is placed, whether on taxonomy or evolution, on the picture or on the process. The ambiguity is such that at one point the photograph appears as the scene of an argument, the terrain on which naturalism and evolutionism oppose each other as two ways of conceiving nature and also two ways of understanding temporality. On one side is a *mise-en-scène* of the three natural kingdoms according to Linnean classification, thus recalling the *Primer Gabinete de Historia Natural de la Nueva España* with its collections that had been gathered on voyages and expeditions<sup>9</sup>. On the other is a progressive line that runs across the image, alluding to the modern European museums of the era. It is as if the image were caught in a tug-of-war between two times that are also two ways of being of knowledge, one that shows what the naturalists expected of nature – a fragmented nature, disarticulated by means of classification, hunted down and possessed, fastened in a picture, in a photograph, congealed in time, “museified”; and another that exhibits those same naturalists’ aspiration at a moment when evolution was becoming the dominant paradigm in biology and turning into the organizing principle of European museums (Bennett 2005).

But a moment later it is obvious who comes out the winner, especially when the desiccated head of the stag in the center of the photograph grabs our attention. The large stag’s head on the wall, surrounded by specimens of stuffed animals, photographs and drawings of large mammals from different parts of the world, makes Man seem small, cornered, diminished, as if the pieces that make up his anatomy had been mounted at the last minute by someone who suddenly realized that in a twentieth-century natural history museum Man must occupy the apex of evolution. Instead, what dominates the image are natural history’s two preferred means of capturing nature: taxidermy and photography, that is, nature as captured by the hunter-taxidermist and by the photographer (Haraway 1992: 309).



I even came to think that the original intention of the physicians and naturalists who participated in the design of the Museo del Chopo was to put the theory of evolution itself on display, but that they came up short. Surely, they aspired to have a museum as modern as the ones in Europe; hence their reports are replete with constant complaints to the government. They complained about a lack of support and also a lack of time, since they were dedicating all of their time not to research but to arranging the crateloads of dust-covered, moth-eaten specimens that were arriving from the Museo Nacional<sup>10</sup>.

But I can also see how that photograph constitutes not the scene of an argument or the mark of a failed project, but rather a particular assemblage in which naturalism and evolutionism are interwoven, as if there were no need to distinguish them, as if the static, observable and classifiable nature of natural history were perfectly compatible with the temporal line through which species and races develop as conceived by evolutionary biology. With a single look the gaze observes, classifies, and simultaneously establishes sequences of universal development<sup>11</sup>. In fact, I would say that the foundation of the exhibition is there, in the non-distinction between naturalism and evolutionism, and that the mark of 1909 through which Nature and Culture were separated into two different museum spaces was ultimately a mere formality, insofar as the temporality upon which both spaces are organized is the same. It is as if the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo and the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, inaugurated in 1910 (Florescano 1993) were mirror images of each other and thus, while the former makes Nature a universal devoid of culture, the latter erects Culture on the screen of natural history that spatializes time by reabsorbing it in the tabular space of classification. By this I mean that both establishments are founded on the spatialized time of natural history, which is also, as Fabian would say, the time of anthropology, the science that has historically taken upon itself the study of the “other”: first it observes and classifies and then, by way of a sequence, it constructs cultural difference as distance<sup>12</sup>. On one hand, it is concerned with progress and “history”, while



on the other it draws on theories and methods that are more taxonomic than processual. That is, the two apparatuses share the same way of producing alterity: if the Museo del Chopo extracts indigenous people from the realm of biology, thereby separating them from nature, the Museo Nacional, the antecedent of what would later be the fabulous Museo Nacional de Antropología, picks up those indigenous people, strips them of context and landscape, fixes them in time, at a distance, on a lower plane, and thus anthropologizes them, “museifies” them (López 2009; Rufer 2014).

Perhaps that spatialized time is what makes the photograph discomfiting, what plays with us and pulls us disjointedly into non-chronological dimensions of time. I do not know if it is the color that retains an appearance of the past, or the perception of a certain piling-up of objects, but the photograph evokes the eighteenth-century culture of curiosity and its cabinets that accumulated specimens without regard to scale or importance. Or maybe it is the blurriness of the copy that I hold in my hands that produces the impression that we are looking at specimens covered in dust, and that dust does no more than announce what will come later: gradually – or all at once – the specimens will be abandoned, the material decomposing until it almost totally disappears and thus, of the 64,000 specimens that the Museo Nacional once held and which would later be moved to the Museo del Chopo, there are now only five on view at the current Museo de Historia Natural (Gorbach 2021).

It could also be that the forcefulness of that disappearance hurls us even further back, toward colonial times, and that the photograph is the artifact that connects that colonial past to the present. And in that way, some animals that no longer exist nevertheless become proof of the existence of a fixed nature, dusty and then abandoned; they remind us that hunting and possession are figures that belong to the processes of conquest and colonization (Haraway 1992); they are the silent, rather unspectacular symptom of the destructive force of history, the testimony of a ruined, devastated, vanished landscape, akin to what Rufer and Añon have called “landscapes of conquest”: a way of using, occupying, exploiting and



looting territory, a war machine that ruins persons, places and things (Rufer, Añon 2018: 126; Stoler 2013: 1-37).

Figure 3 is the only image about hysteria that I have found in Mexican archives, which is odd, given that images of hysterical women from the French hospital of Salpêtrière were already circulating around the world by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More precisely, these drawings, later reproduced in 1915 in the *Gaceta Médica de México*, had been made by Paul Richer, a professor of anatomy at the Ecole nationale de beaux-arts in Paris. At Salpêtrière, at Jean-Marie Charcot's side, Richer sketched all the phases of an hysterical attack (Didi-Huberman 2003: 115-116). "Typical scenes in a case of hysteria" is the title that Enrique Aragón<sup>13</sup>, the author of the study (Aragón 1915), gave to these drawings, which he paradoxically published in a work that does not address hysteria. In that study there appear first Richer's drawings and then six reproductions of religious paintings: The Transfiguration of the Lord, The Stigmatization of St. Catherine, The Ecstasy of St. Catherine etc. Together, the copies of the drawings and the reproductions of the paintings form a set that is embedded in the body of the text, as if their function were to serve as an intermission in which images separated from the text would narrate the history of hysteria. Richer's drawings represent modern hysteria and its distinction from the "wandering uterus" of antiquity and especially from medieval ideas of possession, represented in the religious paintings. Put at the beginning of the series, those drawings affirm the primacy of science over theology while at the same time nodding at Charcot, at that "visual" man, as Freud would put it, who, for his whole life drew portraits, landscapes, still lifes, bodily anomalies, and who, through images, attempted to capture the frenetic movement of the hysterical body and find an order in its postures (Hustvedt 1911).

But when those drawings were reproduced years later in a Mexican journal, they were imprinted with a particular bias. This new context meant that a language that had presented itself as universal had become particular, or been "provincialized", to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's term, causing the drawings to start speaking from elsewhere, from within other frames.

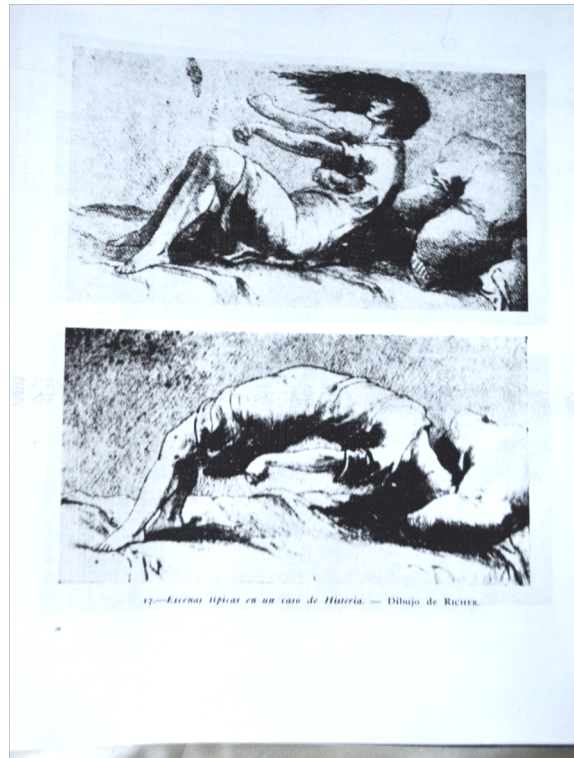


Fig. 3. *Image about hysteria.*

It is as if the spatial slippage, this “particularization”, produced a mismatch in the gaze, as if the movement that shifted a concept to a postcolonial context twisted its meaning and forced a modification of interpretive frames, stretching them over historical plots that encompass science but also go beyond it. Pratt would say that this mismatch is a result of “imposed receptivity” (Pratt 2018: 1600), of being exposed to the postcolonial condition in which the logics of knowledge and power become indistinguishable.

From that new standpoint, what stands out is not the contrast that situates the modern present and medieval past as opposites, but rather the woman’s long, loose hair, and above



all the whiteness of the skin that halts the gaze's movement. The strangeness of her bodily postures fades into the background and what comes out is an etiology of hysteria defined as a function less of clinical symptomatology than of conditions of race and class. In medical discourse, what now gets magnified is the distinction between two kinds of women, those who were susceptible to succumbing to hysteria and those who were not. According to the doctors, hysteria was a disorder that afflicted middle- and upper-class women, accustomed to direct contact with Europe, sensitive, affected by the constant stimulation of modernity. They were refined women, and refinement constitutes a question of education, race and social class (Mejía 1878: 476; Rivadeneira 1887: 11; Olvera 1895: 9; Aragón 1929: 193-194; Sánchez 1907: 68-69). "Other" (read: poor) women lacked emotions and had, in the words of one of the doctors, "a certain bodily and psychic insensitivity, which enables them to endure many ills with ease" (Terrés 1904-1905: 172); "savage" women, another physician would say, because madness is nonexistent among those peoples "where sorrow and danger have produced women who cannot feel pain" (Rivadeneira 1887: 11)<sup>14</sup>.

And in the face of that division, how was one to stop associating poor women – "low and ordinary", "bereft of culture", "accustomed to enduring disgrace" – with the descriptions of indigenous people, like that of Ezequiel A. Chávez<sup>15</sup>, for example, when he attempted in 1901 to tease out "indigenous peoples' psyches?" Indigenous people, he said, are "imperturbably phlegmatic", "stoically taciturn", and "impassively inert"; their "sensibility has an inert and somewhat passive, static character"; they are like a "volcano crowned with snow: highly impassible even though [they are] deeply wounded" (Chávez 2003: 29, 39, 35). Poor women, then – insensitive, indifferent, immovable, passive like animals, like indigenous people – were part of an inert, empty nature, ready to be acted upon by Man.

In this way, the partition compartmentalizes upper-class, white, modern and hysterical women away from poor, dark-skinned, savage ones; women who are susceptible to succumbing to hysteria and women who are not; women who possess



an exaggerated sensitivity that the physician must direct/repress/civilize, and women blurred into an anonymous, indistinguishable mass without history. But none of these women really existed; some, the rich women, because they were erased by medical discourse so that the ideal woman could exist, and others because they exist only in radical difference, in terms of what they are not. None of them was granted the right to be singular; all were denied the possibility of subjectification (Pósleman 2020: 50-51): some, subjected to the ideal of civilization, internalize a desire that is not their own, while others lack desire, since desire is precisely what they are missing (Gorbach 2020).

But that is precisely what the archive does not show, the prohibition of the body and with it the racialization that hides behind the idea of social class; what it hides is the modality assumed in that part of the world by an idea of Western subjectivity. For if what is snatched away from wealthy women is the identity that the others do not have, poor women are absolutely denied the possibility of selfhood. Some internalize a subject that is not their own, and the other, savage, psyche-less ones remain outside representation. This seems to be the dilemma of colonized peoples, de Oto and Pósleman would say: become white or disappear (de Oto, Pósleman 2018: 50)<sup>16</sup>. But what those drawings also show is the paradox into which the physicians and naturalists were plunged, for at the same time that they were aiming to turn others into subjects, they were striving to keep their alterity immovable (Frederick Buell, cited in Pratt 2018: 1453). Ultimately, what the archive does not speak about is the paradoxical ways of producing subjectivity in postcolonial contexts.

I came to a point at which I could no longer distinguish between memory and archive. For reasons that I still do not fully understand, as a result perhaps of the archive's own silence, or of the still life of the museum, or simply of the disruptive force of the image, the result was that the archive began to mix with my memory in the present, and I could no longer maintain the distance that supposedly exists between the researcher and her object of study. I realized that I had been tossed into a mnemonic exercise the moment I



began to connect seemingly incongruent times and geographical spaces that are not generally understood in relation to each other.

All of a sudden there appeared a family photograph that connected, by way of labyrinthine pathways, to the monsters, the women and the animals in the archive. That photograph shows the profile of a young white woman with short, wavy hair, surrounded by a set of data: name, language, year of arrival, place of birth. It is a certification of immigration issued in 1928, found in the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores and it is now part of my existential landscape. The woman in it is my grandmother: the oldest extant document of hers that I have, as a result of which I learned the name of her hometown in Ukraine, which ceased to exist a long time ago. For reasons that I would like to start to disentangle, the appearance of that photograph prompted in me a sort of disturbance, an upset that caused me to doubt my identity at the same time that it gave me a home. As a result of that apparition, the monsters, women and animals of the archive brought me back, from elsewhere, strangely, to the enigma of who I am.

That photograph-document insinuated itself almost naturally into my archive-become-remain, one more piece of that which survived destruction. It connected up with the other fragments through parallel histories of conquest, colonialism, imperialism, totalitarianism, migration. There is a reason why Mbembe says that if Indians and black people opened up the crossroads, especially in the New World, Jews paid the price for it in the very heart of Europe (Mbembe 2019: 63). What I mean to say is that the archive that I built over the years connected unexpectedly with the history of Europe and the history of colonialism, and it connected them insofar as both histories originate in war: wars of conquest and occupation, racial wars that repeat similar patterns of violence, pillage and extermination. If those archival fragments were connected, it was in the silence that circulates through them, a different kind of silence, with a different texture: the silence associated with loss, which is an endless mourning, an affect impregnated with history; the silence that results from a pact, with both the

family and the state, that prevents the past from being brought into memory; the silence that dons a mask and believes that it thereby – in Mbembe’s words – alleviates the ignominy by which we are aggrieved, “and that passed down from generation to generation as a poisoned heritage” (Mbembe 2019: 17).

That is why I would argue that the connection between those heterogeneous materials is melancholic: the sad gaze of the animals in the museum – isolated from their contexts, relocated to alien landscapes, made invisible – connects with the profound discontent of a hysteric who moves inexplicably from sadness to “mad laughter” to irate shouting, and then with the desolation of a monster encased in a jar of alcohol only to be buried in a place where no one could ever find it, which in turn connects with my own sadness when confronted by my inability to name what has been lost.

Melancholy circulates throughout the whole archive. Even though, strictly speaking, it does not belong to anyone, it surrounds it; it haunts it. It is apparent in the Indian drawn by Alexander von Humboldt in his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (Humboldt 1811), who, just like Charcot’s hysterics, “suddenly goes from absolute stillness to violent, unrestrained agitation” (González 1988: 1): the same Indian that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican literature would fasten to the landscape (“the medium we inhabit tends to transform the graveness of the Indian and the seriousness of the Castilian into melancholic tendencies”, Julio Guerrero (1901), cited in Bartra 2003: 49). It also appears in the work of the Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra, who finds that melancholy is a constitutive part of the intimate nature of the “defeated”<sup>17</sup>, a bit like how L.G. Urbina described it a few decades ago, convinced of the “prehistoric melancholia” of indigenous people (the Indian, “that old slave to fate, in whose sadness, impassible because of atavism, there somberly float the age-old sadnesses of long subjugation”, cited in González 1988: 4). Melancholy seems to be an inescapable part of our national identity (we are “profoundly melancholic”, we are trapped in “that melancholy toward which, without wanting to, we feel ourselves to be drawn”, Vicente Riva Palacio 1882, cited in González Rodríguez 1988: 3). We live out our lives



identifying with the lost object, submerged in the schemes of a past that returns in different guises. Ultimately, melancholy is a trope of the postcolonial archive, an empty vessel containing silences that knock time out of joint and dislocate any identity (Khanna 2003); the postcolonial archive, “a network of holes” that absconds with the silences of coloniality, the silences of the West (Añon 2016: 262).

I write all of this not to come up with strategies of mourning that would push me outward and onward, nor to put the lid back on an inheritance that, in any case, “I will never be able to discharge” (Cohen 2002: 110), not even to restore unity to an identity tugged hither and thither by identifications in tension with each other: Europe and America, white and Indian, Jews, women, monsters, all components of my own identity. Far from attempting to undo the tangle of those multiple identifications, I would prefer to stay there, to linger in that moment when the very idea of belonging vacillates; to stay there in order to start, perhaps, to decipher that melancholic nature that impregnates the archive, in order to recognize myself as heir to an original violence that is repeated in different manifestations, in order to open a space of recognition. Because if monsters, women and animals show us anything, it is that alterity is not confined to that which is excluded, to that which is outside and different. On the contrary, it is part of ourselves: at the same time that it gives back to me an image in which I do not recognize myself, I recognize them in myself as a presence that is maintained as other, as foreign (Cragolini 2001). I write all this as a way of recognizing the place that was left by those human and non-human beings, excluded, silenced, disappeared, a place that outlasts them and that cannot be occupied by anyone else.

I think I now understand a bit better why I resorted to images in order to speak of the archive. After all, the image has something to do with melancholy, for while the former gives absence to be seen spectrally, the latter breaks any logic of identification. If melancholy plunges us into interiority (Chamizo 2012), the image makes it possible for the gaze to go beyond the simple fact of seeing and implicates us, affects us, giving shape to our experience (Didi-Huberman 2006: 41-42). The image,

then: because the pain that persists for the thing lost can be neither communicated or represented, but only shown.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This text is a result of reflections that I have held in reserve, and which I now draw upon, far from the archive during a pandemic, in order to continue turning them over in my head. Following Marilyn Strathern, my intention is not to seek out something that no one has found, but rather to revisit the places where I have already been in order to re-read what I did not know I held in our hands (Rufer 2020).

<sup>2</sup> I have learned by way of a history of rumors that in the early twentieth century, after the Museo Nacional was completely dedicated to the exhibition of archaeological collections, the collection of monsters was moved to one and then another institution. When there was no longer anywhere to house it, the specimens were buried in the wall of one of the tunnels of the university stadium, until one day they unexpectedly reappeared, at which point they were taken to the botanical garden of the Universidad Nacional, where they were ultimately lost in a fire. I also know that at one time the Museo del Chopo held 64,000 specimens, including minerals, plants and animals, and that the current Museo de Historia Natural, a modern, interactive museum that is presented as the direct heir of the Chopo, only holds 5. Not much can be said about the women committed to La Castañeda, given that the dossiers deal only with the male doctors.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Stoler prefers to emphasize not “ruins” but rather ruination. If the idea of a ruin refers to a certain nostalgia proper to the European gaze, “ruination” by contrast is an ongoing process that can account for the tangible and intangible effects of empire, of the lives of those whose sensibilities have been marked by the ruins in which they live (Stoler 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Urbina y Altamirano (1843-1906), director of the Museo Nacional, was a pharmacist, physician and professor at the Museo Nacional. He organized the catalog of Mexican plants, taught botany at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, was a member of the Instituto Médico Nacional and published a variety of studies on Mexican plants.

<sup>5</sup> At the time the Museo Nacional had produced 10 catalogs: Galindo y Villa (1897; 1895); Herrera (1895a, 1895b, 1895c); Herrera and Cícero (1895); and Villada (1897).

<sup>6</sup> Román Ramírez was a clinical physician and legalist, a member of the Academia Nacional de Medicina, and brother of José Ramírez. Some of his biographers regard him as one of the first Mexican writers to accept Darwin’s theory (see Flores, Ochoterena-Booth 1991).

<sup>7</sup> According to E. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s theory of embryonic arrest, a monster was born as a result of an influence coming from outside that arrested normal development at a phase prior to its final form. But those phases did no more than recapitulate at an individual level the phases of the evolutionary sequence that ran from inferior to superior animals, which meant that when a superior animal’s embryonic development was arrested, an inferior form was left fixed in time. In brief, as effects of embryonic arrest, monsters constituted fleeting forms, intermediate stages out of which new species and races arose in nature (Gorbach 2008).

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, it would be interesting to adopt this standpoint as a way of understanding the process of aestheticizing archaeological remains and ethnographic collections that be valorized as “art” a few decades later (Williams 1985).



<sup>9</sup> In fact, the current Museo de Historia Natural in the Bosque de Chapultepec presents itself as the heir of that first Gabinete and of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo (see its official website, <http://data.sedema.cdmx.gob.mx/>).

<sup>10</sup> See the reports that the directors of the Museo de Historia Natural del Chopo directed periodically at the government, informing them of the activities of the establishment and of the expenses, especially those that Jesús Díaz de León, the museum's first director, addressed in 1912 to the Secretaría del Despacho de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes (Archivo Histórico-UNAM, 1911-1912; 1914).

<sup>11</sup> The current Museo de Historia Natural proceeds in the same way: the theory of evolution that appears in textual labels and signs seems like an afterthought added to an exhibition that continues to be taxonomic.

<sup>12</sup> "Let us retain at this point that the temporal discourse of anthropology as it was formed decisively under the paradigm of evolutionism rested on a conception of Time that was not only secularized and naturalized but also thoroughly spatialized. Ever since, I shall argue, anthropology's efforts to construct relations with its Other by means of temporal devices implied affirmation of difference as distance" (Fabian 1983: 16).

<sup>13</sup> Enrique Aragón (1880-1942) was a surgeon and psychiatrist at the Academia Nacional de Medicina, the most important medical institution of the era, and one of the physicians with a marked interest in studying hysteria.

<sup>14</sup> At the asylum of La Castañeda hysteria was in fact less a diagnosis than a symptom. It almost always involved poor women, and one hardly knows whether they were committed there as a result of madness or poverty.

<sup>15</sup> (1868-1946). Positivist essayist and lawyer, director of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and rector of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México during the Porfirian regime.

<sup>16</sup> "Colonized peoples have two ways out: either they can incubate the specular monstrous desire according to which they themselves are converted into a conscious servant of the colony, or they can be definitively identified or white-ified" (de Oto, Póseleman 2018: 109).

<sup>17</sup> Melancholy is like an opacity that "hides the deep motives for which men tolerate a system of domination and with their acceptance give a stamp of legitimacy to injustice, inequality and exploitation" (Bartra 1987, 15).

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