La Belle Africaine:
The Sudanese Giraffe Who Went to France

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La Tour Eiffel
Mais oui, je suis une girafe,
M’a raconté la tour Eiffel,
Et si ma tête est dans le ciel,
C’est pour mieux brouter les nuages,
Car ils me rendent éternelle.

--Maurice Carême (1899-1978)

Introduction: writing Franco-Sudanese transnational history

When introducing their research on Sudanese topics to colleagues from the Anglophone world, scholars in France frequently begin with an apology. In contrast to Britain, they say, France has been something of a desert for Sudanese studies – arguably because France lacked a colonial relationship with the parts of the Nile Valley that now include the republics of Sudan and South Sudan. The one-day symposium held in Paris in November 2012 belied this claim, by illustrating the vitality and diversity of French intellectual engagement in the two Sudans, via history, anthropology, linguistics, political science, and other disciplines. Against the context of this project for rethinking “Sudan Studies”, I propose to challenge the French self-image of detachment from Sudanese history by studying an exchange that predated Britain’s active presence in the region by more than half a century. This exchange entailed the gift of a rare and valuable animal, a giraffe, which Mehmet Ali (1769-1849) of Egypt arranged to send from somewhere in what is now the Republic of the Sudan to King Charles X (1757-1836) of France in 1826,
that is, seventy-two years before Britain conquered the Sudanese Mahdist state and created the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1898-1956).

In short, this article recounts a kind of Franco-Sudanese transnational history through the study of a giraffe, who was nicknamed *la Belle Africaine* or “the Beautiful African” by an admiring French newspaper in 1827 (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013a). The article makes a preliminary foray into the history of giraffes in general and this giraffe in particular while examining the story’s diplomatic, cultural, environmental, and zoological dimensions on local, regional, and global scales. By juxtaposing the Sudan(s) and France in this way, and by following this giraffe over the course of her various migrations and manifestations, we can accomplish three things. First, from the Sudanese perspective, we can surmount the earlier colonial-state and nation-state borders that are now looking more contingent and negotiable in the aftermath of the 2011 break-up, while recognizing the Sudan as a zone (as opposed to a clearly demarcated country) within global networks of circulating peoples, things, and ideas. Second, from the French perspective, we can shrug off some of the baggage of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “moment” of colonial history in Africa (Roberts 1990). In the process we can entertain possibilities that France or French people either once had, continued to have, or are now having relationships with places that were never subjected to France’s imperial domination – say, with countries like Kenya or Mozambique, or in this case, the two Sudans. Third, we can draw upon the surprisingly large literary, pictorial, and material record pertaining to our giraffe and others like her in order to see how histories can be embedded in histories, rather like a Russian nesting doll or *matryoshka*, with layers of time, place, and interpretation sitting atop one another. Viewing history in this way may help us to appreciate how our own efforts of interpretation can add to accumulating works-in-progress about a past that looks different according to circumstances.

The article starts in an unlikely place – a provincial French stairwell – in order to understand how and why our giraffe left the Sudan and reached France nearly two centuries ago. It traces this giraffe’s migration to Paris in 1826, and surveys the cultural
impact she had on France, before reflecting on the historic role of the Sudan in supplying giraffes to the Mediterranean world. The article closes by surveying the “afterlives” of the giraffe in France and of Sudanese giraffes in general, in order to see what their stories can tell us about France and the (two) Sudan(s) from the nineteenth century to today’s postcolonial era.

A small point of terminology deserves explanation at the outset. Whether animate or inanimate, nouns in French carry gender. The French word for giraffe happens to be feminine, so that one speaks of la girafe or une girafe, using the pronoun elle (“she”) as a referent. (Identifying a giraffe as a male would require further specification, e.g., une girafe mâle). By contrast, English nouns, if they do not refer to humans, are almost always gender neutral, and in the singular form can be represented by the gender-neutral pronoun “it”. A non-human animal is often described as an “it”, implying a thing as opposed to a sentient being, unless humans hold the creature in esteem (as for example, with a domestic animal or family pet, who may be called a “he” or a “she”). On these pages, I call the giraffe in this story a “she”, but am not simply translating from French into English when I do so. Rather, I am consciously personifying her, giving her stature as a protagonist, and conveying the familial affection with which contemporary French audiences and writers regarded her. My use of “she” also reflects a political choice to recognize a non-human animal as a participant in history – even as a subject potentially worthy of biography. As a “she” and not an “it”, this giraffe is therefore also a “who” and not a “what”, “that”, or “which”. The sub-title of the article reflects this choice, referring not to the giraffe that went to France (which might seem more appropriate in formal English), but to the giraffe who went to France.

The Stairwell at La Rochelle: finding big history in a small place

La Rochelle, located on France’s Atlantic coast, is a small town boasting a rich past. It is a place where one can trace many threads as they weave into world history. Consider, for example, that during the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion, and in collaboration with forces from England, La Rochelle became a bastion of Protestantism.
against France’s Catholic establishment. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, La Rochelle functioned as a major point of departure for French emigrants as they headed to North America, and especially to Québec or “Nouvelle France” in what is now Canada. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the town hosted a formidable cadre of “Lumières” (intellectuals of the French Enlightenment), who scrutinized the natural world through the study of fossils, shells, plants, and animals. These La Rochelle naturalists included men like Alcide Dessalines d’Orbigny (1802-57), who collected more than ten thousand specimens during a seven-year voyage to what are now Brazil, Peru, and other South American countries, and who founded the scientific field of micropaleontology. Later, after 1887, according to a local commemorative monument that stands flanked by two tusked elephants, La Rochelle sent three of its natives as “pioneers” (pionniers) and “peaceful conquerors” (conquerants pacifiques) to west Africa, where they helped to explore and assert French claims to Côte d’Ivoire, and to develop its trade in cocoa and coffee (Bertaud 2003).

Many of these strands of La Rochelle history come together in the town’s Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, which houses materials ranging from the South American specimens collected by d’Orbigny and the artistic and ritual objects collected by Frenchmen in Côte d’Ivoire, to the illustrations of birds sent to La Rochelle by John James (also known as “Jean Jacques”) Audubon (1785-1851). The son of French immigrants and slave-owners in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and a naturalized citizen of the United States, Audubon achieved lasting fame as the premier authority on North American ornithology and as the namesake of a major natural conservation society, which flourishes today (National Audubon Society 2013).

Amidst this wealth of natural and man-made marvels, which together testify to France’s engagement in the world at scales ranging from the microscopic to the global, a visitor to La Rochelle’s Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle may miss another resident treasure – this one tucked into the stairwell that leads up from the ground floor. Bearing a reticulated golden coat over long and knobbly legs, this particular treasure hovers somewhere between the science of zoology and the art of taxidermy, and between
creature and object. “Giraffe” an old plaque announces at its base, its Latin nomenclature then following, “of Darfur”, it goes on to add. A gift from the Pasha of Egypt, she “lived for 17 and a half years in the Menagerie.”

Figure 1: The stairwell in La Rochelle (photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

The plaque attests, in other words, that this is a Sudanese giraffe occupying the stairwell in La Rochelle. Pursuing this lead, the historian can find academic and popular studies to fill in details of the story, as follows. This giraffe, a female, was a gift from Mehmet Ali, the Ottoman governor and later quasi-independent dynasty-builder of Egypt, to King Charles X of France. The man who suggested the idea to Mehmet Ali, and who
handled the giraffe’s procurement, was a Piedmontese from Turin (we might now call him an “Italian”) named Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852), who served as a French consul in Alexandria, a “discreet counsellor” to Mehmet Ali (Dardaud 2007: 23), and a “diplomat opportunist” in general (Lebleu 2006: 31-33). Another writer describes Drovetti as having been, above all, a professional grave-rober and wheeler-dealer whose ancient Egyptian loot – mummified humans, cats, and whatnot – eventually made its way into the Louvre and other major museums in Europe (Allin 1998: 51-57). But Drovetti was also a dealer in botanical, geological, and zoological specimens, supplying wealthy Europeans who shared the scientific collecting passions of the era. In this capacity, he had traded in Sudanese goods in the past, having supplied some “Sudanese horses from Dongola” (chevaux du Dongola soudanais) to the King of Sardinia as well as dozens of white-wooled Nubian sheep (“moutons ‘de Nubie à laine blanche’”) to Count Romanzoff, the chancellor of Russia (Dardaud 2007: 24).

Against this context around 1824, Drovetti advised that a spectacular gift to Charles X could help to win French goodwill for Mehmet Ali. French interest in Egypt was high: Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) had just deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822. And through his Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Charles X had just issued a call to French travelers and consuls abroad, seeking items for the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes of Paris, and for this garden complex’s associated natural history collections (Allin 1998: 57, 65-66). At the same time, Mehmet Ali was engaging in risky ventures and needed, if not foreign support, than at least a minimum of foreign opposition. These ventures included helping the Ottomans to suppress “rebels” (“nationalists”) engaged in the “Greek Revolt” (“the Greek War for Independence”, 1821-32) – a war that many French and British observers were inclined to support on the side of the Greeks. Mehmet Ali was also engaged in building an empire of his own. In 1821, his son Ismail Pasha had led an invasion of the Sudan, initiating the era of colonial rule that scholars have since remembered as the Turkiyya or Turco-Egyptian period (1821-c.1885) of Sudanese history. (By this stage, too, Mehmet Ali may have already had his eyes on Syria, an Ottoman territory that he later sent his son Ibrahim Pasha to invade in 1831.) Mehmet Ali’s control over the Sudan at this moment in the mid-1820s meant that he was able to
send orders from Egypt to military delegates in Khartoum for the capture, care, and transport of an infant giraffe destined for France. Mehmet Ali was known to be ruthless. For example, he had slaughtered his major military rivals, the Mamluks, en masse after inviting them to a dinner party in the Cairo citadel in 1811; he had also created a conscription army so brutal that Egyptian peasants frequently maimed or blinded themselves to avoid its draft (Fahmy 1997). Given this reputation, military underlings were likely to take Mehmet Ali’s orders seriously, even for just a giraffe.

But where exactly did this giraffe come from? The plaque in the museum at La Rochelle claims that she came from Darfur, the western region of the Sudan that borders present-day Chad, but other nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century accounts variously say that she came from Kordofan, in the central western part of what is now the Republic of the Sudan (Jardin zoologique de Lyon: 2013b), or from a region two hundred miles southeast of Sennar near the present-day Ethiopian border (Allin 1998: 41). The author of one recent article even describes her as having come from “the hilly province of Sennar, in Nubia” (Lagueux 2003: 231) – thereby conflating the Blue Nile region with the far northern (main Nile) region of what is now the Republic of the Sudan. Another writer, an American who produced a popular account of this history, repeatedly calls the giraffe an “Egyptian”, presumably because of her passage through Egypt under the aegis of Mehmet Ali, and calls the men who captured and transported her “Arabs” (Allin 1998). These various designations remind us how outsiders have historically viewed the Sudan as a big, vague place and as a hinterland to Egypt, while often using adjectives like “Sudanese” and “Egyptian”, as well as “Nubian” and “Arab”, in fuzzy and variable ways.

Giraffes abounded in the Sudan in 1824, so this particular giraffe could have come from any one of several places. The giraffe habitat in this period appears to have included much of the territory south of Khartoum (into what is now South Sudan), east of Khartoum (the Blue Nile region), and west of Khartoum (in both Kordofan and Darfur) (Laufer 1928: 91; Molloy 1957: 85; Allin 1998: 41). But the origins for this giraffe do appear to have been along the Blue Nile southeast of Sennar from which river transport to Khartoum and then to Egypt (which I will discuss below) would have been feasible.
Suffice it to say here that her journey, which began late in 1825 with her capture, took her through Khartoum early in 1826 and then north to Alexandria on Egypt’s coast. She sailed from Alexandria and reached Marseille on France’s southern shore on October 23, 1826. Her traveling companions included two Sudanese caretakers. One was named Hassan or Hassan el Berberi (Lebleu 2006: 62), variously described as a “Nubian”, “Arab” or “desert Arab”, and “a Moor from Sennar” (Majer 2009: 127; Lagueux 2003: 237; Allin 1998: 72). The other was Atir, variously described as Drovetti’s “negro servant” and “former slave”, or as a “Sudanese negro” from Darfur (Lagueux 2003: 237; Dardaud 2007: 86, Allin 1998: 74). Here, too, and against the context of Sudanese history, the various ways of describing the giraffe’s caretakers reflect the complex and shifting attributions of terms according to perceptions of skin color and blackness, Muslim and non-Muslim identity, language and lifestyle, and statuses of slavery, former slavery, and freedom (Sharkey 2003: 16-39).

**Paris Bound: The regal giraffe and her entourage**

To the extent that the giraffe was an “Egyptian”, she reached Marseille when this port city already had an “Egyptian” community in place. This community consisted of people whom the French government called the “Egyptian refugees”: Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians who had collaborated with the army of Napoleon and his successor, Jean-Baptiste Kléber (1753-1800), during the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801). Having fled with the retreating French army in 1801, these refugees or former collaborators settled in Marseille where they received French government pensions. In fact, these “Egyptians” were of mixed origins: they included indigenous Egyptian Christians (Copts) and Muslims; Syrian Christians (especially Melkites of the eastern-rite “Greek” Catholic church); Muslims of diverse Ottoman backgrounds; and several Sudanese “servants” or slaves, who joined their owners in exile (Coller 2011).

The giraffe reached Marseille six months before another boatload of “Egyptians” arrived – the first cadre of study-abroad students that Mehmet Ali sent to France in order to train professionals for his regime. This group famously included Rifa’a al-Tahtawi.
(1801-1873), a future luminary of the Arabic literary renaissance or *nahda*, and an early theorist of Egyptian nationalism, who years later spent a brief professional sojourn-cum-exile in Khartoum and recorded some Sudanese memoirs (‘Abidin 1967: 391; Powell 2003). Recalling these coincidental connections between France, Egypt, and the Sudan, and between Napoleon’s “Egyptian” collaborators, the giraffe, and Tahtawi, reminds us how exchanges were in the process of quickening along this Franco-Nilotic route of migration.

The giraffe spent a few months at Marseille to wait out the winter, and left for Paris on foot on May 20, 1827, along with her two caretakers, Hassan and Atir, and some extra animals that Drovetti was sending as gifts to the king – an antelope, two mouflons, and a roebuck from Tenerife, in the Canary Islands (Lagueux 2003: 234). Joining them was the eminent French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844), whose theory of “transformism” based on his study of comparative anatomy vis-à-vis extinct and living species made him one of the intellectual precursors to Darwin and the theory of evolution (Lebleu 2006: 26). Saint-Hilaire, whose name now graces the street in Paris that runs between the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle on the one side, and the Grand Mosque of Paris on the other, had a first-hand knowledge of Egypt, for as a scientist he had accompanied Napoleon on his conquest of the country in 1798. Strikingly, in 1827, Saint-Hilaire joined the giraffe in Marseille just after venturing to the southern French city of Montpellier, where he had negotiated the purchase of an ichthyological collection for the natural history museum in Paris – a collection that had been gathered fifty years earlier by the English naturalist Joseph Banks (1743-1820) during exploratory voyages with Captain James Cook (1728-1779) in the South Seas (Lagueux 2003: 232). In Saint-Hilaire’s behavior, we can see the convergence of imperialism, science, and museum making as well as the trajectories of French global engagement and competition with Britain in this nineteenth-century era.

As the group prepared to leave Marseille, Saint-Hilaire decided that he needed an Arabic interpreter in order to communicate with the giraffe’s Sudanese caretakers. Looking to the “Egyptian refugee” community of Marseille, he hired Joseph (also known
as Youssef) Ebeid, the son of a Christian soldier who had fought with Napoleon in Egypt and who had later in France joined the “Mamlukes” (Dardaud 2007: 66; Coller 2011) – a new imperial corps of turban-clad soldiers whose dramatic costumes engaged Napoleon’s Orientalist fantasies. Finally, Saint-Hilaire decided that the giraffe needed a suitable outfit to protect her from the elements. Portraits later produced in France suggest that she was already wearing something around her neck – a Koranic amulet that was a gift from Mehmet Ali, and that was said to have touched the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab (the Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter) in Cairo (Lebleu 2006: 44). But now she received an oilskin raincoat tailored to keep her dry when it rained. Fashioned from royal blue fabric and embellished with the French royal emblem of the fleur de lys on the one side, and the arms of Mehmet Ali on the other (Dardaud 2007: 65), the raincoat made the giraffe an ambulatory symbol of Charles X, the French monarchy, and Franco-Egyptian relations as she made her way northward through France. The raincoat may have had another layer of significance as well. According to a historian of textiles, fitting the giraffe into this fleur-de-lys raincoat was “analogous to the ancien régime ritual of redressing, at France’s borders, foreign princesses who were to marry a Bourbon monarch or an heir to the throne. Like them, she [the giraffe] was obliged to leave her country of birth forever and she belonged henceforth to France” (Majer 2009/10: 145).

The journey from Marseille to Paris was some 880 kilometers long, broken into daily trips of twenty to twenty-four kilometers. The entourage made its way through a parade of French towns: Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, Orange, Montélimar, Valence, Vienne, Lyon, Auxerre, and so on to Paris. People climbed on trees, hoisted themselves on wagons, and gathered in market squares to see the giraffe go by. Saint-Hilaire soon hired gendarmes, realizing that the giraffe needed protection against aggressive humans (Allin 1998: 148). Meanwhile, the giraffe charmed her audiences by licking those who came close. When the giraffe and her companions finally reached Paris late in 1827, another famous scientist, the comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) came with his friend, the distinguished novelist Stendhal (1783-1842), to greet them. But the king did not. Acting on the insistence of his daughter-in-law, Marie-Therèse de France, the Duchess of Angoulême (1778-1851), who was the last surviving child of Louis XVI
(1754-1793) and Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) and a known stickler for rank and protocol, Charles X insisted that the giraffe come to see him, rather than that he go to see her. Consequently the entourage continued to the palace of Saint-Cloud just west of Paris. There, the king offered the giraffe some rose petals, which she ate out of his hand (Dardaud 2007; Majer 2009/10: 153).

The giraffe did not live with the king. Instead she found her home in the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes, a public garden located in the Latin Quarter, or historic university district, of Paris. This garden, which inherited the animals that had survived from the royal menagerie of Louis XVI (following the latter’s decapitation in the wake of the French Revolution), played a significant role in the formation of the modern zoological garden or “zoo”. This was because it combined the attractions of a popular, public spectacle (unlike the menageries of the pre-revolutionary period, which had functioned like the personal plaything or trophies of the rich), with an ostensible commitment to scientific research, and all in an English-style setting, with trees and sinuous paths to suggest a romantic, unplanned landscape (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998: 103-11). In fact, the Jardin des Plantes contained a complex of buildings and institutions: it claimed not only the Ménagerie, but also a natural history collection (now the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle with its Grande Galerie de l’Évolution and Galeries d’Anatomie comparée et de Paléontologie), affiliated laboratories and other exhibition spaces, and greenhouses and outdoor gardens.

During her northward journey, and then in Paris at the Jardin des Plantes, the giraffe became so popular with the French public that she inspired what one of her biographers, Olivier Lebleu, has called girafomania (“giraffomania”). Her image soon appeared on ceramics, glassware, and textiles; and on everyday objects ranging from dishes and paperweights to hairbrushes and chimney plates. Bakers devised a cookie press (moule à gaufres) in her shape and used it to make giraffe-shaped biscuits for children, while there was even a ladies’ hairstyle and an outbreak of seasonal influenza (grippe de la girafe) named after her. Inspired by her Koranic amulet, jewelers designed a heart-shaped pendant that some French ladies began to wear (Majer 2009/10: 136).
Even a color – “giraffe yellow”, a kind of yellowish beige – was named after her in the new fashion magazines of the period (Majer 2009/10: 132). In lithographs and drawings, the giraffe was often depicted in the company of one Sudanese caretaker or two, next to a palm tree. With their colorful turbans and robes, these caretakers may now look like stylized Orientalist abstractions of “the African” or “the Arab”. And yet, as one scholar of the decorative arts has recently asserted, these figures – like the duo gracing a gilded porcelain teapot manufactured in 1827 and now owned by the Musée Carnavalet in Paris – ultimately represented two real men, namely, Hassan and Atir (Majer 2009/10: 139).

On the level of fine art, Jacques-Raymond Brascassat “captured” the giraffe during her voyage northward in an oil painting entitled, Passage de la girafe à Arnay le Duc (1827). Now owned by the museum of beaux-arts in Beaune (Burgundy), this painting shows the giraffe proceeding through the verdant French countryside, accompanied by her Sudanese caretakers, and wearing her amulet (though not her raincoat). Meanwhile, the giraffe, and the excitement she generated, arguably had another broader, long-term impact on French art, by inspiring the genre of the animal sculpture (Musée de la Chasse et la Nature 2013). In this regard, her debut in Paris may have set the stage for the monumental animal sculptures of Antoine-Louis Barye (1796-1875) and later the petite, whimsical sculptures of François Pompon (1855-1933), who as a poor young artist in Paris had found his calling by observing the creatures in the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes.

Giraffomania extended into textual media as well. Poets, dramatists, and other writers, such as, again, Stendhal, and also Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), wrote about the giraffe. In August 1827, the arrival of six Osage Indians of North America in Le Havre and then in Paris prompted the novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) to write about the strange concurrence of the giraffe and these Indians in France (Dardaud 2007: 119). In a satirical work entitled, Discours de la Girafe au chef des six Osages (ou Indiens), prononcé le jour de leur visite au Jardin du Roi, traduit de l’arabe par
Alibassan, interprète de la Giraffe,³ Balzac crafted a dialogue between the giraffe and this Indian cohort in order to criticize the king, Charles X. The Osage delegation, whose members came from Louisiana, which the United States had purchased from France in 1803, arrived in Le Havre claiming that one their immediate forbears had visited Louis XIV. By visiting France, Switzerland, and elsewhere (Fletcher 1900; Bushnell 1908) during this trip, they may have hoped to pursue a diplomatic mission, by winning foreign goodwill in light of their struggles with the U.S. government. But in fact, when the Osage Indians reached Paris, they became subjects for public display and briefly rivaled the giraffe as a popular attraction (Lebleu 2006: 152, 157).

The display of the Osage delegates serves as a reminder that during this early nineteenth-century period, the exotic animals paraded before gawking publics included not just giraffes, lions, and elephants, but also humans. This viewing of creatures from distant lands helped to stage spectacles that made imperialism thinkable under the guise of science and rationalism, by boosting the confidence of viewing publics in their “knowledge” (Coombes 1994: 2-3, 63; Mitchell 1991: 7). The best-known case of this kind had involved the southern African woman and slave named Saartjie (“Sarah”) Baartman (c. 1790-1815), who some fifteen years earlier had gone on European display, nearly naked, as the so-called “Hottentot Venus”. Coincidentally, both Saint-Hilaire (who led the giraffe to Paris) and Cuvier (who welcomed her to Paris) had examined Baartman’s body in Paris in 1815 in their capacity as scientists – taking notes on what they regarded as her large buttocks and other salient features. After Baartman died that same year, Cuvier wrote an account of Baartman’s autopsy, which he published in the Memoires du Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle (the museum’s journal) in 1817 (Crais and Scully 2009) – ten years before Saint-Hilaire published his own scientific description of “La Girafe de Sennaar” (Saint-Hilaire 1827). In short, the giraffe and Baartman had mutual acquaintances in France, both received attention from scientists as ostensible

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³ Translation: “Discourse from the Giraffe to the Chief of the Six Osages (or Indians), delivered on the day of their visit to the King’s Garden, translated from the Arabic by Alibassan, the Giraffe’s interpreter”. During the Bourbon Restoration period, the garden was sometimes called the King’s Garden (Jardin du Roi), instead of the Plant Garden (Jardin des Plantes).
oddities of the natural world, and both helped to convince the French public that they had a firm knowledge of Africa.

Figure 2: Saint-Hilaire, "Quelques considérations sur la giraffe [sic]" (1827)

But why did French people go gaga over this Sudanese giraffe, and put her image on objects like teapots and cookies? The answer, quite simply, is that giraffes until this time had been creatures of legend in France. People considered them marvels not only because of their outlandish appearances (their necks being the longest of any mammals alive on the earth), but also because they were known to be wild creatures with a reputation for gentle behavior (Laufer 1928). Moreover, the precedents for giraffes in French history were meager. Consider that the French explorer, François Levaillant
(1753-1824), had shot a giraffe in what is now South Africa and had sent its skin to Paris to be displayed in 1785. Levaillant’s giraffe was the first dead giraffe to reach France. But so unfamiliar were French taxidermists with giraffe anatomy that they stuffed and mounted this specimen oddly, as one can see in a massive and elaborately-framed oil portrait now hanging in the Cabinet d’Histoire of the Jardin des Plantes (Anonymous, c. 1800). Digging more deeply into French history, one could point out that Anne of Beaujeu (1461-1522), the daughter of King Louis XI (1423-1483), had tried and failed to secure a giraffe for France; and that Louis IX (1214-1270), who died in Tunis while on Crusade and who became “Saint Louis” thereafter, had possessed a crystal giraffe figurine (Lebleu 2007: 10, 16). But that was it. Together, Saint Louis’s crystal giraffe, Anne of Beaujeu’s unattained giraffe, and even the oddly-mounted Levaillant giraffe could not match the first breathing and walking giraffe, La Belle Africaine of the Sudan, who reached France in 1827 and enchanted the local people by eating from their hands.

In one very important respect, however, our giraffe was not new. That is, she arrived in France through a process that had many precursors in world history. She represented what the French scholar Olivier Lebleu has called the “cadeau-girafe” (Lebleu 2006: 10) – the gift-giraffe – in which the Sudan had historically played a critical role. Like certain other rare creatures, such as lions, elephants, and rhinoceroses, giraffes circulated as a prestigious and high-value diplomatic currency (Laufer 1928: 36, 44, 55). But if the Sudan had the potential to supply giraffes abroad, then why were these creatures so rare and legendary in Europe as in China (Laufer 1928), where kings, queens, emperors, and other potentates proved so eager to possess them over the centuries? To answer this question, one must turn to consider the Sudan’s historic role as a long-distance exporter of giraffes.

The “Gift-Giraffe”: Sudan’s role on the supply end of girafomania

From 1905 to 1907, James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) of the University of Chicago led an expedition to Lower Nubia to investigate archaeological remains dating from 2000 BC to 500 AD. He was tracing sites associated with the Meroitic civilization
that had once flourished in the northern parts of what is now the Republic of the Sudan and that had left the dramatically narrow and dark-stoned Pyramids of Meroë as its most visible remains. On March 21, 1906, while on a trek two hours’ south of Abu Simbel near the current Egyptian-Sudanese border, Professor Breasted chanced upon elephants and giraffes etched in the rock. Although prehistoric remains like this one were not what he was seeking, Breasted photographed them anyway. He later tried to guess at their age, by reasoning in his field notebook that, since elephants “have been extinct in this region for some 5000 years, and [giraffes for] nearly as long”, “…these reliefs must be at least as old as the age when these animals flourished here, i.e., 3000 BC” (Larson 2006: 24-25).

Once upon a time, during the Pleistocene era (approximately 2,500,000 to 12,000 years ago), animals belonging to the family Giraffidae had roamed Europe and Asia, judging from fossil remains. But giraffes were extinct in Egypt by the time Egyptian artists carved their images in friezes dating from the reigns of Queen Hatshepsut (1508-1458 BC) and King Tutankhamum (r. 1332-1323 BC) (Laufer 1928: 3, 19-23). A giraffe, even in Pharaonic Egypt, was a rare item, and counted as a luxury good. Consider, for example, the carvings in the Temple of Beit el-Weli, south of what is now Aswan, which commemorated a victory of Ramses II (1292-1295 BC): a scene on the rock wall shows Ramses II enthroned with two lines of Nubians (whom we might now call “Sudanese”) approaching with ebony and ivory furniture, panther skins, rings of gold, bows, arrows, myrrh, elephants’ tusks, ostrich eggs and feathers, and live animals including ibexes, oxen with curved horns, an ostrich, and a giraffe (Laufer 1928: 23).

In the Pharaonic era of Egypt after about 3100 BC, and still four thousand years later during the Islamic era, giraffes were flourishing in the area corresponding to today’s two Sudans. In fact, giraffes were abundant all over sub-Saharan Africa – from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, from what is now Senegal and Gambia in the west to Kenya in the east and down to South Africa, too. Even Saharan North Africa once had some giraffes, and there had reportedly been some in parts of what is now Morocco as late as 600 AD (Ciofolo 1995: 577-78). But although giraffes were all over Africa, the area now corresponding to the Republic of the Sudan played a special role in exporting
them to Lower Egypt and beyond. So then what was it that made the Sudan special as a supplier of giraffes – and more specifically, “gift-giraffes” – that would ideally reach their destinations alive and in hardy condition?

The answer is simply that, during the Pharaonic era, and then later during the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic eras, foreign demand for giraffes came from or through Egypt, and the Sudan was the closest supplier. Even in the modern period between the fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when European (and Chinese) interest in giraffes was mounting, Egypt appears to have remained the conduit for Sudanese giraffes (see, for example, Laufer 1928: 36, 50, 79-80). After all, the Sudan had the Nile – a dependable water source and a (mostly) navigable river – which made it possible for giraffes to survive long and hot journeys northward. By contrast, in a land-locked region like present-day Niger, for example, there were giraffes but no northbound rivers that could enable a regular water supply across the Sahara to the coast of what is now Libya. And in the era before the circumnavigation of Africa (1498) and the digging of the Suez Canal (1869), the long-distance transport of a giraffe by sea from what is now, say, Mali or Uganda was out of the question as well.

In short, the Sudan was the best place from which an Egyptian ruler, or for that matter, any Mediterranean-world, European, or Asian potentate, could hope to secure a giraffe. Thus the Sudan, via Egypt, was the likely source for the giraffe that Caesar marched in his triumphal procession in Rome in 46 BC, causing such a sensation that writers including Varro, Horace, Dio Cassius, and Pliny wrote about what they saw (Laufer 1928: 58, 66-67).

This trend continued into the Islamic era. Indeed, in 651 AD, when Arab Muslim forces, coming from Egypt, first reached the lands beyond the Nile’s second cataract (the rocky stretch of the river that has roughly marked the Sudan at its northern extremity) they signed a peace treaty, called the Baqt, with the Christian rulers of Nubia. The Baqt proved to be seminal to the making of Sudanese Arab and Sudanese Muslim identities, insofar as the story of the Baqt went on to inform historical narratives asserting that a
peaceful, cumulative process – and not a violent rapid assault – led to Islamization and Arabization in the northern Sudan (Hasan 1967). Strikingly, giraffes featured in this seminal episode as well, for the Baqt called upon the Nubians to pay the Arab Muslim rulers of Egypt an annual tribute, consisting of “four hundred slaves, a number of camels, two elephants, and two giraffes”. In a survey of the giraffe across history and art written in 1928, Berthold Laufer – a museum curator and successor of Professor Breasted at the University of Chicago – noted that the treaty underwent some revision, so that under the Fatimid Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-85), Nubia had to pay an annual tribute of three hundred and sixty slaves and one giraffe. “This tribute was paid for two centuries when it was repudiated in A.D. 854, Laufer wrote, “but this revolt was soon crushed.” Meanwhile, in 1275, by which time the Mamluks were ruling Egypt, Nubia was ordered to deliver “three giraffes, three elephants, panthers, dromedaries, and oxen...among the annual tribute (Laufer 1928: 35).” While the reasons for the fluctuation in giraffe tributes remain unclear, giraffes were valuable currency. One, two, or even three of these creatures constituted part of a notable transfer of wealth. Showing them off in occasional parades (which the Fatimids and Mamluks, like the Romans, were known to do [Laufer 1928]), enabled their recipients to engage in what the sociologist Thorstein Veiblen (1857-1929) famously described as “conspicuous consumption” (Veiblen 1899).

If the demand for live giraffes was so high, then why did the Sudan not export more of them? The answer pertains to the supply-side, logistical difficulties involved in their capture and transport. For it appears that the only practical way to keep a giraffe alive and to transport it over long distances was to tame it, and the only way to tame it was to capture it during its infancy so that it would become accustomed to human interaction. An older giraffe, the writer Michael Allin concluded, after conferring with zoologists at the Jardin des Plantes, “would either cripple itself fighting to escape or die of self-imposed starvation.” Only those who were “small enough to be controlled without harm for a few days” would be able to transfer “their attachment from their mothers to their human keepers” and to become “virtual pets” (Allin 1998: 70-71). These details explain why our giraffe was about six months old at the time of her capture, and
not an adult, and why she was initially subdued and tied onto the back of a camel in the first stages of her transport to the river at Sennar (Lebleu 2006: 44).

Infant giraffes posed another logistical challenge: they needed a lot of milk to survive during their first year (Jolly 2003: 32). Indeed, Hassan and Atir reported that, on her trip to Egypt and then to France, the giraffe consumed up to twenty-five gallons of milk per day – first from camels, and later from cows (Allin 1998: 78). (While mother’s milk was optimally nutritious for their growth, baby giraffes, like baby humans, could survive on the milk of certain domesticated mammals.) Indeed, three cows eventually sailed with her from Alexandria to Marseille in order to meet her needs. Later, the sale of one of these cows in Marseille paid for her *fleur-de-lys* raincoat while the two others traveled with her to Paris (Dardaud 2007: 65). (And indeed, in his 1827 portrait of the giraffe on her journey to Paris, the artist Brascassat painted these two milk-cows walking just in front of her.) In short, and especially in the hot and often arid climate of the northern Sudan, merely supplying baby giraffes with sufficient milk for nourishment and hydration complicated their upkeep during long journeys into Egypt. This situation explains why giraffes, despite their abundance in many parts of the Sudan, represented such rare and valuable creatures upon their delivery abroad.

Consider again the case of Hassan, our giraffe’s Sudanese Nubian caretaker. As the man in charge of Drovetti’s personal stable in Alexandria, which included horses, antelopes, gazelles, and sheep, Hassan accompanied an earlier gift-giraffe that Mehmet Ali had tried to send to the Ottoman sultan, Mahmud II (1784-1839), in 1823. (This was the same Mahmud II whose efforts anticipated the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman nineteenth century.) But the animal – apparently the first giraffe in Istanbul since the sixteenth century (Laufer 1928: 67) – had died in 1823 even before reaching the shore. Official reports claimed that the giraffe had died in a shipwreck, but the real cause of death was starvation – which Hassan was later said to blame on the Ottoman functionaries for ignoring his claims about how much milk the giraffe needed (Dardaud 2007: 30; see also Allin 1998: 73). This time, for the giraffe intended for France, Hassan
pressed Drovetti to impress upon Mehmet Ali the importance of sending strict orders to Khartoum to keep the giraffe amply provisioned.

After examining French printed and archival sources about this giraffe, the American writer Michael Allin tried to reconstruct details about her passage from the Sudan. Allin went to Khartoum in the early 1990s asking about the giraffe, and like many an American researcher in the Sudan, received “the same initial nervous glance” from Sudanese people who were afraid to talk to him or who doubted his motives (Allin 1998: 200). Allin finally stumbled upon a Sudanese scholar who was sympathetic to his interests and an expert in kindred matters: this was Professor Gaffar Mirghani of the University of Khartoum, who had studied the export of another exotic animal – a hippopotamus – from Khartoum to London in 1849-50. According to Mirghani, the giraffe would have made her journey down the Nile when the river was high in the Spring; she would have sailed in barges; and she would have been unloaded and reloaded at the cataracts near the present-day Sudanese-Egyptian border, unlike slaves, who did more walking (Allin 1998: 201). This scenario of riverine loading and unloading appears to match an account from ancient Egypt, which suggests that the giraffe that entered the gardens of Queen Hatshepsut around the year 1500 BC had traveled from the Sudan on a series of five different barges to Egypt (Dardaud 2007: 33).

Again, giraffes trickled from the Sudan into Egypt over many centuries, and Egypt exported them further as showpieces for kings, queens, and other major potentates. Consider that, in the late fifteenth century, the Mamluk ruler of Egypt sent a gift-giraffe to Lorenzo de Medici (1449-1492) in Florence – a gift so prestigious that, sixty-four years after Lorenzo died, a portraitist at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence painted the giraffe prominently into the picture alongside his owner (Joost-Gaugier 1987). Consider, too, that in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet III (1566-1603) secured a

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4 This reaction may be familiar to American scholars in the Sudan who, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, often faced suspicion as possible Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives. This reaction is worth mentioning insofar as it illustrates the practical, real-life barriers – including antipathies and anxieties in light of national and international politics – that can affect research.
giraffe in Istanbul (Laufer 1928: 67) and marched it through the capital to celebrate his son’s circumcision. But after that, in the period corresponding to the era of the Funj Sultanate in the Sudan (c. 1500-1820), the trickle of giraffes appeared to grow thinner, for reasons that require further investigation. More than three centuries passed before another giraffe headed for Istanbul – and this was the one that died in 1823 for want of milk as it came into harbor.

By the 1820s the situation stood poised to accelerate. As a result of the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1821, a strong Egyptian regime controlled the Sudan – and was able to extract occasional gift-giraffes from its landscape. At the same time, in Europe and North America, interest in the collection of natural specimens was accelerating, and accompanied the growth of public museums and zoos (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998; MacKenzie 2009). Consider that during the same hunt that yielded the future Parisian giraffe in 1825, hunters had captured another female who went to London as a gift from Mehmet Ali to King George IV (1762-1830) of Britain. A delicate creature, this giraffe survived at Windsor Castle for only two years – just long enough for George IV to commission the Swiss artist Jacques-Laurent Agasse (1767-1849) to paint a portrait that showed her with a curved neck that may have been a sign of her illness (and not of her intentional bending) (Royal Collection Trust 2013). Entitled, *The Nubian Giraffe* (1827), this portrait included two turban-clad figures, too – though it is unclear if these were depicting the giraffe’s actual guardians or if a Hassan-and-Atir-style duo that was becoming frozen into an artistic convention. The death of this giraffe notwithstanding, the London Zoological Society (which was founded in the same year as this creature’s arrival in England) proved determined to claim giraffes for its collection. Thus it managed, in 1836, to secure four young giraffes that reportedly came from Kordofan. These four prospered, mated, and had offspring, and became “the progenitors of a long line of English-bred giraffes” (Laufer 1928: 91) – suggesting to zoos in the long run the possibility of breeding rare and possibly endangered animals in captivity, far from their original homes.

5 In its summary of the painting, the Royal Collection Trust describes this creature as a male, but she was a female (Saint-Hilaire 1827: 211).
Postmortem: afterlives of the giraffe in France

Today, outside the giraffe enclosure in the zoo of Lyon located in this city’s Parc de la Tête d’Or, there are several large panels featuring the history of the Sudanese giraffe, who passed through Lyon en route to Paris in 1827. One panel does not mince words when it describes her recipient, Charles X, as having been “too old, too religious, too authoritarian” (trop vieux, trop religieux, trop autoritaire) and “highly criticized” (très critiqué) in France (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013c). Among French republicans and workers, Charles X was an unpopular king who forged a close alliance with conservatives of the royalist and Catholic-church variety. Inspired by the mode of the giraffe’s passage to Paris, critical cartoonists of the period portrayed Charles X as a clumsy giraffe being steered on the road by a priest who was holding his reins (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013c). Even oil paintings that were meant to be flattering portrayed this king with a narrow head, long neck (accentuated by his high-collared jacket), and thin torso that made him seem decidedly “giraffish” (Gérard 1825; Dardaud 2007: 54; Majer 2009/10: 153), helping to explain why the giraffe analogy may have appealed to his detractors.

After meeting the giraffe at Saint-Cloud, Charles X lasted for three years on the throne. He had just enough time before his ouster in 1830 to authorize a French invasion of Algiers, citing an alleged diplomatic insult – the “Fly-Whisk Incident” – as his casus belli. There may have been a connection between the giraffe and the conquest of Algiers. She was a “Trojan giraffe (la girafe de Troie),” argued Olivier Lebleu, “which stimulated the demons of imperialism” in France. Although Mehmet Ali gave the giraffe in an attempt to curry French favor as he set his sights on Greece, Lebleu continued, the gift may have had another, quite different effect. Namely, it bolstered Charles X’s self-image of imperial grandeur and prompted the French king to look enviously across the sea to North Africa, where invasion became thinkable (Lebleu in Dardaud 2007: 90). The invasion of Algiers in 1830 proved to be only the first in a series of incremental conquests by which France went on to carve an enormous territory called “Algeria” in
Africa. Thus constituted, Algeria became not just a French colony but also an official offshore part of France, which discriminated between “French” people (including settlers from mainland France as well as immigrants from elsewhere in southern Europe) on the one hand, and Muslim natives on the other, in granting privileges of citizenship. In short, the invasion of 1830 stuck around for much longer than Charles X did, lasting until the human and material costs of an anticolonial and nationalist war convinced France to vacate Algeria in 1962.

Charles X died in exile in what is now Slovenia in 1836. By contrast, the Sudanese giraffe remained comfortably ensconced in Paris at the Jardin des Plantes, where visitors flocked to see her. She lived on a diet of milk from the two “Egyptian” cows and from the menagerie’s zebus (South Asian cattle, i.e., Bos taurus indicus), supplemented by hay and vegetables, including her favorite, which was onions (Dardaud 2007: 92). Her caretaker Hassan returned to Egypt after delivering her to Paris, but her other caretaker, Atir, lived with her for another decade, sleeping by night on a platform in her enclosure, until he, too, returned to the lands of the Nile. By some accounts, Atir became a neighborhood fixture during his decade at the Jardin des Plantes, quickly learning French, wooing the local Parisian ladies, and according to the menagerie’s police, returning from his nocturnal adventures at dawn (Dardaud 2007: 93). The newspaper Le Figaro reported these tales about the “black” Atir with relish, resorting to Orientalist stereotypes about sexually powerful African men (Lebleu 2006: 151).

The Sudanese giraffe died from an inflammation of the lungs on January 12, 1845 when she was twenty-one years old – a respectable age for a giraffe in captivity (Encyclopedia of Life 2010). “If during her life she had been multiplied ad infinitum by artists and engravers,” observed Olivier Lagueux, an historian of science, then “she was literally after her death cut into pieces. It might therefore be more appropriate to speak of the afterlives of the giraffe, or rather the afterlife of the giraffes” (Lagueux 2003: 243).

Researchers at the Jardin des Plantes took out her heart, lungs, and other soft organs, and preserved them in formaldehyde, but then lost track of them. Researchers
took out her bones and rebuilt her skeleton, which they later donated to the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Caen, in Normandy, in 1869. It appears that her skeleton remained on display in Caen until World War II, when it was incinerated during the Allied bombings that liberated France from the Nazis and from France’s Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime (Lagueux 2003: 243). The most durable part of her body proved to be her skin, which researchers peeled off and stuffed. But in a vaguely understood process that unfolded over many decades, it seems that her stuffed remains eventually moved to a museum in Verdun, where they survived the World War I battles that killed nearly 300,000 French and German soldiers in this one town alone (Lebleu 2006: 182).

The fact that the giraffe’s body parts were preserved in these various ways attests to her status as an animal (either human or non-human) who was scientifically worthy (Alberti 2011). But the fact that the Jardin des Plantes let her skin go, so that her stuffed figure no longer “lives” in Paris, attests to the fact that as the century went on, giraffes became more accessible to zoos. Consequently, she, or rather her skin, may have seemed less special with time. Moreover, judging from the eight giraffes that are now on public display in the Grande Galerie de l’Évolution (located on the grounds of the Jardin des Planets), giraffes eventually reached Paris not only from the Sudan, but also from further south in East Africa. This is because new technologies (notably, trains and steamships) were helping to speed up giraffe exports from Africa, and just as critically, so was the engineering marvel known as the Suez Canal. Constructed under the leadership of Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894), whose father Matthieu de Lesseps (1771-1832) had been a colleague, fellow Freemason, and diplomatic co-conspirator of the same Drovetti who had arranged the gift-giraffe for Mehmet Ali (Galtier 2006), the Suez Canal opened to traffic in 1869 and quickened traffic between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The

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6 Two of the eight giraffes on display there are of the subspecies *Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchi* (also known as the “Masai giraffe” or the “Kilimajaro giraffe”), which “is native to east African savannahs in southern Kenya and Tanzania” (Encyclopedia of Life 2013). The other giraffes on exhibit appear to be of the *Giraffa camelopardalis* and *Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata* variety that was widespread in the Sudan.
Suez Canal more than anything enabled giraffes to “invade” the zoos of Europe and North America during the late nineteenth century (Lebleu 2006: 182).

The history of the Suez Canal later looped around into the history of the Sudanese giraffe in another way, too. In the 1940s and 1950s, the director of Agence France Presse in Cairo, a journalist named Gabriel Dardaud (1899-1993), became aware of her story as the first live giraffe in France. Dardaud began to track her down, first searching in Egyptian archives in Cairo, and then in archives in France. But Dardaud’s career in Egypt was cut short when he became caught in another episode of French world history, namely, the Suez Crisis of 1956, or as Egyptians remember it, the War of the Tripartite Aggression (insofar as France, Britain, and Israel launched it together). For France, the war represented a last-ditch effort to preserve financial stakes in the Suez Canal Company after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) declared its nationalization; France was also attacking the Nasser regime for aiding anticolonial insurgents in Algeria. In the aftermath of this war, Egypt ordered the deportation of French and British passport-holders – including Dardaud. Thus Dardaud landed in Beirut (which English-speakers at the time sometimes called “the Paris of the Middle East”) and worked there until 1984, when, amid the Lebanese Civil War (1975-c. 1990), Hizbollah fighters pillaged his apartment and prompted him to go back to France (Dardaud 2007: 7-18). Thus in 1985, one year after his repatriation, Dardaud found time to publish his research from decades earlier, in a book entitled Une girafe pour le roi (“A Giraffe for the King”), which appeared in a second, annotated, posthumous edition in 2007.

In this book, Dardaud gave his subject a name. He called her “Zarafa” (meaning “giraffe” in Arabic), simply because that was how the functionaries of Mehmet Ali had labeled the bundle of paperwork relating to her acquisition and dispatch to France (Dardaud 2007: 22). Leaving aside the many affectionate epithets that popped up in French sources at the time and later, such as “l’enfant des Tropiques” (Child of the Tropics) (Dardaud 2007: 52), “la belle orpheline égyptienne” (the beautiful Egyptian orphan girl), and again, La Belle Africaine (“The Beautiful African”) (Lebleu 2007: 108,
141), it remains unclear what her captors and caretakers had called her when she lived. Nevertheless, since Dardaud’s book, most commentators have called her “Zarafa”.

Dardaud made another important contribution to the biographical literature on “Zarafa” by tracking down her stuffed skin. Initially, he followed her skin to Verdun, but then lost its (or should we say “her”?) trail for a while, and therefore concluded that it (“she”?) had perished. He later discovered, to his delight, that her taxidermic avatar had somehow survived the battles of World War I and migrated to La Rochelle. To be precise, her skin reached La Rochelle in 1931 in the company of several other stuffed creatures, including two tapirs, two elephants (one Indian, the other African), two hippopotamuses, a rhinoceros, an axis deer or chital, several antelopes, an eland, and a gaur or Indian bison (Lebleu 2006: 182). Her host at the museum of La Rochelle, Dr. Étienne Loppé (1883-1954), was a twentieth-century naturalist who evinced a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century-style passion for collecting specimens. Strikingly, colleagues later remembered Loppé not for having won the giraffe for La Rochelle, but rather for having amassed a unique collection of human-made items from Oceania, such as Easter Island objects including a feathered diadem, a bicephalic sculpture, and head carved from lava. The lava head reached France via the eccentric French traveler and novelist, Pierre Loti (1850-1923), who cultivated a kind of late nineteenth-century “ambiguous exoticism” in both his writings and personal life (Holley-Williams 1954; Musée du Quai Branly 2013).

Dardaud’s account became a touchstone for other writers, and set off a new round of studies. In 1991, Michael Allin, an American writer and self-confessed fan of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, produced a popular biography of “Zarafa” in English (with a French translation to boot). In 2006, Olivier Lebleu, who had stumbled upon the giraffe in La Rochelle, produced a lavishly illustrated study of “Zarafa” and of the giraffomania that she elicited in France, as reflected in both literary sources and the decorative arts.

As the early twenty-first century opened, this resurgent interest in the giraffe had built up so much momentum in France, that it paved the way for a feature-length
animated film based on her story. Called Zarafa, this film debuted in 2012 and targeted an audience of French children (Bezançon and Lie 2012). Because of its richly detailed and lushly colored images, its creative adaptation of historical events, and its vaguely didactic, “feel-good” quality, this film resembles an American Disney movie. In other respects, however, Zarafa is a very French, and very postcolonial, film. Zarafa herself is portrayed as a giraffe version of Audrey Hepburn: she is girlishly beautiful, elegant, and endowed with a gentle sense of humor. Charles X, by contrast, appears as a simian fool: stupid, and more like a monkey than a giraffe. Hassan appears as a handsome, dignified, though stern man dressed in a crisp white jallabiyya and turban, although the film contains no “Atir”. Instead there is a brown-skinned boy named Maki, who ends up accompanying the giraffe and Hassan on the voyage after he escapes from an attempted slave raid on his Sudanese village.

The movie ends happily for its humans. It presents Maki, back in a bucolic Sudanese village with thatched huts, as the kindly and contented patriarch of a flourishing family. And it shows Hassan finding domestic companionship with a beautiful Greek lady pirate (a strong and independent career woman) named Bouboulina. Zarafa in the film functions as an ambassadress, fostering goodwill between the gift-givers (Mehmet Ali as well as Hassan and “Maki”, who seem to stand in for the Nile Valley, the Islamic world, and Africa more broadly) and the receivers (the French people of a vaguely Christian Europe and their diverse present-day heirs – though not Charles X himself, whom the film portrays as an idiot).

As a postcolonial fantasy à la française, the film Zarafa offered an optimistic tale of French-North African, Muslim-Christian symbiosis, while also inspiring a follow-up work of historical fiction for children (Rouer 2013). Perhaps as a natural consequence of the involvement of Charles X, and perhaps because of the timing of its release early in 2012, the film Zarafa seems to evoke not only Franco-Sudanese and Franco-Egyptian history, but Franco-Algerian history as well. In fact, the year 2012 marked the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the 1954-62 war that had made Algeria independent, that had caused perhaps a million Algerian Muslim deaths (Ruedy 1992: 190), and that had sent
more than a million French citizens fleeing “home” to a France that many of them had never set eyes on before (Smith 2006: 3-4). As Zarafa appeared in cinemas, a range of intellectuals throughout France were organizing commemorative lectures, photographic exhibits, musical performances, and other events that tried to achieve some kind of “reconciliation of memories” for a war that still “remained a burning event” (L’Algérie 2012). The audience for these retrospectives also included the large population of French citizens of Algerian Muslim heritage who, according to one estimate, numbered some 1.5 million in the mid-1990s, with many of these people having emigrated to France or having been born in France after the war had ended (Silverstein 2004:4). In short, for many adult viewers of Zarafa, the inclusion of Charles X may have recalled the emotionally entangled history of France and Algeria.

Seeing Them Where There Are None: The disappearance of Sudanese giraffes

At the very moment in the early nineteenth century when the Sudanese giraffe arrived in France – that is, when European and American public zoos were forming, zoological research was booming, and wildlife of all sorts was poised to become more portable over long distances (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998) – giraffes were dwindling in nature. What follows is a survey of this disappearing act that brings the history of Sudanese giraffes up to the present by connecting the two Sudans not only to France and to the former colonial powers of Egypt and Britain, but to global histories of hunting, modern tourism, and conservation.

When Mehmet Ali’s son, Ismail Pasha, invaded the Sudan in 1821, giraffes were still abundant around Sennar, the former capital of the Funj sultanate (c. 1500-c.1820), which was located about 300 kilometers away from the Nile junction where the Turco-Egyptians developed Khartoum as their capital. The local people hunted giraffes and used giraffe leather to make their shields and lances (Cailliaud 1826: Vol. 2, 272; Vol. 3, 63). So reported the French mineralogist Frédéric Cailliaud (1787-1869), who secured a position (with the help of Drovetti) as the Turco-Egyptian expedition’s official prospector for gold and emeralds. Considering, however, that the hunters who captured the giraffe
for France seem to have ventured well beyond Sennar, towards Ethiopia, to find her, it appears that giraffes had disappeared from Sennar itself within three years of the conquest, probably as a result of overhunting (Allin 1998: 41).

Just as Turco-Egyptian officials hunted extravagantly after 1821, so did the British do after their conquest of 1898. Strikingly, much of the active British hunting in the early twentieth century occurred in southern areas of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan – in what is now the Republic of South Sudan – and reflected the fact that many wildlife habitats were contracting away from the north. This was the case for elephants, whose ivory became a lucrative Sudan Government monopoly in 1903, but also for creatures like rhinoceroses and giraffes. Meanwhile, British authorities began to regulate hunting as the twentieth century opened, at first by requiring licenses for foreigners who entered the Sudan as tourists (for example, Chapman 1921). British employees of the Anglo-Egyptian regime faced fewer restrictions on hunting. Indeed, before World War I, the ability to engage in big-game hunting for leisure – and to boost salaries by cashing in ivory extracted from elephants – presented a major perquisite for Britons working in the mosquito-ridden zones of southern Sudan (Carruthers 1997: 299; Stigand 1913).

In the early twentieth century, shooting a giraffe – and not receiving a gift-giraffe – was what seemed to boost a European man’s prestige. And the word “man”, not “woman”, was important, for European big-game hunting was almost exclusively a male preserve, and one that helped to bolster early twentieth-century European and American ideals of masculinity. To be sure, Sudanese peoples had a long tradition of pursuing giraffes as well. However, instead of capturing giraffes alive for export, or killing them for the mere thrill of the hunt, Sudanese peoples usually killed giraffes for their meat and leather in a process that involved hunting by men and preparation by women (Arnold and Lyons 2011; Cunnison 1958).

Men like Theodore (“Teddy”) Roosevelt (1858-1919), who went to hunt in what are now Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan in 1910, embodied this macho ideal. As President of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt had become known for his “Big-Stick”
approach to U.S. foreign policy (after his advice to “speak softly and carry a big stick”, meaning to threaten people nicely). By the time he reached the Sudan, Teddy Roosevelt was already becoming associated with the children’s stuffed toy animal known as the “Teddy Bear”, which had been named in his honor following his refusal, one day in 1902, to shoot a bear that had been tied to a tree in Mississippi (National Park Service 2013). In memoirs that included an itemized kill-list of the 296 creatures he personally shot (such as seven giraffes [in western Kenya], eight elephants, and twenty zebras), Roosevelt claimed that his hunting had a scientific purpose: he was collecting specimens for the “National Museum” – now the Smithsonian Institution – in Washington, D.C. (Roosevelt 1910: 3, 532-33). His claims point to the blurry distinctions between hunting as a sport and hunting as a scientific endeavor, in this era when nascent international conventions were arguably keener to protect hunting opportunities for white men than to protect wildlife (Cioc 2009).

On the ground in the Sudan, restrictions on hunting grew tighter as the twentieth century progressed. A mediator in this process was James Stevenson-Hamilton (1867-1957), a British South African military veteran and director of the Sabi Game Reserve (the precursor to Kruger National Park) who worked for the Anglo-Egyptian regime from 1917 to 1921. Three things appalled and worried Stevenson-Hamilton. First, British officials in the Sudan hunted on lands that the regime had classified as game reserves. Second, tourists hunted on a massive scale – as in the case of one American who set a grassland on fire in order to shoot all the animals as they fled (Carruthers 1997: 307-9). And third, rifles and modern transport were making hunting easy (too easy) and quick. Stevenson-Hamilton held private scorn for men like Winston Churchill (1874-1965), later Britain’s Prime Minister, who engaged in something like armchair hunting by shooting at game while seated on the “cowcatcher” (the grille projecting from the front of a train) and “blaz[ing] at everything he saw” (Carruthers 1997: 307; Churchill 1908: 12).

Coming from South Africa, where big game animals were on the verge of extinction, and where a conservation-oriented “natural park philosophy” was growing in importance based on the idea that wildlife was an asset and a form of heritage (or what in French would be called *patrimoine*), Stevenson-Hamilton drafted in 1921 new wildlife
legislation for the Sudan in an era when hunting had become “tainted by the use of modern weapons” (Carruthers 1997: 312-15).

New medical treatments were changing hunting as well. In memoirs, Peter Molloy, who worked as the last British game warden in Southern Sudan from 1946 to 1954, noted that by the end of his tenure, “the giraffe [were] almost, the rhino totally, exterminated” in southern Darfur, and once-prolific wild antelope were “few and scattered”. Molloy observed that Darfur’s Arabs (who belonged to the pastoralist Baqqara, meaning in Arabic “cattle people”) had traditionally faced a natural barrier in the form of tsetse fly, which spread sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) and thereby deterred them from hunting south of Darfur. But in 1951, Molloy was “alarmed to find that this natural barrier to poaching incursions had been rudely shattered by antricyde, the new prophylactic against trypanosomiasis...” Through a black-market trade in this drug, the Arabs of Southern Darfur were able to ride “immunized horses [that] were pressing deep into the hunting-ground south of the border, which had hitherto been inaccessible....” (Molloy 1957: 85).

In 1958, two years after Britain’s formal decolonization of the Sudan, the anthropologist Ian Cunnison (1923-2013) published an article about giraffe-hunting among the Muslim, Arabic-speaking, Humr community of Kordofan (who were also Baqqara people), just east of Darfur. As a work of ethnographic prose, this article now seems poetic in its beauty. The Humr told Cunnison that their grandfathers used to hunt giraffes by riding on horseback, chasing them into muddy areas, and spearing them. But in the 1950s they were hunting with rifles, which were mostly “French and British relics of the nineteenth century” (Cunnison 1958: 49). Since the giraffe habitat had contracted, the Humr were venturing south of Kordofan, in areas that were sparsely inhabited by people who had not traditionally hunted big game on horseback – namely, non-Muslim Dinka and Nuer people of Upper Nile Province (in what is now South Sudan). Technically, the government restricted “the whole Messiriya tribe (Humr and Zurg) [of the Baqqara]...[to] an allocation of 60 giraffe a year” (Cunnison 1958: 50). But the Humr killed more when opportunity arose, hunting giraffes as they found them in herds of three
to seven creatures in the forest or up to sixty in the open plains. Meanwhile, the British game warden Peter Molloy observed that habits of meat-eating (from various animals) had risen, since rifles meant that hunts that had once fed single families were now able to kill enough to feed whole villages (Molloy 1957: 141).

The Humr used giraffes for a lavish giraffe-meat cuisine. One of their favorite dishes, for example, was *umm nyolokh*, consisting of the giraffe’s braised liver, pounded together with its bone marrow, along with salt, red pepper, and dried onions, until it reached a soup-like consistency. The Humr used everything from the dead animal, for example, making the female giraffe’s stomach hide into a bowl for liquid butter. As a result, the only parts left behind on the field after a kill were the hooves and skull (Cunnison 1958: 55).

Giraffes seemed to enchant the Humr in the mid-1950s as much as they had enchanted the French in the late 1820s. “A kind of giraffe mania pervades Humr life,” Cunnison observed, though he wondered if the intense interest in giraffe (the most popular topic of fireside conversation) was a recent response to its increasing scarcity. The Humr staged elaborate divination ceremonies before a hunt. Humr men, who were otherwise observant Muslims who did not drink alcohol, described giraffe soup (again, *umm nyolokh*) as “intoxicating”. People even reported dreaming about giraffes. “In the waking state, also, men swear that they see a giraffe through the forest or over the plain where there are none at all.” He concluded that, “In the absence of any physiological explanation, these phenomena may perhaps be regarded as an indication of the extent to which the Humrawi’s being is permeated with thoughts of giraffe” (Cunnison 1958: 60).

In the late twentieth century, overhunting and competition for farmland depleted giraffe populations throughout Africa (Ciofolo 1995: 577-78). But in Sudan, the protracted civil war (1955-72, 1983-c. 2005) aggravated the wildlife crisis in particular ways, as the United National Environment Programme (UNEP) reported in 2007 when it published a “post-conflict environmental assessment” (UNEP 2007). “As late as 1970,” the report asserted, “Sudan boasted some of the most unspoilt and isolated wilderness in
east Africa, and its wildlife populations were world-renowned” (UNEP 2007: 252). Amidst war and political instability, however, sanctuaries and national parks lost funding and staff and stopped functioning. Hunting continued without restraint, and proliferating firearms sped up the killing (UNEP 2007: 262, 265). Large wildlife “essentially disappeared” from northern and central Sudan (now in the Republic of the Sudan) (UNEP 2007: 264). The Jonglei Dam (whose digging had been a precipitating factor in the renewed outbreak of war in 1983) persisted as an unfinished ditch that impeded wildlife migration (UNEP 2007: 12). And a multiplying population of humans and other animals (especially cows, sheep, and goats) was adding to environmental pressures (Suliman 1997: 104), even as livestock were playing an ever more important role in the Sudanese domestic and export economy, and as pastoralists were competing with agriculturalists for access to usable land (Casciarri and Ahmed 2009).

In 1980, an aerial survey had counted 2,097 giraffes in Southern National Park (south of Wau, in the western side of what is now South Sudan near the Central African Republic border) and many to the east, near the Ethiopian border, in Boma National Park (4,605 in the wet season and 9,028 in the dry season. A team of conservationists suggested in 2012 that the total giraffe population of South Sudan is now near Boma – and only near Boma – and may number below 450 animals in the whole country (Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012). By contrast, a safari company, appealing to foreign tourists in 2013, claimed a few thousand (Bahr El Jebal Safaris 2013).

Consider this history in brief: The area corresponding to the current Republic of the Sudan (i.e., northern Sudan) exported giraffes to Egypt from the Pharaonic era until the early nineteenth century. But as the nineteenth century ended, the Sudanese giraffe habitat was contracting at an accelerated rate as a result of human hunting – and more specifically, of hunting with guns, which poured into the region and made killing faster and easier. By the mid-twentieth century, giraffes had largely disappeared from northern Sudan (aside from a population of ninety giraffes found in Darfur, near the Chad border, in 1976 (Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012) and were found mostly in southern regions. As the twenty-first century opened, giraffes were extinct in northern Sudan and
verging on extinction in the south. Meanwhile, future prospects for giraffes and other large game animals were looking doubtful in the face of bushmeat hunting, by local people killing animals as a food source, and safari hunting, by rich foreigners ready to pay for the thrill (Amum and Eves 2009; Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012).

Since achieving independence in 2011, the South Sudanese government and international observers have issued reports suggesting that coherent, conservation-centered wildlife policies may be taking shape. Some reports, like those issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), see potential for South Sudanese parks to attract a kind of tourism or even “sustainable game ranching” to bolster and diversify the economy (UNDP 2013; UNEP 2007: 273). Conservation societies express much gloomier scenarios, however, and predict the imminent extinction of elephants, giraffes, zebras, and other large mammals in South Sudan as a result of hunting and habitat loss (Agence France Press 2012 [citing an official from the Wildlife Conservation Society]; Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012 [on behalf of the Giraffe Conservation Trust]). The big unknown in this story may be the literally thousands of South Sudanese game wardens – “over 7,300 men as of late 2006” (UNEP 2007: 265), and a staff of some 15,000 men and women in 2013 (UNDP 2013), who are entrusted with patrolling national parks and sanctuaries for the sake of protecting their wildlife. Most of these wardens are decommissioned soldiers, who are armed and who may be combatting poachers even as they themselves continue to hunt wildlife for meat as they did to secure food during the war (see Langfitt 2011).

**Conclusion: talismans, fantasies, dreams**

In 2003, Human Rights Watch issued a report surveying human rights abuses against the Dinka and Nuer people who lived near recently developed southern oilfields, which the Khartoum regime was intent on controlling. Amidst harrowing details of violence, the report paused to reflect on ecology and wildlife. Traditionally, it remarked, the “agro-pastoralist” residents of this area (in contrast to the Baqqara Arabs) had rarely hunted wild birds and mammals, although such creatures defined their landscape. “The
names of rivers and towns in various Nilotic languages suggest this variety, for instance, Ghazal (gazelle) [as in the Bahr el Ghazal River], Jeraf (giraffe) [as in the Bahr el Zeraf or Bahr el Zaraf River], and Mankien (mother egret) [as in the town of this name]” (Human Rights Watch 2003: 78). Today, there are no giraffes left along the Giraffe River of South Sudan, though their memory persists in the landscape.

In 2010, as southern Sudanese people were anticipating the referendum that might enable the region’s secession, leaders tried to articulate their dreams and visions for a future country – for South Sudan. Against this context, the London Telegraph reported that for a projected cost of $7 billion, “Juba, the region's rapidly-growing capital, will be re-designed into the outline of a rhinoceros. The city of around one million people will have a park sited in its horn and a 5-star hotel where the animal's eye would be.” It added that, “The region's second-largest city, Wau, is to be modelled on a giraffe, with a large industrial estate in its neck” (Plantz 2010). Another source reported the opposite – that Juba would be the giraffe and Wau the rhino – and that the cost would be $10.1 billion (Nerenberg 2010). Planners may have been looking to the example of oil-rich Dubai for inspiration in suggesting urban concoctions of this kind. Yet, in a region and soon-to-be-country where educational and health infrastructures were so limited that a 15-year-old southern Sudanese girl was five times more likely to die in childbirth than to be in school (The Economist 2011 and Womakuyu 2011 citing the World Health Organization), the plan for multi-billion-dollar giraffe- and rhino-shaped cities may have functioned more as fantasies than as credible plans. Nevertheless, the mere fact that someone thought up this plan – and announced it to the world – suggests the power of the giraffe and other creatures in shaping fantasies and hopes relative to what is now South Sudan.

As Humr men suggested to the anthropologist Ian Cunnison in the 1950s, giraffe mania (or “giraffomania”) does strange things to people – it hovers in people’s dreams. This proved true in France as well, and not only in 1827 when the first live giraffe reached Paris. Consider a bizarre story that the historian Olivier Lagueux recounted about this giraffe – or to be precise, her stuffed skin – in the midst of World War I in Verdun. While some sources have speculated that her body was taken safely out of the
town before fighting started, or even that the giraffe in Verdun was another giraffe altogether (see Lebleu 2006: 184), one report – written in 1923, in anticipation of the centennial of her arrival in France – claimed that French soldiers found her, with neck and head peaking out of second-floor rubble of the town’s museum, and took her into the trenches. Lagueux calls her their “saintly relic” and their “improvised Joan of Arc from whom they awaited a miraculous intercession” (Lagueux 2003: 242-43). Because the giraffe, alive and then dead, exerted a kind of talismanic tug on the imaginations of many French people who encountered her, Lagueux calls his study of her a “hagiography” rather than a “biography”.

Writing in 1827, Honoré de Balzac put words into the mouth of the Sudanese giraffe in Paris, *La Belle Africaine*, when he had her warn the troupe of Osage Indians, who were also visiting the city, that if they died in France, their fate might be like her fate – to someday be stuffed “to amuse the living” (Majer 2009/10: 147). Just as she (or rather Balzac!) predicted, she died and was stuffed. In retrospect, her story may seem sad but is not utterly tragic, since creatures of her species – the *Giraffa camelopardalis* – are still walking on Earth today. Indeed, there are perhaps 80,000 giraffes still living in the wild in Africa – albeit none in the successor-state territory (the Republic of the Sudan) from which she herself once hailed (Giraffe Conservation Foundation 2013). And while she may be standing alone in stairwell in La Rochelle, and not with the eight other giraffes that now loom over the other stuffed creatures in the dramatically lit, cathedral-like atrium of the Grande Galerie de l’Évolution in Paris (see Philibert 2002), she is extremely fortunate not to qualify for membership in the sepulchral hall where the same museum displays the stuffed skins of extinct and near-extinct animals. For example, she is not standing in a glass case with the South African quagga (*Equus quagga quagga*), a sub-species of zebra. According to the label outside his case, this quagga left Africa in

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7 Lebleu suggests that the specimen in Verdun may have been the “Daubenton giraffe”. This was perhaps the stuffed skin of the same giraffe whose skeleton now stands in the paleontology gallery in Paris. A sign in the museum identifies this skeleton as the giraffe of William V (1748-1806), the Prince of Orange. Seized by French troops in the Hague in 1795, this giraffe became the subject of a study by the naturalist Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716-99) in Paris.
1784, and entered the Jardin des Plantes in 1794 along with other survivors of Louis XVI’s menagerie. Although he lived for four more years in the garden, most of his of peers died from starvation within a year, because the keepers of this incipient zoo were not able to, did not know how to, or did not care enough to, keep the late king’s creatures alive (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998: 103-4). This stuffed quagga of Louis XVI now stares with glass eyes at a world in which creatures of his kind have been extinct in nature since the 1870s and extinct in captivity since the last one died, at the Amsterdam zoo, in 1883 (Maas 2008).

In sum, whatever we call her – *La Belle Africaine*, Zarafa, or just the Sudanese giraffe who went to France – the creature who stands at the center of this study enables us to tell a multitude of stories. She was one in a long line of gift-giraffes across history, from antiquity to the nineteenth century, sent from the Sudan to glorify and impress powerful rulers. Alive and then dead, she crossed paths with a surprisingly large and unlikely cast of interesting humans – in settings ranging from Nile barges to the French royal court and a World War I trench. By migrating to France, she drew a line of Franco-Sudanese contact. A straight “transnational” approach has the potential to privilege a clean line of contact, even though the arcs of history, in practice, are likely to be messy and wobbly, and to meander hither and yon. Transnational history may also privilege “nations” when other spatial units of analysis may be just as relevant – empires, waterways (such as the Mediterranean, or the Nile), and even vaguer “zones” (with “the Sudan” in the aftermath of the 2011 break-up now being a “zone”, as it was before the drawing of colonial boundaries). In this respect, the study presented here is more of a zone history than a national history – one that studies a Franco-Sudanese zone within the larger swirl of the world.

Imagine more closely the swirl of world history, and what it can leave in its wake. The debris that has settled from its spinning resembles the jumble of objects in the natural history museum of La Rochelle: a Sudanese giraffe here, a Franco-Caribbean-American bird painting over there, a Côte d’Ivoirien wood carving upstairs, and so on – each testifying to a different series of migrations, and suggesting how things, like people and
ideas, have lives and can travel (Appadurai 1996; Spitta 2009). Of course, different assemblages of objects, like different curations of the past, can tell different histories. This article began by showcasing one item – the stuffed skin, the relic, of a Sudanese giraffe who was born near the Sudanese-Ethiopian border in the early nineteenth century and who died in a zoo in Paris some twenty years later – and then attempted to reconstruct the journeys she made, the paths she crossed, and the changes she may have set into motion (however unwittingly), all against the larger contexts of where she came from and ended up going. By suggesting what complicated patterns the past can elicit, as well as the challenge facing historians who decide what to weave, this narrative seeks to tell a Franco-Sudanese zone history while drawing out lessons about the practice of, and choices in, the writing of history at large.
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