2. Tolerance and Taboo

Modernist Primitivisms and
Postmodernist Pieties

Exoticism, as Michel Leiris knew, can take many forms, not the least of which is the contemporary urge to eliminate it once and for all, to demonstrate that we are all equal and that, so far as history goes, an enlightened “we” who live at the end of the twentieth century can see the hidden and not-so-hidden colonialism, racism, and sexism of the early twentieth century as in itself it really was. In her highly praised study *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellec ts, Modern Lives* (1990), for example, Marianna Torgovnik is scornful of modernist definitions and ideas about the primitive, which “all take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and subordinatable.”2 “We simply do not have,” she mourns, “a neutral, politically acceptable vocabulary,” the “best we can do” thus being “to uncover, from a political and cultural perspective, the kinds of work key terms like primitive have performed within modern and postmodern culture and the kinds of work they have evaded and short-changed” (GP 21).

But of course words like “evaded” and “short-changed” are themselves loaded, suggesting that there is a correct (as in politically correct) way to regard “the primitive” and the “work” it should perform in our culture. Oddly—and I shall come back to this issue—*Gone Primitive* seems to have learned little from a book that appeared just two years earlier and on which it is heavily dependent for its information, subject matter, and even its specific examples, namely James Clifford’s *Predicaments of Culture* (1988), which argued eloquently that “the words of ethnographic writing . . . cannot be construed as monological, as the authoritative statement about, or interpretation of, an abstracted, textualized reality.”3 When Torgovnik does cite Clifford, it is to remark (accurately enough) about his omission of the role gender plays in the construction of “the primitive,” an omission that places Clifford in the long line of those first-world male (and sometimes, like Margaret Mead, even female) ethnographers who have victimized the Other.4 Thus, in an ironic reversal, the ethnographer takes the place of the “primitive” in the “them” versus “us” game.

Fieldwork, in this scheme of things, is devalued as old-fashioned empiricism, as is any sort of firsthand experience of ethnographic acts and their objects of investigation—the knowledge, for starters, of the languages both of the investigators and the investigated. The preferred method is to know what one wants to prove—in this case, that modernism was riddled with racism, sexism, and colonialism—and then to proceed to collect one’s supporting exempla, the game being to ignore all “evidence” that might point in a contrary direction. Ironically, then, we are now witnessing an increasing body of scholarship on oppressed groups that, in its zeal to track down the oppressors, reinscribes the very oppression and subordination it seeks to deconstruct. And further: such would-be oppositional discourse curiously reverts to the very binary model poststructuralist critics have assiduously claimed to be undermining. In what follows, I take Torgovnik’s interrogation of modernist primitivism as my example.

Chapter 7 of *Gone Primitive*, “The Many Obsessions of Michel Leiris,” begins with the following thumbnail sketch:

Michel Leiris is a French novelist, poet, and man of letters, but also and by profession, an ethnographer who has written a massive and important book on African art. Intellectually, he has traveled with his culture, moving from Surrealism in the twenties and thirties, to Existentialism after World War II, to, more recently, a poststructuralist concern with language. He has been the intellectual bridesmaid of figures better known in this country, like Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre. (GP 109)

Whatever audience Torgovnik is writing for here, surely it cannot be an audience in any way familiar with French literature or culture, much less with Michel Leiris or problems of African ethnography. “A graduate seminar at Duke in Spring 1988,” explains this professor of English in her
preface, "was indefatigable in providing me with information and with evidence that primitivism was everywhere present in contemporary culture" (GP xi). Here, one surmises, is a projected readership not likely to be offended by such inaccuracies as that Leiris was a "bridesmaid" (an odd vulgarity) of Sartre, or that Leiris’s interest in language followed his surrealistic phase (which was, incidentally, never fully surrealistic), when in fact it coincided with it. And further: only a fairly narrowly drawn American audience would not question Torgovnick’s assertion that the "best-known work in English on Leiris," a special issue of *SubStance* edited by Jean-Jacques Thomas, conceives of the writer as "ethnographic hero" and ignores (in the case of Mary Ann Caws’s essay) his terrible misogyny. What Torgovnick doesn’t say is that this issue appeared as long ago as 1975 when gender theory was in its infancy and that, from the sixties to the present, a rich secondary literature on Leiris has come into being, critics from Maurice Blanchot, Philip Lejeune, and Susan Sontag to Rosalind Krauss, James Clifford, and Denis Hollier writing major commentary on this complex and brilliant writer.

Then, too, the cultural production Torgovnick investigates seems oddly unrelated to questions of the actual production and reception of Leiris’s autobiography. The critic bases her entire reading of Leiris’s *Manhood* (*L’Age d’homme,* 1939) on its "inspiring icon" in the form of Lucas Cranach’s diptych *Lureeze and Judith* (1536), reproduced on the book’s cover (see GP 109). But although Cranach’s diptych is indeed central to Leiris’s autobiography, the original 1939 edition published in Paris by Gallimard does not reproduce the painting at all (it first appeared in the 1946 edition, where *L’Age d’homme* is preceded by the introductory essay, "De la littérature considérée comme une tsauromachie"). The 1966 *Livre de Poche* edition has on its cover a blown-up detail of Judith’s torso, the gender of the headless figure, holding what seems to be its own head in its left hand, being ambiguous; and the 1973 Folio paperback edition depicts Judith as a semi-abstract playing-card figure, a kind of Queen of Hearts. Indeed, the first time Cranach’s Lureeze and Judith become, so to speak, Leiris cover girls is in the 1984 North Point Press translation by Richard Howard (a translation originally published by Grossman in 1968). And when the University of Chicago Press recently reissued this edition, North Point having gone out of business, the cover design and format were retained.

Leiris’s "misogynist" cover (which was not in fact his cover at all) thus finds itself juxtaposed to Torgovnick’s own Chicago cover, in her case Man Ray’s 1926 photograph *Kiki* (also called *Noire et blanche*), an egre-

...igious example, no doubt, of modernist "primitivism," in its juxtaposition of the oval head of Man Ray’s sleeping mistress (Kiki) to the oval African mask with its sightless eyes, both the "white" face, underneath jet black hair, and the black mask, silhouetted against Kiki’s naked white arm and shoulder, being rendered as fetishized objects controlled by the male artist-photographer Man Ray. What the Leiris—Man Ray juxtaposition masks, however, is that, unlike Man Ray, whose passionate love life was legendary, Michel Leiris had, by his own account, enormous sexual difficulties. His erotic fantasies of dismemberment, far from being directed outward, say, toward African women who would have to submit to his will, were primarily directed at his own person.

The aim of Torgovnick’s chapter, in any case, is to debunk the myth of Leiris as "intellectual hero," a term I have never seen applied to Leiris but which Torgovnick uses a number of times interchangeably with "postmodern ethnographic hero." Although in his famous essay of 1950, "Léthnographe devant le colonialisme," Leiris "correctly" (the word is Torgovnick’s) "notes the colonized would begin to ‘speak back’ to the once monologic West," and although Leiris "admirably" (again her word) "maintains that the ethnographer’s role should be that of facilitating the future that the formerly colonized imagine for themselves" (GP 106), such "admirable" and "correct" ideas are evidently not enough to redeem a writer whose early autobiographical work *Manhood,* when read in conjunction with the ostensibly anticolonialist *African Art* (1967), reveals "a spillage between sexuality and Western interest in African art—a spillage we too often take for granted, and take for granted to our shame" (GP 107).

Let us see what we should be ashamed about. *Manhood,* Torgovnick claims, cannot just be read as an arresting fictionalized autobiography; on the contrary, "the terms Leiris chooses for his exposure of self should be taken seriously and count as facts about his brand of primitivism, even if they are ‘invented’ or ‘constructed’ facts" (GP 108). The word facts is interesting in this context. One such "fact," evidently, is Leiris’s reading of Cranach’s *Lureeze and Judith,* a double painting that, so the author tells us, represents the two erotic poles that haunted his adolescence and young manhood. Here, taken out of its context which I shall discuss in a moment, is Leiris’s description:

the first, Lureeze, pressing to the center of her white chest, between two marvelously hard round breasts (whose nipples seem as rigid as the stones decorating a gorget or cuirass at the same place), the narrow
blade of a dagger whose tip is already beaded, like the most intimate gift appearing at the end of the male member, with a few drops of blood, and about to annihilate the effect of the rage she has suffered by a similar gesture; one that will thrust into a warm sheath of flesh, and for a bloody death, the weapon at its maximum degree of stiffness, like the rapist’s inexorable virility when it enters by force the orifice already gaping between her thighs, the gentle pink wound that soon after returned the libation in full measure, just as the wound—deeper, wickedness, but perhaps even more intoxicating—made by the dagger will release, from Lucrece’s very heart as she faints or fails, a torrent of blood; the second, Judith, in her right hand a sword naked as herself, its point piercing the ground close to her slender toes and its firm broad blade having just severed Holofernes’ head, which hangs, sinister trophy, from the heroine’s left hand, fingers and hair mingled in hideous union—Judith, wearing a necklace as heavy as a convict’s chain, whose coldness around her voluptuous neck recalls that of the sword close to her feet—Judith, placid and already seeming to ignore the bearded ball she holds like a phallic gans she could have sooned merely by pressing her legs together with Holofernes’ floodgates opened; or which, an ogress at the height of her madness, she might have cut from the powerful member of the drunken (and perhaps vomiting) man with a sudden snap of her teeth."

Interestingly, Cranach’s paintings have little of the violence and horror that Leiris ascribes to them; his astonishing ekphrasis teases out meanings largely submerged if not absent in the diptych, where the myths are primarily vehicles for the painter’s exhibition of the female body in all its sensuous nudity. The reference to Judith’s “fingers and [Holofernes’] hair mingled in hideous union,” for instance, is a pure invention on Leiris’s part, the calm expression on Judith’s lovely face all but belying what has just taken place. But Torgovnick pays no attention to these anomalies, concerned as she is with what she takes to be the “repellent” “porographic violence” of Leiris’s description, and concluding that he must have come to ethnography “via sensual associations very much like those which attract him to Cranach’s Lucrece and Judith.”

Accordingly, when she reads the later, seemingly objective account in African Art of the tribal signification of scarification and tattooing, as well as of circumcision and, in the case of young women, excision of the clitoris and the labia majora, Torgovnick detects an ulterior motive. Leiris is not, she argues, writing a disinterested account of African tribal customs; he is enjoying what he calls the “prophylactic effect” inherent in his “ethnographic approach to the primitive” (GP 114). Like Judith and Lucrece, the native women described with seeming scientific detachment cannot “talk back,” the male viewer thus being able to gaze at them voyeuristically. “They are object; he is subject. He is in control, empowered, unthreatened” (GP 114). The attraction of Africa for Leiris turns out to be pornographic, a vehicle for his diseased sexual fantasies about women. Such ethnographic work, Torgovnick concludes, is finally “pervasive,” a model we who are enlightened must abjure. Its “structures of mastery” must give way to those of “mutuality; a reaching out to the natural world as our home and mother, not the exploitation of that world for profit.” “Primitive societies,” after all, should be “allowed to exist in their own times and spaces, within their own conceptions of time and space, not transposed and filtered into Western terms.” Indeed, a correct history of primitive societies would acknowledge these societies “as full and valid alternatives to Western cultures” (GP 247).

On what planet, one wonders, do these utopian conditions obtain? Where are the “structures of mutuality,” where the “natural world” is “our home and mother,” where each society exists “in its own time and space”? Not, assuredly, in Leiris’s France, a France that during the writer’s high school years was engaged in the horrific trench warfare of World War I, a France, moreover, that by the time he published Manhood was months away from the Nazi occupation of World War II. In these circumstances, “structures of mutuality” and “full and valid alternatives” (themselves, incidentally, nothing if not Western post-Enlightenment norms) may have seemed just slightly out of reach.

Here is where history comes in, history which is the great absence in the branch of cultural studies practiced by Torgovnick. Her reasoning goes something like this: (1) Enlightened narrative about so-called primitive societies is directly related to”enlightened” personal morality; (2) Leiris, judging from the revelations in his autobiography, revelations that must count as relevant “facts” in any assessment of his “character,” had curious sexual obsessions; therefore, (3) even though Leiris later writes explicitly and eloquently against colonialism, his accounts of such matters as African tattoo and scarification rituals are not to be trusted. To put it crudely: anyone so preoccupied with what well may be kinky sex, and who persists in seeing sex in its relationship to death, cannot be the kind of “ethnographic hero” “we” want.
I wish I could say my summary of Torgovnick’s argument was simplified, but the fact is that the colonialist Joseph Conrad and the racist D. H. Lawrence, the voyeuristic Bronislaw Malinowski, and even the cowardly Margaret Mead who, despite her own lesbian leanings, stopped short of explicitly writing against homophobia (GP 238)—all these are found wanting according to the severe Puritan yardstick applied to them in *Gone Primitive*. How Conrad’s representations of the European experience in the Congo in the early century relate to other accounts of the period is considered beside the point, the point being, it seems, that Conrad refused to spell out what lay behind Kurtz’s famous phrase, “the horror, the horror,” that he ignored “ugly facts, facts like how those heads of the natives got on the palisade, facts like the African woman’s relation to Kurtz” (GP 152). “Conrad’s version of the primitive,” declares Torgovnick with great moral authority, “is a cheat” (GP 153).

So, it seems, was the “phantom Africa” of Michel Leiris. Born in 1901, Leiris grew up in bourgeois comfort in Paris, where his father was a banker, seemingly insulated from the Great War, which broke out, let us remember, when he was at the impressionable age of thirteen. Not that *Manhood* is overtly a war book. Indeed, its foreword, “De la littérature considérée comme une taurinachie” (in the English translation, “The Autobiographer as Torero” becomes the afterword), begins with the nonchalant reference to its author’s coming to legal maturity “four years after the war, which like so many other boys of his generation, he had experienced as scarcely more than a long vacation” (MLM 154; LD 9). But in the very next paragraph, we read, “Now in 1939, when the young men of the post-war period see the utter collapse of that structure of facility which they despairs of trying to invest with not only an authentic fervor but a terrible distinction as well, the author freely acknowledges that his true ‘manhood’ still remains to be written, when he will have suffered, in one form or another the same bitter ordeal his elders faced.” And on the following page, the narrative breaks off abruptly with the following remarks:

This was the preface I was writing for *Manhood* on the eve of the “phony war.” I am rereading it today (evidently 1945) in Le Havre, a city I have often visited for a few days’ vacation and to which I am bound by many old ties (my friends Limbour, Queneau, and Salacrou, who were born here; Sartre, who taught here and with whom I became associated in 1941 when most of the writers remaining in occupied France united against the Nazi oppression). Le Havre has now largely destroyed, as I can see from my balcony, which overlooks the harbor from a sufficient height and distance to give a true picture of the terrible *tabula rasa* the bombs made in the center of the city, as if there has been an attempt to repeat in the real world, on a terrain populated by living beings, the famous Cartesian operation. On this scale, the personal problems with which *Manhood* is concerned are obviously insignificant: whatever might have been, in the best cases, its strength and its sincerity, the poet’s inner agony, weighed against the horrors of war, counts for no more than a toothache over which it would be graceless to groan. (MLM 154–55; cf. LD 11)

Such speculations might have led to silence—the “no poetry after Auschwitz” stance. Or they might lead, as indeed they did, to the use of “the toothache over which it would be graceless to groan” and related aches and wounds as synecdoches and analogs for those “horrors of war,” and, in a larger sense, horrors of being human, which are, in any case, always seen as paradoxical. “Even in Le Havre,” Leiris remarks in the foreword, “things continue, urban life persists. Above the still intact houses as above the site of the ruins there shines intermittently, despite the rainy weather, a bright, beautiful sun” (MLM 155). Just so, the imagery of death, of shame and horror, of the abject which is so prominent in *Manhood* is made poignant by its association with desire and pleasure, with the longing for voluptuous gratification. And to complicate matters further, what makes modern “civilized” urban life so terrifying is that the orderly and familiar rituals of bourgeois family life to which the child is exposed, the boredom of normal everyday existence provide only the filmsiest screen for the violence beneath the surface.

In assessing Leiris’s authorial position in *African Art*, read retrospectively in the light of his autobiography, Torgovnick writes “They [the African women] are object; he is subject. He is in control, empowered, unthreatened” (GP 114). Presumably Leiris has this position because he is a white man, describing the tribal mutilation practices of black women. But surely no one is less “in control” and “unthreatened” than the hero of *Manhood*, who, from the opening page of the book, presents himself as having a “head . . . rather large for my body,” legs “a little short for the length of my torso,” and thin, hairy hands, “the veins distinct; my two middle fingers, curving inward toward the tips, [which] must denote
something rather weak and evasive in my character." And further: "Sexually, I am not, I believe, abnormal—simply a man of rather cold temperament—but I have long tended to regard myself as virtually impotent. It has been some time, in any case, since I have ceased to consider the sexual act as a simple matter, but rather as a relatively exceptional event" (MLM 5). Here is the personal predisposition that colors so many of the book's subsequent events and memories.

Take the memory of the boy's first erection, which takes place when he is six or seven on a family picnic in the woods near Paris. "The event which caused my excitement was the sight of a group of children... climbing trees barefoot... Much later, it seemed to me that the strange sensation I experienced then came from imagining what must have been both a pleasant and painful feeling for the children in question, the feeling caused by the contact of the soles of their feet and their bare toes with the rough bark" (MLM 13–14). We may consider such confessions as, in Torgovnick's words, "a disturbing reminder of how this linking of sex and violence... pervades Western culture and provides a psyche like Leiris's with ready simulacra" (GP 110). Or we may try to understand Leiris's collage of "disturbing" images as by no means "simulacra," but, on the contrary, images with specific reference to a time and place when pretensions of protected childhood and "civilized" behavior, of paternal and church authority and training, of fixed class division and the seemingly incontrollable gap between masters and servants—when all these cultural formations were playing themselves out against the backdrop of a world war that is a persistent but barely alluded to subtext.

We can see this anomaly most clearly in the short sequence called "Throat Cut," in the chapter "The Head of Holofernes." The incident in question could hardly be more ordinary, and yet the autobiographer, who has presented his childhood self as acquiring his knowledge of violence and tragedy largely from spectatorship, whether at the opera, at the theater, or in the museum, recalls it as "the most painful of all my childhood memories":

At the age of five or six, I was the victim of an assault. I mean that I endured an operation on my throat to remove certain growths; the operation took place in a very brutal manner, without my being anesthetized. My parents had first made the mistake of taking me to the surgeon without telling me where we were going. If my recollections are correct, I believed we were on the way to the circus; I was therefore far from anticipating the nasty trick about to be played on me by our family doctor, who assisted the surgeon, as well as by the latter himself. The occasion went off, point by point, like a play that had been rehearsed, and I had the feeling that I had been lured into a hideous ambush. Matters proceeded as follows: leaving my parents in the waiting room, the old doctor led me into another room where the surgeon was waiting for me, wearing a huge black beard and a white gown... I saw various sharp instruments and must have looked frightened, for the old doctor took me on his lap and said to reassure me: "Come here, mon petit coco! Now we're going to play kitchen." From this moment on I can remember nothing except the sudden assault of the surgeon, who plunged some kind of sharp instrument into my throat, the pain that I felt, and the scream—that of a slaughtered animal—that I uttered. My mother, who heard me from the next room, was terrified.

On the way home in the carriage, I did not speak a word; the shock had been so violent that for twenty-four hours it was impossible to get a word out of me; my mother, completely disoriented, wondered if I had become mute. All I can remember about the period immediately following the operation is the carriage ride, my parents' vain attempts to make me speak, and then, back at the house, my mother holding me in her arms in front of the living-room fireplace, the sherbets she had me swallow, the blood I spat up at each mouthful and which mingled with the raspberry color of the sherbets. (MLM 64–65)

"My whole image of life," remarks Leiris, "has been scarred by the incident: the world, full of traps, is nothing but a huge prison or an operating theatre; I am on earth only to become a specimen for doctors, cannon fodder, food for worms" (MLM 65). What justifies this seemingly excessive response is that the incident in question depended on a terrible deception, on the collusion of the narrator's parents with the doctor's "enlightened" view that children are to be manipulated and coerced into acquiescence. But the curious phrase in the above sentence is "cannon fodder" ("chair à canons," LD 112). The world as prison, as operating theatre: these classic metaphors emerge naturally from the situation of the tonsillectomy, but the image of "cannon fodder" relates the ordinary childhood incident to the extraordinary circumstance of the war outside the nursery. The child is lured by the promise of the circus just as the young medical student in
Celine’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is promised adventure and a beautiful uniform only to end up, like little Leiris, in the place of dismemberment, where the red of raspberry sorbets is mixed with blood.

The memory of the throat operation foreshadows another seemingly trivial “suburban” incident:

One day a cousin whose parents lived in the villa next door to ours was bitten by a dog. One detail made me shudder: I was told that the bite had been so deep “a piece of buttock had remained in the child’s under- wear.” I cannot think of this cousin—who was subsequently killed in the war—without remembering what he was like when the incident occurred: a big, well-built, heavy-set boy whose parents adored him because he represented, from a certain point of view, the ideal of beauty and health, and whose chubby calves were the admiration of almost everyone in the family, except for my mother who said he was a “big softy” and thought her sons “more delicate.” (MLM 67)

It is against the backdrop of such incidents that we must understand the attraction—repulsion associated for Leiris with “Lucrece the chaste and Judith the patriot prostitute” as depicted in Cranach’s double painting:

One might . . . suspect that their two apparently distinct gestures were at bottom identical, and that both were supremely concerned to cleanse in blood the taint of an erotic act, the one expiating by her suicide the shame of having been violated (and perhaps of having enjoyed that violation), the other expiating by murder the shame of having prostituted herself to her victim. So that it would not be out of mere caprice, but by virtue of profound analogies, that Cranach painted the two as pendants, both similarly naked and desirable, at one in that complete absence of moral hierarchy which is the necessary concomitant of nakedness, and shown on the verge of committing particularly arousing actions. (MLM 93–94)

“The passage repels most,” writes Torgovnick, “by its suggestion that Lucrece enjoyed (must have enjoyed) her rape . . . and its parallel suggestion that Judith castrates Holofernes to punish him for his sexuality, rather than kills him as a political act” (GP 110). The either/or of the latter statement (i.e., it’s either politics or sex) would be quite alien to Leiris’s radius of discourse, but the former, with its very contemporary (and justified) complaint about the still-prevalent male assumption that women who are raped somehow “want” it, is also misconceived. The death of Cleopatra, who represents for Leiris a kind of symbolic union of the Lucrece and Judith prototypes, is apposite here: “on the one hand the murderous serpent, the male symbol par excellence—on the other the figs beneath which [the asp] was concealed, the common image of the female organ. . . . I cannot help noting with what exactitude this meeting of symbols corresponds to what for me is the profound meaning of suicide: to become at the same time oneself and the other, male and female, subject and object, killed and killer—the only possibility of communion with oneself.” And Leiris relates this image of “the right to love oneself to excess” to “that of Prometheus punished for having stolen fire” (MLM 93).

Leiris is not, then, subscribing to anything so vulgar as the patriarchal belief that woman is the subject who “enjoys” rape. He identifies, after all, not with Lucrece’s rapist but with Lucrece; not with Holofernes but with Judith, his case being for the dissolution of gender boundaries in the love act and for the inseparability of eros and thanatos. The issue is not whether this particular vision of human sexuality is “true” or not but whether Leiris’s powerful self-examination and pitiless self-critique carries conviction. The aim of *Manhood*, after all, is not to provide moral uplift or to present the reader with “full and valid alternatives,” but to depict an especially demonic (because so seemingly placid and bourgeois) world, the world of *entre deux guerres*, in all its excesses and contradictions.

Can a writer of Leiris’s kind be a “good” ethnographer and an important source for our understanding of the “primitive”? In the final chapter of *Manhood*, Leiris tells us that in response to a crisis period in his twenties, he decided to engage in “a more strenuous life for a while,” and “went to Africa for almost two years, as a member of an ethnographical expedition. After months of chastity and emotional weaning, I fell in love while in Gondar with an Ethiopian woman who corresponded physically and morally to my double image of Lucrece and Judith” (MLM 40). This woman’s face, Leiris recalls, was “beautiful but her breasts ravaged”; she was “wrapped in a filthy gray toga, smelled of sour milk, and owned a young Negro slave girl”; he dwells further on the “bluish” tattoos around the neck of this “syphilitic” witch, and notes that “her chiton is extirpated, like all the women of her race, she must have been frigid, at least from a European point of view.” “I never,” he concludes, “made love to her, but when the sacrifice took place it seemed to me that a relation more intimate than any carnal link was established between her and myself” (MLM 140).

It is interesting to compare this retrospective description of the Gondar woman to the diary version recorded just a few years earlier and published
in *L'Afrique fantôme* (1954). Emawayish, as the woman in question was called, was the daughter of Malikam Ayyahou, the charismatic leader of a group of initiates possessed by “zark” genies. Leiris’s entry for 25 August 1932 records a dark mood: “Bitterness. Renunciation against ethnography which makes you take so human a position, that of an observer, in situations where it would be best to let go.” As James Clifford recounts in his notes to the translation, “Three days later, during an intense possession scene, Emawayish contrives to leave her mother, comes over to the bed on which Leiris is sitting and, in a gesture of apparent intimacy, places his hand under her armpit. The ethnographer is entranced by the songs she sings while possessed and wants her to write them down so that he and his Ethiopian co-worker Abba Jerome can make translations” (S 42). Here is the beginning of Leiris’s entry for 31 August:

During the morning, letter from Emawayish. She would be pleased if I made her a gift of a blanket. Quite a natural wish, following my courtly declarations of devotion. . . . I’ll never accuse a native of vanity. Just imagine how insanely wealthy a European must seem to such poor people and how they must look obsessively on his smallest objects of comfort, as if they were treasures! (S 42–43)

Leiris now brings Emawayish pens, ink, and a notebook “so she can record for herself—or dictate to her son—the manuscript [of her songs];” he is upset that another member of the expedition, Lurin, for whom “making love is only a matter of pleasure or hygiene!” wants to sleep with her, whereas he himself finds it “impossible . . . to treat love with nonchalance.” Isolated, lonely, unable to find anyone to whom he “can speak from the bottom of [his] heart,” he is all but suicidal. When he urges her to record her love songs, Emawayish asks pointedly: “Does poetry exist in France?” And then, as if challenging Leiris’s manhood: “Does love exist in France?” (S 43; AF 359).

The very next entry (1 September) begins: “Very bad night. First insomnia, then, very late, a little sleep,” which is haunted by guilt dreams. “During the day,” Leiris notes, “though tired and enerated, I feel better. I realize I’ve been overworked, that I’ve been too caught up with research in a dangerous area.” And he admits his doubts as to the methods of gathering material, the poetry collected “probably not as beautiful as I had thought, the possess states not as intense . . . and also covering up a bit of merchandizing, . . . But above all, and in contradiction to all this, an ardent sensation of being at the edge of something whose depths I will never touch.” Then, after describing Emawayish’s belief that “one of the spirits inhabiting the head of her mother is capable of killing her son,” he remarks sadly that he cannot really enter her spirit world, “imbued whatever I do with a civilization that leads one to give everything a moral rather than a magical tint. And this is the great boundary I will never cross” (S 44; AF 360).

Is this the white man whom Torgovnick takes to be wholly “in control, empowered, unthreatened” in his relation to African women? Who voyeuristically revels in the sight of their naked breasts and colorful tattoos? One wonders what sort of relationship between the Leiris of 1932 and this particular Ethiopian woman critic like Torgovnick would consider acceptable. The West, she asserts, might have developed a “history in which primitive societies were allowed to exist in all their multiplicity, not reduced to a seamless Western fantasy . . . when the majority of Euro-Americans can accept that our nations—for all their present comforts and power—exist on the same plane with other social and political entities” (GP 147). But perhaps this optimistic trust in an “openness” by fait so to speak, “to alternative conceptions of knowledge and social reality” is itself the ultimate “seamless Western fantasy.”

How, asks James Clifford in a critique of Edward Said’s 1978 *Orientalism,* “can one ultimately escape procedures of dichotomizing, restructuring, and textualizing in the making of interpretive statements about foreign cultures and traditions?” (JCP 261). If, that is to say, Said presents Orientalism as “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient,” an institution which has, throughout the colonial period that extends from the late eighteenth century to the present, wielded the power of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (JCP 259), how can his own account avoid the essentialism inherent in the unstated assumption that the “oppressed” Orient is in fact not like the one produced by the Orientalist myth? The critique of Orientalism presupposes, in other words, an Orient with such and such specific characteristics, characteristics that have been misrepresented by the West. And further: “The Western culture of which Orientalism is an exemplar is viewed as a discrete entity capable of generating knowledge and institutional power over the rest of the planet. Western order, seen this way, is imperial, un reciprocally, aggressive, and potentially hegemonic” (JCP 272). Against this binary opposition, an opposition Said himself begins to doubt as his argument proceeds, Clifford makes the case for a “West” that is itself “a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a complex, shifting
otherness." "Europe," in this case, may be seen as, in its turn, a false stereotype of the Orient, the question being, in Clifford's words, "How... is an oppositional critique of Orientalism to avoid falling into 'Occidentalism'?" [PC 259].

There are no easy answers to such questions. That colonialist "fictions of the primitive" have been used for at least a century to bolster the West's own self-image is incontrovertible. But that we can now enter a utopia where we approach "primitive" cultures as "full and valid alternatives" to our own is perhaps an even more dangerous myth. If I have dwelt at such length on the argument of *Gone Primitive*, it is because this well-meaning study epitomizes the wrong turn the new "cultural studies" takes when it ignores both history and common sense. In her attack on Leiris, as on the "primitivism" of Conrad and Lawrence, Freud and Roger Fry, Malinowski and Mead, Torgovnick's root assumption is that a good writer (or ethnographer) is equivalent to a good person, and, concomitantly, that a "good" book is one which is the repository of the "right" cultural values. But, as John Guillory has recently argued, we must beware of equating "the values expressed in a work with the value of the work, of assuming that a given work is simply the "container of such and such values":

The reversion to moralism is determined by the equation of text-selection with value-selection. For this reason much of what passes for political analysis of historically canonical works is nothing more than the passing of moral judgment on them. The critique of the canon moves quickly to reassert absolutist notions of good and evil.\footnote{One thinks here not only of a study of primitivism like Torgovnick's but such recent studies of minority writing as Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1920–1945* (1989). With its eloquent but ultimately absolutist replacement therapy, the canonical "greats" (Eliot, Pound, Frost, Stevens, Williams, etc.) are swept under the rug to make room for a large body of "neglected" and hence ipso facto "deserving" poets of the period: women, African-Americans, communist activists.}

Perhaps a more satisfactory critique of primitivism and its analogs would begin with the recognition that primitivism, like the modernisms to which they are related, can only be plural. How, to take just one example, does the Russian "neoprimitivism" of the artists Goncharova and Larionov, Tatlin and Malevich, or the poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh square with the "primitivism" of Leiris and his colleagues at the Paris Col-

Tolerance and Taboo 49
Margaret Mead once, at a Washington dinner party in the sixties. She was wearing a long colorful cotton dress and lots of wooden jewelry, and she supported herself on a large shepherd’s crook, which she tapped emphatically on the floor when she wanted to make a particular point. I found her extremely exotic—a powerful, individual presence. Marianna Torgovnick, however, scolds her for such things as “never fully ming[ing] with the Samoans” or for “referring routinely to male graduate students as ‘men’ and females at the same stage of professional life as ‘girls.’” It seems that the poor Margaret of memoir and historical record is not allowed to dwell, as are the “primitives” toward whom Torgovnick expresses such tolerance, in her “own conception of time and space”; nor is hers judged to be one of those “full and valid” alternatives the author wants us to respect. The “full range of human sexual possibilities and variations in belief” (CP 246)—these are evidently available only to the still-exotic Others.

Surely there are more satisfying ways of approaching the Other. I conclude with some lines from “Chapter 217” of Lyn Hejinian’s long poem Oostra: A Short Russian Novel, which tells the story of the American poet’s gradual initiation into the Otherness of the then Soviet Union:

Recognition in itself is a source of great excitement
I discovered I knew Tekhnologicheskii Institut as well as Ploshad Lenina
Deductions are directions
Truths change, things develop
I felt a thrill of gratitude—to whom or what it may refer
Lurking with competence, I was familiar with the future.

3. “Barbed-Wire Entanglements”

The “New American Poetry,” 1930–32

January 1931. In the “News Notes” at the back of Poetry magazine, Harriet Monroe announced that the February issue would be edited by one “Mr. Louis Zukofsky, who has been for several years a prominent member of a group of writers interested in experiment in poetic form and method. . . . Mr. Zukofsky is recommended on the high authority of Ezra Pound and others whose opinions we greatly respect.” But, having “abdicated [her editorial powers] temporarily,” Monroe evidently felt betrayed. In the March issue, she wrote an angry response to the “Objectivist” number of Poetry called “The Arrogance of Youth.” Zukofsky, she insisted, was wrong to “abandon” such big poetry names as E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, as well as the “once-revolutionary imagists.” And “what,” asks Monroe, “are we offered in exchange? A few familiar names get by [she is evidently thinking of William Carlos Williams’s “Botanical Trees’] though often by severely wrenching Mr. Zukofsky’s barbed-wire entanglements.”

What was the nature of the Objectivist experiment, as represented by Zukofsky’s selection for Poetry—a selection that included, aside from the obvious names (Basil Bunting, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Zukofsky himself), Robert McAlmon and Kenneth Rexroth, Whittaker Chambers and Henry Zolinsky, John Wheelwright and Martha Champion? And in what sense was the work of these poets a departure from that of the “once-revolutionary imagists”? Williams, for one, seems
aspects of the postmodern paradigm: it is, as he suggests in his appendix (788–
80), the increasingly political definitions of postmodernism that must go.
(1990): 12. Harvey is here rethinking some of the notions in his The Condition of
15. Subsequently cited in the text as CB.
16. Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Goodbye, Columbus! Notes on the Culture of
39. A related poetic text, The Black Debb, is discussed in my Radical Artifice:
Writing Poetry in the Age of Media (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992),
chap. 4 passim. See also essay 14 below.
last page.

Essay 2: “Tolerance and Taboo”

1. “How many kilometers it took to make us feel we were finally on the thresh-
hold of exoticism?” Michel Leiris, L’Afrique fantastique (1934; Paris: Editions Galli-
mard, 1980), 266; my translation. Subsequently cited in the text as AF.
2. Mariana Torgovnick, Gone Primitive: Savage Intellec
tes, Modern Lives (Chic-
nounced Gone Primitive “powerful” and “provocative,” “a superb book.” In Mod-
ern Philology 89 (February 1992), Sander Gilman similarly declares, “Mariana
Torgovnick has now provided us all (academic and nonacademic specialists) with
a brilliant, exciting, and innovative reading of our ‘modern’ . . . fascination with
the image of the primitive” (457). And he concludes by remarking, “I put down
this book feeling that cultural studies in this country had come a lot further than I
had imagined” (439). And in “Otherness Is in the Details,” The Nation (5 No-
vember 1990): 530–36, Micaela di Leonardo, who does comment on some of the
book’s “key lacunas,” calls Torgovnick’s goal “laudable,” her critique of humanism
“valuable,” and her interpretations of the shifting meanings and wildly enhanced
monetary value of primitive art . . . particularly acute” (533).
4. James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnogra-
yphy, Literature, and Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 42. Subsequently
cited as JCP.
greenish layer—the living magma and the odd eleusins—that forms on the surface of calm water and sometimes solidifies into a crust, until an oddy comes to break it up. All our moral practices and our polite customs, that radiantly colored cloak that hides the coarseness of our dangerous innocence, all those lovely forms of culture we are so proud of—since it is thanks to them that we can call ourselves "civilized"—are ready to disappear at the slightest turbulence, to shatter at the slightest impact (like the thin mirror on a finger-nail whose polish cracks or roughens) allowing our horrifying primitiveness to appear in the interstices, revealed by the fissures just as hell might be revealed by earthquakes. (19)

11. Even this assumption is unfounded, since the circumcision practices described at length in the passage Torgovnick cites are those of men, not women.


Excerpts from Leiris’s La Possession et ses aspects obsédants chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar (1958), which deals specifically with the Zär cult, may be found in S 113–17.


Essay 3: “Barbed-Wire Entanglements”


However little taste one might have for proposing metaphors as explanations, civilization may be compared without too much inexactness to the thin