

Sometime in the mid-1950s the Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams, a leading member of Afro-modernism and black abstractionism, was introduced to Pablo Picasso by Albert Camus during a visit to Paris. Given Williams's association with various factions of cubism and his attempt to emulate its style to capture the hybrid cultures of his native Guyana, the meeting with the great artist was supposed to be a highlight of his career, perhaps a catalyst for new directions in the troubled relation between artists of African descent and the international avant-garde. But as it turned out, the meeting between Williams and Picasso, far from being an epiphanic encounter, was to be remembered as anticlimactic:

There was nothing special about meeting Picasso. It was a meeting like many others, except that meeting Picasso was a big disappointment. It was a disappointment for stupid little things: I didn't like how he looked; I didn't like how he behaved. I never thought I would not like people like that. But the total of the whole thing is that I did not like Picasso. He was just an ordinary past-middle-aged man. I remember the first comment he made when we met. He said that I had a very fine African head and he would like me to pose for him. I felt terrible. In spite of the fact that I was introduced to him as an artist, he did not think of me as another artist. He thought of me only as something he could use for his own work.

Williams's disappointment may have arisen from a sense of heightened expectation about the master, or even the hurt that came from not being recognized as a fellow artist, but what stands out in this description of the encounter is that what Picasso found most enchanting about the Guyanese painter was a "fine African head," he valued as a model for art. Williams was disappointed that he was appealing to Picasso merely as an object or subject of art, not as an artist, not as a body, not even as a human subject. And yet, it is possible that this disappointment arose because Williams had assumed, as many historians of art have assumed over a century of modernism, that because Picasso was the most important figure in primitivism, the movement in art when the Other, often black or brown, became a catalyst for modern art, that he must have had some respect for the cultures and bodies that had made modernism possible. How else could one make other cultures and subjects the sources of art, the agents of the major breakthroughs we have come to associate with modernism, unless one also valued the people who produced it? We now know, of course, that the relationship between Picasso and his African sources was much more complicated than Williams might have assumed. Indeed, the fascination with the "fine African head" did not simply reflect the insensitivity of an artist past middle age; on the contrary, Picasso's relationship to Africa, or his investment in a certain idea of Africa, which is evident from his early career to his high cubist period, was a meticulous attempt to separate the African's art from his or her body, to abstract, as it were, those elements of the art form that would serve his purpose at crucial moments in his struggle with established conventions of Western art. This is the gist of the argument I want to present in this essay.

Much has been written on Picasso and primitivism but little on his specific engagement with Africa. Indeed, a major part of the argument I will be presenting here demands a separation of primitivism, as a now canonized idea in the history of modernism, from African cultures and bodies. Picasso loved the idea of the primitive and tribal, but his relationship with the cultures and peoples of Africa and Oceania was more ambiguous. We are told, by André Malraux, among others, that Picasso was irritated by “the influences that the Negroes had on me” even as he eloquently discussed the magical influence of those African objects discovered at the Old Trocadéro on that fateful day in 1906. In most of his reflections on the “Negro” influence he seemed careful to make distinctions between the effect or affect of African objects and cultures. When he talked about the “Negro,” he was talking about the object rather than the person. The fact that Picasso had an intimate relationship with African objects is not in doubt; but there is little evidence of an interest in Africans as human beings and producers of culture beyond his general interest and involvement in anti-colonial and other radical movements. Indeed, as Williams discovered in that encounter in Paris in the 1950s, Picasso seemed to be meticulous in his separation of objects of art from bodies, and it is my contention that it was in this division of bodies from artistic models that the African could be cleansed of its danger and thus be allowed into what Aaran has aptly called “the citadel of modernism.”

It is now claimed that in order for modernism to claim its monumentality, that is its enshrinement in the very institutions of Western culture and museum culture that it had set out to defy and deconstruct, it had to shed the contaminants of the Other as part of what D. A. Miller calls, in a different context, its “routine maintenance.” In fact, the debates that have come to define modernism, the custodial commentaries on its monumentality, tend to see it as the triumph of endogamy over exogamy, of internal forces over external ones. It is remarkable that except in those instances when the topic at hand is primitivism, the canonical narrative of modernism has little to say about African sources. Now, this absence can be explained in one of two ways: one could argue, for instance, that the institutions of commentary have been so eager to secure the purity of modernism, that they have become mechanisms of surveillance against the danger that engendered it in the first place. Africa is first acknowledged as a significant episode in the history of modernism, and then it is quickly dispatched to the space of primitivism, a place where it poses no danger to the purity of modern art. However, there is a second, even more interesting explanation, namely that the practitioners of modernism had themselves started the process of containment, that they needed the primitive in order to carry out their representational revolution, but that once this task had been accomplished, the Other needed to be evacuated from the scene of the modern so that it could enter the institutions of high art. How else can we explain the paradox that runs throughout the history of modernism, the fact that almost without exception the Other is considered to be part of the narrative of modern art yet not central enough to be considered constitutive? To put it more specifically, why is it possible to argue simultaneously that the discovery of African and Oceanic art enabled the moment of modernism yet claim that these works did not have a fundamental influence in the shaping of modernism? From Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler’s dismissal of the “Negro influence” in the rise of cubism to Pierre Daix’s famous claim that “there is no ‘Negro’ in the *Les Femmes d’Alger*,” one of the greatest puzzles

of modern art is whether Africa has to be considered a categorical imperative in the theory and practice of modern artists or just a passing fad in the ideology of modernism. My discussion will proceed in a circuitous way, but it will focus, from different directions, both on Picasso's entanglement with Africa and the critics' and art historians' entanglement with this entanglement. My goal is to show how understanding it—the entanglement that is—is crucial to our rethinking of the aesthetic of modernism and the schemata—and stigmata—of difference that both maintains and haunts it.

1.

Let us start with a basic question: is there an Africa in Picasso's oeuvre? And if so, what form does it take? Is it the Africa of bodies or art forms, of material culture or abstracted ideals? At first sight this might appear to be a banal question, especially when we recall the countless debates surrounding the influence of Africa as the mark of Picasso's modernist breakthrough and, inevitably, the centrality of primitivism in his aesthetic practices. But this old question needs to be posed because with few exceptions, the major studies of the African influence in Picasso, whether for or against it, are explorations of the influence of certain African art objects on Picasso's work, or generalized explorations of how African art objects, discovered at the Old Trocadère, triggered the "terror" that made modernism possible. The terms of reference in these studies tend to acknowledge the African influence and to dispose of it in the same breath, either by confining "Africanisms" to the realm of psychological fear or artistic structure. What these approaches seem to do, even in their detailed and meticulous study of "Africanisms" in Picasso, is also to minimize what I am calling the constitutive role of Africa in the making of modernism. In 1948 Kahnweiler would, in a single bold gesture, testify to the modernists heavy interest in Negro Art and still proceed to "dispute the validity of the thesis of a direct influence of African art on Picasso and Braque." In 1984, William Rubin would provide perhaps one of the most detailed explorations of the influence of primitive art on Picasso's major works and still conclude that tribal sculpture did not have a constitutive role in the shaping of his art. From the moment Picasso began to be canonized as the most important painter of the modern period in the 1940s, the institutions of interpretation have been anxious to minimize or dismiss any direct and determinative correlation between his works and the tribal objects that surrounded him as he undertook the project of making art modern. Where the influences of the tribal seem self-evident, they are redefined as "convergences" (by Kahnweiler), "affinities" (by Rubin), or "connotations" (by Bois).

My interest here is to probe the reasons for this anxiety of influence. What threat does the acknowledgement of correlativity between the modern and its Others pose? What is the basis of the hauntology that has come to define the moment of modernism and Western high culture in general? Elsewhere I have argued that one of the unifying characteristics of the aesthetic ideology that has emerged in Europe since the eighteenth century, is its concern with Others as the enabling conditions of beauty, taste, and judgment and, simultaneously, with the counterpoints or opposites of these conditions. If art has come to function as the defining point of cultural achievement and civilization, it is only because it functions within economies of desires and ideals—of purity and a chaste culture—clearly distinct from the danger and defilement

represented by the Other and in need of defense from the barbarism that necessitates taste. Modernism presents an immediate challenge to this thesis because, its overall economy, especially its adulation of primitivism, would seem to posit the Other not as a threat that must be contained but as the source of new energies. In 1919, T. S. Eliot declared that one could no longer understand culture without knowing “something about the medicine-man and his works”: “As it is certain that some study of primitive man furthers our understanding of civilized man, so it is certain that primitive man and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry.” What is easy to miss in declarations such as this one is that the primitive was a conduit to understanding “civilized” man, art, and poetry, not an endpoint in itself; there was no incentive to understand the Other unless it would lead to an understanding of Western civilization either in its “childhood” or moments of crisis. Thus, Eliot wanted his readers to comprehend something about the medicine-man so that they could recognize the sensibility of the poet, “the most able of men to learn from the savage.” Savagery and the artistic sensibility would intimately be connected in the aesthetic of modernism; however, it did not follow that the moderns were willing to give up civilization to become one with the savage. Indeed, the relation between the modern and the savage was defined by a dialectic of love and loathing, identity and difference. So it is with Picasso and Africa.

Even in his “Negro” period, Picasso seemed to prefer the African art object to the “uncultured” African body. Nevertheless, this preference for the art object over the body was something that Picasso arrived at in the process of working through his aesthetic ideology at certain crucial phases of his career, beginning with his troubled relation to academic art during his youth, his subsequent flirtation with “soft” modernism, and culminating in the cubism that marked the revolution in modern art. His oscillation between the African body and artwork appears to be the symptom of a deep and continuous engagement with the continent, the mythologies surrounding it, the fantasies it generated, and ultimately the threat it posed to the idea of civilization that the modernists both wanted to deconstruct and yet secure as the insignia of white, European, cultural achievement.

Under these circumstances, it is best to begin a rethinking of Picasso and the haunting of Africa by comparing his figuration of the continent in the years before his “Negro Period” (1906-1908) and the irruption of modernism. It is useful to recall here that in the early years of his career, Picasso was preoccupied with what Marilyn McCully has called “classicizing subjects and forms”; he was primarily attracted to the art forms of what he construed to be classical cultures, mostly Iberian and Egyptian. It is important to note at the outset that he did not consider “Negro Africa” to be part of this classical heritage or classicizing impulse. The absence of Africa from Picasso’s classicism suggests an early awareness, on the artists part, that the value of “Negro Africa” as a model or source of art lay elsewhere; it could not be relegated to antiquity nor could it be considered modern; rather it occupied a middle space temporally located both in the childhood of mankind and yet very much part of the living world. This understanding of Africa was determined—and explained—by Picasso’s Andalusian background much more than his French sojourn. Indeed, as Natasha Staller has shown, Picasso’s engagement with the myth of Africa predates his 1904 move to Paris or his 1907 discovery of African art objects at the Old Trocadero.

My concern here, then, is the meaning of Africa in Picasso's pre-primitivism period, especially the often forgotten fact that he was the product of an Andalusia whose identity had historically been defined against an African cartography, disconnected from the "dark" continent by the Strait of Gibraltar but connected to it by history. This ambiguous connection led to "a series of complex and ambivalent racial, religious, and sexual stereotypes, and [to] the Malagueño myth of Africa, including the belief that the defeat of Africa made one modern". Staller informs us that the defeat of the Moors entered Andalusian consciousness as an epochal moment: "the middle ages ended on 18 August 1487"; it was understood "in terms of apocalyptic rupture— a rupture explicitly understood in terms of modernity". The myth that Picasso inherited from this history was one in which Africa was posited as the unmodern antithesis of the new Malaga: to become modern was to break away from Africa. Modernity, rather than classicism, defined what Picasso inherited—and resisted—as tradition. Where does resistance fit into this narrative? Since Picasso had to reject tradition in order to become an artist, or at least to break away from the artistic traditions associated with his father, he needed, paradoxically, to discover and valorize a counterpoint to the modernity of Andalusia by inventing his own version of the unmodern. He could seek this unmodern, first, in the classical tradition. But it also seems, as scholars of his early works have noted, that a mastery of classical models of painting, especially those concerning the human form, would not enable a rupture in Western systems of representation; after all, one of the uncanny moves of modernity was to embrace the classical itself as the source of its civilizational authority. In this sense, it was significant that the Malagueño myth of the modern was predicated not on a break from antiquity, but from the Middle Ages, clearly associated with the Arabic, Moorish, and hence African influences.

Aware, then, that the classical alone could not be valorized as the alternative to the modern, Picasso's work in the early years turned to the painting of the body in order to appropriate its classical form but also to mark his difference from the inherited tradition. What stands out in his transitional works from 1906 such as the *Two Nudes*, is what Margaret Werth has aptly described as a historical and formal liminality. Werth argues that the *Two Nudes* is liminal "in that it situates itself between formal investigation and the archaic of primitive; between materialization and dematerialization of the body; between figuration and disfiguration; and between masculine and feminine." But I think this liminality is also the reflection of a deep anxiety about tradition. On one hand, Picasso wanted to figure the body in the classical style, on the other hand, he wanted his representation to be in excess of the conventions he had inherited; and this excess is marked by his drawing of the human form out of proportion and, more significantly, by his conversion of the face to a mask. As the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, also painted in 1906, was to illustrate, Picasso would turn to masking when he felt he had failed to capture the human face even after numerous sittings.

But if Picasso's goal was to break away from inherited conventions—and the distortion of classical forms in the early works seems to enforce this view—then there was an even more radical way in which he could achieve the task of disfiguration, that is, by turning to Africa. We know, for example, that the artist inscribed his youthful rebellion by claiming a Moorish identity. We also know that his adolescent drawings are

populated by Moorish figures and subjects, representing the danger of what I have called the “unmodern.” These drawings represent juvenile fantasies about the Moorish Other. In the late 1890s, however, Picasso embarked on some academic paintings of the African body. These paintings are important for two reasons. First, they represent the first and only time that Picasso was interested in the corporeal form of the African. After that, as I will show later, Picasso’s interest in things African, even during his so-called “Negro Period,” was limited solely to art objects which came to stand in for Africa itself. Second, in his academic paintings, Picasso perceived Africans in a twofold relation: the African nude represented the body in its “natural” state, one which was, nevertheless, out of proportion with the “ideal” in long-established European notions about ways of representing the human form in art. (These paintings reflected stereotypical notions of the blacks excessive sexuality; indeed, what made the black body, in the form of the models Picasso was painting, compelling was its unusual distortion.) In order to defy convention—in the *Two Nudes*, for example—Picasso could draw the white body by drawing it out of proportion. Now, it seemed, the black body kinds of forces, often unspoken and unlicensed, which he needed in order to break through the edifice of modernity. Apparently, Africa was most useful to Picasso when it was confined to the unconscious—there but not there—mediating other needs and desires, while not serving as a primary faction in itself. From this perspective, it would seem that when he was encountering real Africans in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century, they had nothing useful to perform in his artistic project in their embodied form.

The second factor to consider when probing Picasso’s political unconscious recalls what happened during his sojourn in Gósol in the summer of 1906. Here I am interested not so much in what has been referred to as Picasso’s “regression to ethnic and primitive roots,” or even in his turn to female figures as the intercessors of the primitive, but in his valorization of this distortion and dissymmetry as part of his method and signature. If the paintings at Gósol have one thing in common, it is their intertextual and contrapuntal relation to previous works which they acknowledge as part of their schema and yet displace in terms of form and meaning. Picasso’s primary goal in the “Blue Period” (of which the stay at Gósol is exemplary) was the artistic deformation of the European canon of painting. This goal could best be achieved through the distortion of the white female form, a subject or figure whose ideality represented the classicism he was fighting against. This point is easily made through a comparison of Picasso’s *The Harem* and Ingres’s *Turkish Bath* and of his *Reclining Nude* and Goya’s *The Naked Maja*. What we see in these repaintings of significant works in the European canon is a reinstallation of established conventions of painting, a distillation of formalized artistic subjects, and a transmutation of genres. But what does this repainting of European works have to do with Africa? If we were to read *The Harem* in itself, as an isolated object of reflection, or even in relation to Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*, perhaps nothing, for there is little in the painting that points to Africa or the “Orient” as the primary referent. Treated as autonomous objects what we have in front of us is one painting (*Turkish Bath*) functioning as the intertext of another (*The Harem*). And yet from its title and implicit motif Picasso’s *Harem* does seem to echo the odalisque and this has led commentators to read it in explicitly Orientalist terms. Picasso encouraged this kind of reading by describing the quality of the picture as that of

"L'humanité féminine, la femme d'Afrique." Still, one wonders whether, this kind of strong Orientalist reading is supported by the painting itself. One could argue that Picasso has modernized the odalisque and thus distorted its terms of reference and this may well have been his intention; nevertheless, compared to the modernist Orientalism of, let's say Matisse, the "Eastern" referent is weak and displaced. It could be said that in comparison to Matisse, Africanisms or Orientalisms would be notable in Picasso's painting simply because they were absent where they should have been present, or rather, absent where we are encouraged to look for them. However, Africa was not entirely absent from Picasso's "mental map" in the Gósol period—it had just become confined to his artistic unconscious, where it would re-emerge forcefully in *Les Femmes d'Alger* in ways that are still being contested.

African art objects are, of course, part of the thick description of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and also its enigma. According to Malraux, Picasso was unwavering in his view that *Les Femmes d'Alger* came to him unconsciously during the visit to the Old Trocadéro and that it came to him not because of the enchantment of the forms of the African art he encountered—he doesn't seem to have paid much attention to these — but because what he recognized in this art was a force, or spirit, that was hard to describe or objectify. In other words, he was attracted by what he considered to be the unconsciousness and inexpressible. The discovery of African art was unique for Picasso because "for the first time the discovery of an art was not the discovery of a style. African art was discovered, not an African style". In this context, the contrast Picasso was to make between himself and Braque was revealing. For Picasso, African objects were agents of exorcism (magical wards to be used against the economy of symbolic form); for Braque, African art was valued because of its form:

That's also what separated me from Braque. He loved the Negro pieces, but as I told you: because they were good sculptures. He was never at all afraid of them. Exorcism didn't interest him. Because he wasn't affected by what I called 'the whole of it,' or life, or—I don't know—the earth?—everything that surrounds us, everything that is not us —he didn't find all of that hostile. And imagine—not even foreign to him! He was always at home ... Even now ... He doesn't understand these things at all: he's not superstitious!

Then, there was another matter. Braque reflects when he works on his paintings. Personally, when I want to prepare for a painting, I need things, people. He's lucky: he never knew what curiosity was. People stupidly mistake it for indiscretion. It's a disease. Also a passion, because it has its advantages. He doesn't know a thing about life; he never felt like doing everything with everything.

Now, one of the reasons why reading Africanisms in Picasso has continuously generated conflicts of interpretation is because many attempts to read his "Negro Period"—and even cubist phase—as both inside and outside European cultural history are imprisoned by what Jameson has aptly called the ideology of modernism, which "imposes its conceptual limitations on our aesthetic thinking and our taste and judgment, and in its own way projects an utterly distorted model of [literary or art] history." The struggle for a pure Picasso, one uncontaminated by Africa, is ultimately a struggle to secure the aesthetic ideology of high modernism, especially the privileging of form as the mark of its breakthrough. It is not accidental, then, that many

discussions of the influence of African in the making of Picasso's major works tend to revolve around the absence of a formal influence, or a style. And yet in their concern with substantive formal influence, these discussions start with a logic that is bound to fail because form is not what Africa had given Picasso. Indeed, one could argue that what made the African fetish attractive was that it would lead one away from forms of representation modeled on observable experience or reality. After all, as David Simpson has argued, what makes fetishism dangerous "in all perception and representation" is that "reality itself is open to construction." My contention is that it is precisely the doubleness of the fetish—as a figure that is located at the heart of culture and ritual and yet seems to appear to us only in its perceptual nature, against reality—that explains Picasso's enigmatic relationship to the African figures he discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century. This doubleness is worth closer consideration because it haunts some of the influential attempts at both connecting Picasso to, and disconnecting him from, the primitive.

2.

In "Picasso," an essay written for the catalogue for MOMA's controversial exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, William Rubin provided students of modern art with one of the most meticulous and detailed examinations of Picasso's engagement with tribal arts and more specifically African objects. Employing a combination of historical documentation and a systematic comparison of some of Picasso's major works and African art objects, Rubin establishes the centrality of the artist's turn to primitivism and his empathy for the artworks of the Other as one of the turning points in the emergence of modernism. He shows, convincingly, that Picasso's turn to the primitive had provided a way around artistic conventions that "had degenerated into a rhetorical and sentimental art": "By embracing primitivism in 1906, Picasso short-circuited the continuity of these inherited conventions, and his year-long exploration of increasingly remote and alien aesthetic correlatives permitted him to rediscover pictorial authenticity for himself". In Rubin's account, the discovery of the tribal was an important bridge between the "soft modernism" that had characterized Picasso's art before 1906 and the "hard modernism" of his cubist period.

But underneath his acknowledgement of the affinity between the tribal and the modern, Rubin's project is also underwritten by a troubling surreptitious intention: the need to minimize the role of the Other in the emergence of modernism as a style and, in particular, the significance of Africa as an artistic model, even when acknowledging their overall affect. In other words, the majestic reconstructive effort in Rubin's essay was driven by the desire to acknowledge the role of Africa as the source of certain powerful unconscious forces while, at the same time, minimizing the significance of the continent as the source of emulous art forms, rather than simple spiritual objects. Thus in his reading of Africanisms in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Rubin sees the African masks on the demoiselles as instruments for accentuating the themes of sexuality and death rather than as models. His primary thesis is that the invocation of African figures and women (both subjects of love and loathing in Picasso's psychic economy and behavior) enabled the "cohabitation of Eros and Thanatos". More specifically, Rubin argues, the African faces would "finally conjure something that transcends our sense of civilized experience, something ominous and monstrous such as Conrad's Kurtz

discovered in the heart of darkness". Rubin acknowledged that Picasso's turn to the tribal was prompted by the absence of a "Western precedent" for mask-like heads and other forms of representing the human body in distortion, but he was insistent that the precedence of primitivism lay not in the models it provided but its psychological connotations; the word "African," for example, evoked "something more fetishistic, magical, and above all, potentially malefic".

From this interpretation we can discern two immediate issues, which, lie at the heart of the schemata of difference in modernism. The first one is how the psychologizing of the relationship between the artist and his primitive art forms depended on, or ended in, the sublimation of the perceptual in the conceptual. Building on Picasso's own claim that the tribal objects in his studio were "more witnesses than models," Rubin makes a crucial distinction between the kind of intertextuality that characterized Picasso's relationship to the works of other European artists such as Cézanne and tribal sculpture. In this scenario, tribal sculpture could function as a point of departure for Picasso, but its significance as an artistic source—a model—was militated by the fact that Picasso "metamorphosized" his objects of reference: "Picasso was impressed by aspects of its conceptual structure, principles that he could abstract from their sources and use to his own end". It would appear that Rubin's goal here is to confer the power of psychological affect on Africa while, at the same time, denying it a formal influence in the making of modernism. But perhaps more important is the distinction he draws between Picasso's intertextual relation to tribal, as opposed to, European art. Why is it that Picasso's intertextual relation to Gauguin or Cézanne was considered constitutive (hence conceptual) while his relationship to African objects was perceptual, a mere starting point to something more profound than its degree zero?

We can clarify the issue at hand here by recalling that Picasso was one of the most intertextual of modern artists. Indeed, the moments in his career that have come to be considered epiphanic, such as the sojourn to Gósol, are marked by powerful repaintings of the works of other artists. It is in his distortion of the works of his precursors that Picasso established his difference and thus his modernism. When we consider Picasso's relation to, let's say Ingres or Goya during his Gósol sojourn, Gauguin during the "Blue Period" or Cézanne during the cubist phase, we are left in no doubt about the centrality of intertextuality in his project. It can easily be said that his paintings are, to borrow Jonathan Culler's words "intelligible only in terms of a prior body of discourse—other projects and thoughts, which it implicitly or explicitly takes up, prolongs, cites, refutes, transforms."

Nevertheless, in his study of the intertextual relation between the European modern and the African or Oceanic primitive, Rubin's categorical claim is that Picasso transformed the tribal masks in *Les Femmes d'Alger* so radically that nothing on the canvass resembled "any African or Oceanic mask Picasso could have seen in Paris in 1907 in the studios of his friends or at the Trocadéro museum". What makes this claim puzzling, however, is that it is not clear that a reading of Picasso's transformation of the masked figures from African or Oceanic traditions was radically different from the transformation that the works of other European artists underwent in his hands. Indeed, the transformation of figures and forms so that they could retain only a minimal relation to their artistic precursors was one of the hallmarks of the method

that we now call abstraction. And as the structuralists used to argue in the 1960s and 1970s, one of the signatures of a strong, as opposed to a weak, intertextuality was the extent of the deviation from the original model. Strong intertextuality is evident when the “borrowed” textual unit is “abstracted from its context and inserted as if in a new textual syntagm as a paradigmatic element.”

A second problem in Rubin’s psychological reading of Picasso’s Africanism is the emphasis he places on the subliminal and subconscious or unconscious. It is, of course, true that in foregrounding the perceptual dimension of the African connection, Rubin follows a long tradition (one encouraged by Picasso himself) in which the encounter with the primitive is defined by fear and repulsion and is hence connected to the forces that modern civilization repressed. This is, of course, the familiar narrative of primitivism in modernism. But to argue that the primitive art object appealed to the modernists because of its association with repressed psychological forces, and that those forces were the triggers for the revolutionary works of modernism, should not necessarily lead to a *de facto* negation of the more formal, conscious, conceptual influences tribal art had on Picasso and his contemporaries. The problem with Rubin’s valorization of the psychological impact of the primitive on Picasso’s artistic consciousness is that it is built on the rather dubious presupposition that subconscious or unconscious influences negate formal ones; hence his expenditure of much energy trying to show that the objects that were supposed to have influenced Picasso’s revision of *Les Femmes d’Alger*—*O. J.*—were not accessible to the artist at a particular phase in his career.

Rubin’s theoretical stratagem—the claim that African art objects had entered Picasso’s subconscious but never rose to the level of formal models—reflects, perhaps more boldly than that of others’, a significant feature of the conundrum of modernism in its relation to the Others that it considered part of its schema. Simply put, if we deny the Other as a model for new forms of art, how do we explain the resemblances between Picasso and African masks that he was not supposed to have seen? It is in response to this question that Rubin developed his influential—and quite controversial—theory of affinities:

The resemblances between the heads in the *Femmes d’Alger* and the masks that have been compared to them in art-historical studies are thus all fortuitous—reflections of affinities between arts that communicate through conceptual signs, rather than through pictorial conventions directly derived from seeing. Yet the fact that so many more such affinities may be found between Picasso’s art and that of the tribal peoples than is the case with the work of other pioneer modernists reflects, on Picasso’s part, a profound identity of spirit with the tribal peoples as well as a generalized assimilation of the principles and character of their art.

Here Rubin’s argument depends on a fundamental distinction between influence and affinity. In influence (Ingres, Gauguin, or Cézanne on Picasso, for example) the relationship between the work of art and its model takes place on the conceptual level in terms of observed formal conventions. In affinity, the influence is perceptual, almost unconscious, functioning on “an invented projection of an internal, psychological state” (ibid). Rubin would simply not allow for “tribal” influences on the formal, artistic level so central to the identity of modernism. It was only through the unconscious that the

Other would be allowed into a now canonized modernism. An unconscious influence would not be allowed to enter the surface where form is discernible. Thus, to describe or posit an influence as unconscious is to simultaneously acknowledge its constitutive presence in the making of the object under discussion but also to deny it visibility. Apprehended in its absence and read solely in terms of its perceptual, sensual influence, the African Other would be contained and then evacuated from the edifice of high modernism.

But what are we to do with those instances where Picasso visibly modeled his works on African objects and where the relationship between the two was quite formal, as in the case of the *Guitar* and a Grebo mask? Rubin documents many instances of what appear to be conceptual African influences in Picasso's work, especially in 1907 and 1908, including *Woman's Head* and a Fang sculpture, but not even his own evidence was enough to convince him that these works constituted real models, sources of formal borrowings, rather than launching pads towards a cubism detached from its influences. Clearly, Rubin was not willing to concede African art forms the distinctive status of art; they remained—had to remain—artifacts (ritual objects) with the capacity for psychological influence, but not sources of a formalized aesthetic. And in a curious way, this confinement of African works of art to artifacts or ritual objects seems to ignore the fact that in his own relationship with African objects, Picasso tended to prefer those works which seemed to fit his aesthetic interests and sensibilities rather than simple affect. Indeed, if Picasso seemed to value African art objects over bodies, and quite often to privilege the former over the latter, as I argued at the beginning of this essay, it was because he was, in a very strict aesthetic sense, self-conscious and selective about the objects he found worthy of incorporation in his art. In short, Picasso had a clear idea about which objects, among his vast African collection, could be considered worthy of formal emulation and which could be consigned to the spectatorship of ritual.

It is now common to argue that Picasso was attracted to African art because of its capacity to generate terror or that he sought those subjects who would serve as what Bois calls "models for anatomical forms." And yet the Africanist elements in Picasso's paintings only appear deforming to the extent that they call previous conventions of painting into question, not merely because they duplicate the syphilitics that he had encountered in French hospitals. In this sense it is striking that while he had in front of him some of the most deformed and terrifying figures in the African pantheon, real fetishes as it were, Picasso chose as models those masks that seemed to be closer to a familiar European grammar about form and symmetry even when they challenged some established notions of representation. Consequently, Picasso's version of tribal art is one cleansed of the terror he seemed to have experienced in his first encounter with it, streamlined in such a way that they are no longer images of the deformity we are eager to ascribe to African ritual objects. Once we recognize that Picasso modeled some of his works on African objects but also departed from them significantly, once we reject the model or no model option, we can shift the significance of his relationship with Others elsewhere.

3.

Now, one of the major criticisms leveled against the notion of affinity, the reigning paradigm in the study of modernism and primitivism, has centered on the implication that the tribal and the modern were bound together by what James Clifford called “a deeper or more natural relationship than mere resemblance or juxtaposition.” Clifford’s major difficulty with affinity as “an allegory of kinship” is that in its universalizing claims it excludes the stories and experiences of the Others that modernism seeks to reappropriate in its own image, that scholars of modernism are primarily interested in tribal art for its “informing principles” or its “elemental expressive modes.” True enough. But it is important to underline the point that if the proponents of affinity seem to have no difficulties mounting an exhibition built on allegories of kinship, it is precisely because the aesthetic ideology of modernism was itself driven by the same impulse, the desire to encounter the Other in its ugliness and terror and then purify it so that it could enter the modern art world as part of its symmetrical economy. The major difference between modern artists and their posthumous patrons is simply that the former were also interested in “conceptual displacement” while the latter were invested solely in “morphological coincidence.” What makes Picasso such a central figure in the history of modernism’s relationship to its Others was his ability to make the primitive central to the aesthetic ideology of modern art while also transforming tribal art objects in such a way that they were no longer recognizable as models. This is how *Les Femmes d’Alger* has come to be read, in Hal Foster’s majestic phrase, as both the primal scene of primitivism—“one in which its structure of narcissism and aggressivity is revealed”—and also the site of disavowal of the very difference it considers a condition of possibility.

So, where exactly is Africa in Picasso’s schemata? This question returns us to the problem that opened my discussion, namely the strict separation of African peoples and art objects in the artist’s notion of the primitive. However, a set of more complicated questions needs to be posed: how could Picasso turn to Africa for its magic and art and yet avoid being entangled in its endangered cultures or the problems of its colonized peoples? How do we reconcile the terror and danger he felt when he first encountered African objects at the ethnographic museum with the symmetrical relationship he established between the tribal art work and abstract modernism so that the two seem almost to have been made for one another? The complaint that curators of modernism and primitivism seem to avoid tribal artworks that seem impure and asymmetrical in relation to the structures of Picasso’s art is a familiar one, but I have been arguing that the failure of such curatorial endeavors as the 1984 MOMA exhibition does not simply arise from a yearning to rescue modern works from the aesthetic influence of the primitive, or even from the institutional necessity to wink at, yet displace, tribal works from their context. A larger problem concerns the imprisonment of curators and historians in the logic of coherence and symmetry favored by the practitioners of modern art. In the end, this logic ignores two major problems which need to be at the center of any discussion of the relationship between modern painters and their African sources, especially when we are discussing those crucial years between 1895 and 1922 when modernism emerged: the question of African definition and authority of sources.

The question of definition was raised most poignantly by Robert Farris Thompson in 1988: “what are the indigenous African definitions of the impact of African art forms

on the artists of the cities of Europe (like Fang masks in Paris) at the beginning of this century?” Berating the arrogance of Western art historians who never once consider that “the African priests and traditional leaders might have something of intellectual substance to contribute to this most important argument,” Thompson concludes that “the final definition of the impact of African and Oceania upon modern art remains incomplete until we take large photographs of the Africanizing works of Picasso, Braque, et al to traditional Africa... and listen to indigenous comments and critical reaction.” We still do not have “indigenous” commentaries on works of modernism. In the few instances where indigenous artists have been given access to the institutions of commentary, they have been denied the authority of criticism. Even the works of African art historians produced in the most prestigious institutions in the West, are not heard across the temporal and cartographic divide that separates the study of expressive and other cultural forms between the modern and everything before or after it.

But what lessons could we learn from African art historians that would be useful to modernism, to the relation between Picasso and Africa? For one, we could learn that Picasso has had a significant, though perhaps surreptitious, influence on the field of African art studies. Otherwise how can one explain the almost unquestioning assumption that the mask is the primary medium of traditional African visual expression? On the other side of the debate, however, a shift in contexts of reading—from seeing Africa from Picasso’s perspective to seeing the modern artist’s from the Others angle of vision —can yield even more useful results. Consider the fact that in a large measure, the literature on Picasso and his African sources assumes that the mask in Africa was part of a unified and intelligible tradition and that its value lay in its ritualized form and function. Yet, the most detailed studies of African masks, their cultural contexts, and the views of their producers, recognize the intersection between the ritual fields in which they are produced (and out of which they perhaps cannot be understood) and the centrality of the meaning of the mask in motion. Indeed, contemporary African writers and artists who have deployed the mask in their works recognize the significance of movement in determining the form of the mask and its interpretation.

A final enigma must be confronted if we are to rethink the role of the Other in the making of modern art outside the ideology of modernism: how do we transcend the established doxa that it was through the acquisition of the “mythical method” or “mystical mentality” inherent in primitivism that, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, art was made possible for the modern world? What is the source of this idea, the unquestioned notion that the art of the primitive emerged from a mystical, preconscious mentality and found its ideal form in myth? Why, indeed, did the idea of the African fetish dominate Picasso’s understanding of the African primitive in that initial encounter at the Trocadéro in 1906? We are, of course, familiar with the ethnographers of the primitive mentality and the mythical method, most notably Levi-Bruhl and Sir William Fraser, and countless studies have been devoted to the influence of their ethnography on the ideology of modernism; but we have not often paid enough attention to the ethnographers’ sources. As a matter of fact, we seem to take it for granted that the ethnographers of modernism conducted field work among the primitives and that their powerful ideas on the cultures and myths of the other came

from native sources. The real story, however, is different. The primary sources behind the idea of the African primitive were not the academic ethnographers but a group of what I will call the surrogate native informants: European adventurers such as Leo Frobenius, Emily Torday, and Mary Kingsley; missionary ethnographers such as Robert Nassau, John Roscoe, and G. T. Basden; and colonial administrative officers such as R. S. Rattray in Ashanti and Amaury Talbot in South Eastern Nigeria. These were the first Europeans to write about African cultures and to make art central to understanding the primitive mentality.

They also produced their most important work in the foundational years of modernism.

Briefly, there are three reasons why these surrogate informants are central to any rethinking of modernism and its ideas of the primitive. First, while academic ethnographers were generally critical of the colonial enterprise, most often its methods rather than objectives, the surrogate informants conceived their work in the field as crucial to colonial governmentality and as a practical contribution to the theoretical work of the intellectuals of modernism. They assumed that the work of ethnographers at major European universities needed the authority of observations made first hand in the theater of colonialism. Indeed, surrogate informants cultivated close relations with the leading ethnographers of primitive cultures. Thus, John Roscoe, who wrote the first ethnography of the Baganda, was a protégé of Fraser at Cambridge, and Rattray who wrote on the Ashanti, was a collaborator of E. G. Seligman at Oxford. As agents in the field of colonialism, the informants premised their authority on their contact with those Africans who, in Roscoe's words, were "uninfluenced by foreign ideas." Second, the surrogate informants were the first, in those crucial years between 1905 and 1922, to promulgate the notion that the mentality of the primitive was mystical and mythical, outside modern forms of rationality, and under the hold of fetishism. One could not understand the native mind or indeed any aspect of native religion and social organization without understanding the role of the fetish, the explanatory code that connected everything. Third, as is evident from the sheer amount of cross-reference, the surrogate informants existed in a cohesive field of discourse, and thus reinforced the idea of a core set of beliefs that were uniform across Africa.

As part of a generational project, adventurers, colonial officers, and missionaries referred to each others' work and used the parallels they saw in their respective fields of operation to reinforce the power of their ideas, to provide the thick description that made their evidence unassailable. This is why even when artists such as Picasso questioned colonial practices, they seemed to reproduce the colonialist model of African societies; they questioned the practice but not the theory of colonialism. This structure—the questioning of the practice and the acceptance of the theory—tends to be reproduced when we don't interrogate the idea of Africa in modern art, when, for example, we forget the brutality that accompanied the arrival of the African art object to the West, the amount of African bodies that had to be destroyed so that the objects would arrive safely at the art museum.

Finally, three challenges remain to be addressed in greater detail. The first one is how to restore the intimate relationship between the brutality of late colonialism and the emergence of the ideology of modernism and, the second, to consider more closely

the role the surrogate informants played in making Africa accessible to modernism. The third one is how to displace Picasso—as the representative custodian of high modernism in art—from the ritualized place that he occupies in the modern museum. It is my contention that we cannot undertake the work of displacement and de-ritualization without changing the language of commentary, the allegory of affinity, the contexts for reading and—eventually—our understanding of perspective and spectatorship. What were to happen, for example, if one were to exhibit *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* next to Faith Ringgold's quilt, *Picasso's Studio*, instead of traditional Pende Mbuya masks? Or if we examined *Woman's Head* not in relation to an indigenous Fang mask but next to *Mina y a Nnom*, a bronze sculpture by Feandro Mbomio Nsue, the contemporary Equatorial Guinean artist, a modern representation of the Fang perspective on form?

NOTAS

[1] Rasheed Araeen, "Conversation with Aubrey Williams," *Third Text* 2 (1987–88): 32.

[2] André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 10; hereafter abbreviated PM.

[3] Writing to Kahnweiler in August 11, 1912 about some masks he had bought, Picasso didn't hesitate to describe them as (stand-ins for) Africans: "We bought some blacks [des négres] at Marseilles and I bought a very good mask and a woman with big tits and a young black." Quoted in Natasha Staller, *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso's Cultures and the Creation of Cubism* (New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 2001), 318; hereafter abbreviated SOD.

[4] *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989), 16–50.

[5] See D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xii. Here Miller is discussing how "modern social organization" has made even scandal "a systematic function of its routine self-maintenance." For my purposes one can substitute difference or primitivism in modernism for scandal.

[6] See for example the debates in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, second edition, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Routledge, 2000), especially the argument between T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, 71–112.

[7] My assumption here is that while the literature on black bodies and modernism has grown in recent years, as has that on race and modernism, most of it takes the African

American, not the African, to be the representative black subject. See, for example, Michael North, *The Dialectic of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and the essays collected in *Race and the Modern Artist*, ed. Heather Hathaway, Josef JaYab, and Jeffrey Melnick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[8] Kahnweiler's comments were made in 1948 at the height of Picasso's canonization; Dax was writing in the 1970s; both are quoted in *Yve-Alain Bois Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1990), 69.

[9] "Negro Art and Cubism," originally published in *Présence Africaine*, collected in *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art*, ed. Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 284.

[10] See William Rubin, "Picasso" in "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 260; hereafter abbreviated "Pic."

[11] See, respectively, Kahnweiler "Negro Art," 285; Rubin, "Introduction" to *Primitivism*, 17; and *Bois Painting as Model*, 73.

[12] I pursue these questions in greater detail in *Unmodern Subjects: Race, Art, and African Difference* from which this discussion is excerpted. Discussing the way the "ghostly" makes its way into the movement of European history, Jacques Derrida observes that "Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe. It would open the space and the relation to self of what is called by this name, at least since the Middle Ages. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

[13] I develop this argument in "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic," *Michigan Quarterly Review* XL, no. 2 (2001): 318–50. For the interplay of social ideals and ideas of pollution, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 1–6.

[14] "War-Paint and Feathers," originally published in the *Athenaeum* in October 17, 1919, collected in *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art*, 122.

[15] "War-Paint and Feathers," 122.

[16] See "Chronology" in *Picasso: The Early Years 1892–1906*, ed. Marilyn McCully (Washington, D.C. : National Gallery of Art, 1997), 48; hereafter abbreviated PEY.

[17] For this argument I have relied on Staller (SOD) and the essays collected in *Picasso: The Early Years* (PEY).

[18] Margaret Werth, "Representing the Body in 1906" (PEY, 277–88).

[19] Werth, "Representing the Body in 1906" (PEY, 277).

[20] After eighty sittings, Picasso gave up "seeing" Gertrude Stein and turned to the mask as an alternative way of viewing. The significance of this turn from the human model to the mask is discussed by Michael North in *The Dialectic of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59–76. For a feminist reading of the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, see Tamar Darb, "'To Kill the Nineteenth Century': Sex and Spectatorship with Gertrude and Pablo," in *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger*, ed. Christopher Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55–76.

[21] These works are discussed in detail by Staller (SOD, 296–301).

[22] But in discussing notions of disorder, we need to keep Mary Douglas's dictum in mind: "Reflections on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death." See *Purity and Danger*, 6.

[23] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1981), 280.

[24] This is not to deny Picasso's interested radical anti-colonial politics; merely to raise the possibility that radical anti-colonialism might have needed the valorization of the primitive as part of its maintenance, a point that was to become more apparent with the rise of surrealism. For Picasso and French colonialism in Africa, see "Colonialism, *l'art nègre* and *Les Femmes d'Alger*," in *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger*, 77–103.

[25] The quoted phrase comes from Robert Rosenblum, "Picasso in Gósol: The Calm Before the Storm" (PEY, 268).

[26] My discussion here is indebted to Rosenblum's "Picasso in Gósol," 262–7.

[27] As does Staller (SOD, 314).

[28] Quoted in Staller, (SOD, 316).

[29] It would be interesting to compare Picasso's Harem with some of Matisse's Orientalist paint-

ings. For the latter, see Roger Benjamin's *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), especially chapter 7, 59–90.

[30] Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave," in *Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 117.

[31] Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination*, 11.

[32] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.

[33] Laurent Jenny, "The Strategy of Form," in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov,

trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 40.

[34] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 72.

[35] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and*

Art (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1988), 190.

[36] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 190, 193, 195.

[37] Hal Forster, *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay

Press, 1985), 184.

[38] Forster, *Recordings*, 182.

[39] Robert Farris Thompson, "Fang Mask," in *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, James Baldwin

et al (New York: Center for African Art, 1987), 190.

[40] Farris Thompson, "Fang Mask," 190.

[41] The most notorious instance of this exclusion concerns the Baule artist, Lela Kouakou, who

was invited to participate in a forum on African art but was allowed to comment only on works from his ethnic region because he was deemed incapable of providing "objective" aesthetic judgments, that is, those not bound by his "traditional criteria." See Susan Vogel, "Introduction" to *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, 11. For a subtle discussion of this criterion of inclusion and exclusion see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 137–9.

[42] The literature on African masks is too extensive to cite here, but see Z. S. Strother, *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially chapter six, 39–54.

[43] Dramatic deployments of the mask in motion can be found in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964) and Wole Soyinka's *The Road* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

[44] See Richards, *Masks of Difference*, 204.

[45] John Roscoe, *The Baganda: An Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London: MacMillan, 1911), ix. For Rattray, see *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

[46] What, for example, is the structural relationship between the destruction of the Kingdom of Benin by a British Expeditionary Force in 1897 and the availability of Benin sculpture to the British Museum? Should it surprise us that the rooted sculpture is now housed in a modern wing of the British Museum, paid for by a family that made its fortunes in the confectionaries of empire, and named after Henry Moore, a leading modernist and connoisseur of African art? For the Benin Expedition, see Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination* (New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 1994), 7–28.

[47] I had suggested a similar act of deritualization, albeit too briefly, for T. S. Eliot in *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), chapter 5, 157–89.