COSMOPOLITAN MODERNISMS

THE POST-MODERN MODERNISM OF WIFREDO LAM

LOWERY STOKES SIMS

I believe that the Black soul, if there can be such a thing, belongs in Modernism.[1]

The Black Artist in Modern Art

'Modernism', historian Jeffrey Stewart once observed, 'is a tricky word when used in association with the Harlem Renaissance'.[2] If we consider that the Harlem Renaissance (c.1919–29) marked the moment of first significant emergence of artists of colour – and specifically African American artists – within the modernist movement in the last century, then we would do well to heed Stewart's caveat. In order to discuss the situation of African, African American and Caribbean artists within modernism on an equal footing with their European or Euro-American peers, it is necessary to get past the more narrow definition of modernism – described by Stewart as 'the rebellious artistic and literary movements of the late 19th- and early 20th-century Europeans and white Americans'.[3] Whereas modernists are usually cast as having a 'sense of alienation from the rise of the corporate industrialized state',[4] for black artists modernism affirmed the notion that a modern individual could be an agent of change or transformation. Whereas for white artists modernism 'was reflected in the breakdown of the representational and the familiar in literature and art',[5] for black artists that rupture represented a potential revolution in self-definition and self-image as they assumed the role of proactive rather than reactive agents in contemporary society. The fact is, therefore, that black artists created a modernism that is, in the words of art historian, Helen Shannon, 'not always congruent with canonical histories of European and American modernism'.[6]

This did not mean, however, that the situation for black artists globally was straightforward. Inevitably they would have been enmeshed in strategies of assimilation that were dictated by their colonised circumstances as they fought their way to personal sovereignty and expression. 'Primitivism' – the engagement of the 'tribal' by modern artists [7] – blocked their recognition within the chronological imperative of modernism. Emerging from the colonisation of Africa, Asia and the Americas by Europe as of the 15th century, the phenomenon of primitivism marked the appropriation of the ancestral arts of black artists to the purposes of modern art,[8] which dictated that primogeniture and recognition would be conferred on which artists did what first, and which individuals were the agents of 'industrialization, urbanization, secularization and commodification and technological innovation'.[9] Primitivism also engendered the vocabulary for the discourse that maintained, even supported, the power relationships of colonialism: the 'center' versus the 'periphery', 'intellectual' versus 'emotional', 'objective' versus 'subjective', 'technological' versus 'manual', 'conscious' versus 'unconscious', and 'individual' versus 'communal'.[10] So while this convergence of cultures affirmed the importance of world art to modernity it would also inevitably raise the question, if 'modern' art could not exist without the 'primitive', can the 'primitive' also be 'modern'? The subordinate social and political positioning of tribal creators in the history of modernism would hold so long as they were un-named ('anonymous'), the work they created deemed 'communal' and their work assigned a lesser value than that of their white counterparts.

As if to expressly answer this question, one artist of African, Spanish and Chinese descent

from Cuba entered the lexicons of modern art history. Wifredo (originally Wilfredo) Oscar de la Concepcíon Lam y Castilla (1902–82) was the first artist of colour to make an impact on the international art scene, and did so in the 1920s and 30s during the full fluorescence of primitivism. During his sixty-year career (1922–82), Lam was to pave the way for contemporary artists of African, Asian, Pacific and Native American descent in the international art world. His arrival in Paris in the late 1930s effectively precipitated the first crisis of modernism by introducing the 'primitive' into 'primitivism'. He confronted European modernists with a real human entity both conversant in his traditional culture and trained in modernist conventions.

It might be said, in fact, that Lam was at the vanguard of new modernism noted in the early 1950s by Jean Paul Sartre, who wrote that having 'accepted primitive art into itself' European culture was being 'colonised in reverse', as 'Third World artists were themselves entering [European] culture and . . . effecting a more complete Africanisation of western art'.[11] This Africanisation was initiated at the beginning of the 20th century in the encounter of French artists such as Paul Gauguin, André Derain, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque with Pacific and African sculpture in the *magasins* and museums of Paris. Sartre's comments remind us of the inexorable inversion of European colonisation that was marked by global trends in the post-World War II era such as migrations of populations from former colonies to the centres of world economic, social and political power. Reinforcing the sense of reparation, even retribution in the reversal of cultural imperatives described by Sartre, Lam once cast his art as an 'art of decolonisation', calling on all artists like himself to 'sever all ties with the colonial culture'.[12]

Lam encapsulated this 'Africanisation' of European cultures in a small drawing executed in 1943 in which he depicted a woman – who is clearly European – looking at herself in a mirror. What she sees is her reflection as a figure with a face that resembles an African mask. The woman resembles Lam's second wife Helena Holzer; the reflection represents a version of Lam's avatar of female power – the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman.[13] The *femme cheval* became the thematic cornerstone of Lam's work, which is characterised by its unique synthesis of European modernist vocabularies – specifically cubism (with its engagement of African forms) and surrealism (with its engagement of non-empirical phenomena) – with motifs and symbols of African religions, which had survived in Cuba.

The Primitive Challenges Primitivism

Wifredo Lam's outstanding achievement within modern art, John Yau observes, was the fact that he reversed the relegation of appropriated forms from African art to being mere 'reductive artefacts to be absorbed into western perceptual systems'. He 'reintegrated' them 'within nature', where they could reclaim 'their original and rightful place'[14] as well as their symbolic content (within the context of traditional tribal art), which had been defused through the process of appropriation in the theoretical and conceptual rubrics of the modernist movement. However, during his peregrinations within the modernist scene, Lam faced many challenges in establishing himself as more than a cultural curiosity and winning recognition as a viable

artistic force in his own right. As an African-Chinese Cuban he was quickly subsumed within the romantic characterisations of the 'primitive' that emanated from 18th-century notions of the 'noble savage', and he was additionally marginalised to an extent as an 'authentic' specimen of 'primitive' wisdom, described variously as 'magician', 'master of the fantastic', 'avatar of the jungle', and 'shaman'.

According to Michael Leja, Lam elicited 'a different sort of response from New York critics' in spite of the 'thematic and formal continuities with the early New York School'.[15] The fact of Lam's ethnicity, Leja notes, caused his work to be 'subsumed into notions of the stereotypical "primitive" that could be glimpsed in Tarzan movies of the period and the more sensationalized and patronizing concepts of the "primitive" that were routine in Hollywood depictions'.[16] Lam's condition as both an insider and outsider is clearly illustrated in the diagram of the modern art 'tree' published by painter Ad Reinhardt in *P.M.* magazine in 1946.[17] Reinhardt grouped together artists of different modernist tendencies on branches off the trunk of modern art. Lam's name can be found in the proximity of artists whose work manifests a 'magical', 'sur-real' quality – Yves Tanguy, Pavel Tchelitchew, Kurt Seligmann and Louis O. Guglielmi – whose names are written on leaves bunched together on the same branch. Lam's name, on the other hand, is seen on a leaf on the same branch but all by itself. As James Clifford so cogently demonstrated, the challenge for individuals who would be forces of decolonisation within the colonial system was daunting and frustrating. They both had to assert their more subjective and 'authentic' status in relationship to interpretations of their cultures and they also had to challenge presumptions that their proximity to those cultures deflected their ability for analytical or 'objective' approaches to those cultures.[18]

Undoubtedly because he grew up in Cuba in a culture that was marked by African survivals, Lam's own apprenticeship to modernism during his fifteen-year residence in Spain (1923–38) focused successively on the Africanising aspects of the cubistic work of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. He became familiar with their work first through magazines brought back from Paris to Spain by friends and then had a catalytic encounter with Picasso's work in the 1936 exhibition that toured Spain in support of the Nationalist cause.[19] This work provided structural paradigms through which Lam launched his signature style during the 1940s when he returned to Cuba after the German occupation of France. In this period, Lam's style is characterised by an exploration of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural elements through the sieve of European modernism and arcane symbolism. Less anecdotal than most images of Afro-Cuban culture that were prevalent in the work of his Cuban contemporaries, Lam's hybrids of human, plant and animal elements, in the words of art historian Giulio Blanc, '[interpret] the spirit of magic and pantheism underlying the Afro-Cuban world-view'.[20] Lam's work may thus be said to have paralleled syncretistic survival strategies devised by Africans in the Americas, such as masking or encoding in Santeria (Lucumí) and Vodun which allowed African slaves to camouflage their practices of ancestral rituals under the cover of accepting European and Catholic values and practices.[21]

The way to do this was not a given. In the early 1940s Lam had to grapple with finding a way to mediate the vocabulary of European modernism

and traditional Afro-Cuban content, while finding the most effective stylistic and technical means to reintegrate form and content. The presentation of a female figure – the aforementioned *femme cheval* – became the central motif in his work, set in a specifically Caribbean locale or landscape, and featuring Africanising and hybrid forms. He devised seemingly endless variations on the shamanistic *femme cheval*. While most of them were literally endowed with horse-like heads, others had heads of a more helmet-like character, prognathic noses, 'sausage' lips and Egyptian-esque prosthetic beards from which a fall of hair flowed. Decorative elements function like ritual tattoos on their bodies: floral motifs based on Matisse, trefoil designs, arched patterns radiating from a central axis, and a circle-within-a-diamond shape motif. Female breasts mimic hanging tropical fruits – such as papaya; chins morph into male sexual members; limbs approximate cane stalks; and a repetition of forms suggests motion or at least a fugitive state of being.

These elements are evident in compositions such as *Déesee avec feuillage* (1942) where Lam opens up transitional space between figure and background, allowing a progressive 'invasion' of one by the other so that they become enmeshed. Episodes of drawing and painting alternate with one another in a dynamic way, and the focus of the pictorial energy retreats from the edges of the compositions and is concentrated in the centre of the canvas or sheet of paper. On the one hand this work presents a dense, disorienting tropical forest environment; on the other it encapsulates the key modernist concerns around perspectival space versus a-formal, 'allover' space. The intensity of that spatial impenetrability and the fusion between plant and human becomes so seamless through the mid-1940s that the pretensions of the human ego are set aside for a complete surrender to an all-encompassing force that is not unlike the Romantic sublime in feeling and certainly signifies the surrender of Lucumí devotees to the will of the orisha. Through this infusion of Afro-Cuban motifs into the landscape, Lam was effectively continuing the practice of positioning the Cuban landscape as 'the foremost indicator of the kind of nationalistic production' that had been the practice in Cuban art during the colonial period.[22] This interest in the distinctive landscape of the Americas had also been a potent strategy in declaring a unique North American identity in art in the USA and Canada in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Landscape as Metaphor

Landscape was the focus of Suzanne Garrigues Daniel in her 1983 dissertation on Lam's work between 1941 and 1945. Using Fernando Ortiz's 1940 publication *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* as a paradigm, Garrigues Daniel notes that the vegetation in Lam's work can be imbued with encoded political nuances. This approach is all the more intriguing given the comparable use of calligraphic elements and natural subject matter as tacit political commentary in traditional Chinese painting (thus fuelling speculation about the influence of Lam's Chinese father Lam Yam on his work).[23] As Garrigues Daniel writes, 'Given these racial, economic, political and historical associations', tobacco is associated with 'liberty' and the national and political hegemony of Cuba,[24] while sugar cane 'in addition to being a symbol of femaleness, fertility and carnality is, on a socio-politico-historical level, also a symbol of slavery, exploitation, colonialism and capitalism'.[25]

Wifredo Lam,
Déesee avec feuillage, 1942

Wifredo Lam,
The Jungle, 1943

Lam himself encouraged a more metaphorical and less literal comprehension of his work. He pointed out that the title of *The Jungle* 'has nothing to do with the real countryside of Cuba, where there is no jungle but woods, hills and open country, and the background of the picture is a sugar cane plantation'.[26] This painting 'was intended to communicate a psychic state' rather than a geographical phenomenon.[27] Lam's observations caution us about primitivist generalisations that often accompany popular notions of the generic 'tropics' where the distinct biological and botanical natures of 'forest', 'rain forest' and 'jungle' are undifferentiated. In *The Jungle* Lam referenced the metaphorical meaning that 'the tropics' conjures in the western imagination: it evokes 'a place of threats, of aggressions, of perils known or unknown'.[28] That psychic state, however, also provides insight into the psychological and cultural relationship of African Cubans to their new homelands in the New World. New York-based Yoruba priest and philosopher John Mason observed that Africans – specifically the Yoruba newly arrived in Cuba – were reticent about claiming a proprietary relationship with the land due to 'their status as slaves'.[29] The Siboney and Arawak had already 'filled the roles of primary land clearers and inhabitants', and 'ownership and social authority rested in the hands of white plantation owners'.[30] Therefore, Mason concludes that since 'the basis of all that is authoritative and original emanates from the lands and its first inhabitants', and since the Africans were 'barred from the ability to claim title to the land', they 'settled on the use of words and actions that taught them why and how they could define themselves in a hostile world.... The people became like the land'.[31] The arena for those words and actions was the dense vegetation of the Cuban countryside known variously as 'el monte' and in Lam's titles as 'la selva', 'la maleza', or 'la brousse'.[32] Paintings by Lam such as *The Jungle* and other compositions of the 1940s, including *Omi Obini*, *Mofumbe [ce qui importe]*, and *Malembo*, all represent the forces of the African cosmos manifest in the realm of the Cuban countryside, and demonstrate how the theme of the landscape and its bush persisted in Lam's work throughout his career.

As Lam explored the incorporation of themes related to Afro-Cuban religions in his work between 1941 and 1946, he brought various painterly techniques to this task, which were integral to and enhanced the thematic aspect of his work. In compositions done in 1941 and 1942, Lam reduced his palette to closely valued contrasts of pale yellows, salmons, and greens (and then in the late 1940s to beiges, browns, black and whites). Often working on brown Kraft paper, he applied the paint sparsely, defining form with a variety of linear elements – some prominent, others so scant they can barely be seen. The 'under colour' of the brown paper emerges through the paint scumbled on top of it; the colour of the figure incorporates that of the ground while the lines defining the figure are occasionally over-painted and obscured. Such techniques convey a sense of the space within the painting as ephemeral and ethereal. Furthermore the use of a 'pointillist' stippling technique, where objects are white voids within the surrounding ambiance, effectively conveys the visual experience of the brilliant, reflective light of the Caribbean.

New York and Europe: Alternate Contexts

Although he was working in Cuba during the 1940s, Lam's artistic development during the 1940s paralleled those among the burgeoning movement that came to be known as abstract expressionism in New York City. His exploration of Afro-Cuban myth in the guise of multi-species hybrids literally embodies the search for 'new hybrids for old myths'[33] on the part of artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb and Jackson Pollock. This new imagery was suffused in mythic and totemic allusions and couched in a morphology that married surrealist improvisation with cubist structure,[34] by breaking up form through techniques such as automatism, the *cadavre exquise*, and liberating colour as a purely descriptive element in painting. These formal approaches were promulgated in the New York art world by the French artist André Masson and Chilean painter Roberto Matta, who shared with their American counterparts their expertise in the technical aspects of surrealist picture making and the interest in spontaneous paint application through dripping and splattering.[35]

As I have noted at the beginning of this essay, however, despite commonalities with the North American artists, Lam's artistic sensibility was very different from the aggressive, rough-hewn, raw, immediate, and unpremeditated gestural aspects of abstract expressionism in New York that were to become familiar characteristics of the new 'American' spirit in art. Lam's work, in contrast, evoked qualities of 'finish'– in terms of both finesse and completion – and even 'elegance' and 'beauty', which would ultimately come to be dismissed in the New York scene as remnants of European traditions in art. During this period artists in the USA were particularly preoccupied with supplanting such traditions in their work.[36] Lam's work did however, for a period of time, share stylistic and morphological character with that of Arshile Gorky. The monochromatic dripping and thinly painted, open surfaces of compositions such as Lam's *Oya* and *Hermes* (1945) may be favourably compared to paintings such as Gorky's *Water of the Flowery Mill* (1944).[37]

Whatever congruencies that existed between Lam's work and his New York contemporaries were affirmed in a review published in the August 1946 issue of *Newsweek* magazine which heralded Lam, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell as 'some of America's own young abstractionists who think they have found the long-waited "new direction" in art'. The unidentified reviewer distinguished the work of the younger Americans from that of the surrealists in that 'they do not paint dreams, nor do they paint in literal representational styles'. Rather, they utilise 'the surrealists's method of free association to evolve shapes, images, and ideas out of the subconscious'.[38] The review anointed Motherwell as an example of an artist who typifies what the reviewer called a new 'imaginative abstraction' or 'surrealistic formalism'.[39] Lam was described as filling 'his canvases with strange winged creatures and voodoo gods which suggest rather than represent the mysteries of the jungles in his native Cuba'. Gottlieb's paintings 'look something like ancient hieroglyphics'. Gottlieb is quoted as saying that he uses 'rough rectangles' in his work instead of perspective in order to 'kill space'.[40] The fact that *Newsweek* dubbed Lam as one of 'America's own abstractionists' is noteworthy given the sharply demarcated national lines which have been enforced in the international art world since the 1950s.[41]

Wifredo Lam, *Oya [Divinité de l'air et de la mort/Idolos]*, 1944

If the American art world after 1948 was more ambivalent about Lam's work within the post-war period,[42] in Europe his work was exhibited in England, France, Italy, Sweden, then Czechoslovakia, Belgium, The Netherlands and Spain. His development toward a hieratic, ceremonial style with flat shapes that evoked a certain ritual protocol, appealed to a post-war generation in Europe that was seeking a more in-depth psychic dimension to primordial manifestations of the cycles of terror and rebirth that were much in evidence after World War II. This factor explains, in particular, the interest in Lam on the part of the CoBrA artists (whose group hailed from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam under the energetic leadership of Asger Jorn and Cornelis van Beverloo, known as Corneille) especially when the totemic forms in his work became more and more 'pure signs' [43] in his work of the 1950s onwards. For critic and art historian Henri-Claude Clousseau, the viability of Lam's 'écriture' is evoked by the pure line of compulsive, obsessive art-making associated with traditional and folk art, the art of children, and the art of the mentally disabled.[44] Critic and art historian Jacques Leenhardt fosters the view of Lam's work as revolutionising the role of drawing in painting. Charles Merewether takes this further by fostering a reading of Lam's work within the Afro-Cuban cultural context that compares elements of drawing and tracing in his totemic figures as a means to achieve a reconfiguration of empirical reality that is synonymous with divination drawings made by santeros or priests of the Lucumí religion during ritual observances. Lam's work draws some of its power from this genre by means of his deft draughtsmanship and Merewether perceives it as sharing the quality of divination drawings, which 'embodied and transmitted sacred knowledge and historical memory of Afro-Cuban culture'.[45]

A New Model for Art History

Writing in 1992 about Lam, critic and art historian Gerardo Mosquera suggested that his life and career provided models for 'a new orientation of the various discourses [around art history]' that would position the nexus of power and proactivity as 'taking place from the periphery towards the center.' [46] According to Mosquera, through this approach 'the periphery is ceasing to be a reservoir of traditions, and is moving towards a poly-focal, multi-ethical decentralisation of "international" culture combined with a strengthening of local development.' [47] Mosquera's proposal for redefining and reorienting the power positions between European and non-European cultures in the definition of vanguardism, progress and cultural propriety acknowledged the fact that by the 1990s, the century-long infatuation of European culture with traditional, tribal cultures in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, meant that these non-western cultures were 'no longer "ethnic" and [had] become internationalised as intrinsic components of a world shaped by the development of the West'.[48]

This shift in interpretation, Mosquera suggests, effectively breaks 'away from the dualism [of "western" versus "non-western"] and recognises the hybridisations, complexities and "inauthenticities" inherent in the post-colonial dynamics through an awareness of the cultural action of the periphery in contemporary processes from modernism to post-modernism'.[49] Mosquera reminds us that despite some fanciful

reconstructive image-making by vanguard leaders like the surrealist magus André Breton, Lam was never the primitive artist, and although of African and Chinese (as well as Spanish) heritage, he studied art at venerable institutions such as the San Alejandro Academy in Havana and the Prado Museum in Madrid, and was a rather highly westernised member of an underdeveloped nation in the post-colonial context. Lam's work should therefore be recognised as neither primitive nor traditional, but, as Mosquera puts it, an example of 'the non-traditional artistic production of the Third World' that reveals 'a... point of true synthesis between avant-garde and "primitivism" – the possible embryo of a future line of development of art as a result of the eruption of the confines of contemporary culture'.[50]

By the 1990s this synthesis would characterise numerous post-modern tendencies in the international art world. Issues such as identity, ethnicity, gender and societal context began to influence the study of Lam's career. I would suggest, however, despite Mosquera's persuasive argument, that a simple deconstruction of Eurocentrist art history is not an adequate means by which to reconstruct Lam's artistic identity on the 20th-century art world stage. We must keep in mind the artist's own determination to establish his place in the context of modernism, while at the same time confronting the fact that to reduce his work to its context would diminish his stature as a modernist pioneer. The challenge, therefore, is to confront the hierarchical constructs of art historiography that correlate with the economic, political, and social hierarchies of world power.

One strategy is to interrogate the definition of modernism and challenge the overly linear genealogy that characterises the canon of 20th-century art history. Art historian Ann Gibson notes the view proposed by Linda Hutcheon, who hypothesised that post-modernism emerged from the oppositional avant-garde of Brecht and Duchamp, on the one hand, and purist formalism on the other.[51] As Gibson notes, Peter Wollen's concept of 'two avant-gardes', provided for a contrast of terms, one of which 'practiced the disjunction that cubism opened between signified and signifier', which made it 'possible, and indeed, necessary, for avant-garde art to appear to be indifferent to political and social issues'.[52] The second avant-garde, according to Gibson, 'interrogated the codes of realism and perception. But unlike the hiding, ignoring, or rejection of certain subject matter demanded by formalism, the aesthetic employed by artists of the second avant-garde permitted the use of abstraction (often along with elements of the mimetic realism) in order to better enable the artist to express his or her view of the subject matter'.[53]

If we consider the career of Lam with that of his African American contemporaries Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden – who were also emerging on the New York art scene in the 1940s – we might also think about 'two waves' of primitivism. Lam, Lewis and Bearden would then signal a transition from the first wave – the European avant-garde's appropriation around 1900 of motifs from the arts of Africa, Native America, the Pacific region, and Pre-Columbian countries – to the second wave in which black artists whose ancestors came from those lands combined modernist styles with motifs from the traditional artists in a way that reflected their more profound and authentic understanding of the meaning that these forms had for their ancestors.[54] In that sense then,

Lam, Lewis and Bearden could be said to have heralded the new ideas of post-modernism some three decades before the international art establishment codified this theoretical world-view.[55]

In the final analysis, I have to return to my initial scepticism about becoming embroiled in an existing critical and art-historical paradigm in an attempt to legitimise the art of African, Native, Asian, Latin, and Latino American artists. Engaging the paradigm of 'modernism' or, more specifically 'modernist primitivism', embroils one in an argument about chronological priority, not to mention arguments about objectivity (centre) over subjectivity (periphery), that also inevitably arise in discussing 'Second Wave' or 'New Wave' primitivism. The 'New World' sobriquet does, however, provide a situation for recalibrating the criteria around issues of authenticity and cross-cultural dialogue put forward by Gerardo Mosquera. Mosquera's proposal for a new art history is given a further concrete methodology by African art historian, Ikem Stanley Okoye, who proposes a parallel notion of various histories to accommodate the ability of all cultures to change and permutate and to reflect more precisely the condition of the 'primitive'.[56]

In his 1996 essay, 'Tribe and Art History', Okoye proposes that in reconsidering the issue of primogeniture in modern art that scholars might consider a hypothetical object produced by an African artist working in Africa the same year as Picasso working in Paris produced *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Within a set number of conditions, such an object by that African artist working in Africa should be considered as much a part of the discourse on the genesis of modernism. He writes:

> [t]he idea of modernist sculpture *as such* was as likely invented in Africa (southeastern Nigeria) as in western Europe (France), then a ritual object (anyanwu) created among the Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria would have a place next to *Les Demoiselles*.[57]

The fact that this object would include non-traditional elements such as 'a large number of bottles of Schnapps'[58] arranged so that the artist could take advantage of 'the brilliance... produced in the tropical intensities of light and shadow'[59] suggests an affinity with vanguard artistic strategies (such as dadaism). Ordinarily, however, this object would not be included in any exhibition of early 20th-century modern sculpture,[60] its exclusion based solely on notions of traditional African art as creativity emanating from an anonymous, communal activity rather than an individualist, personality-based one.

As an African, Okoye's approach confronts western pretensions at primogeniture more directly than Mosquera, whose experience as a Cuban positions hybridity as a factor that would blur the distinctions between the polarities of western primitivism. Okoye's hypothesis therefore attains cogency in light of current trends in African art history which foreground the contributions and recognition within African contexts of individual artists and their workshops.[61] This would situate formerly 'anonymous' African artists on a par with their European contemporaries and allow them to claim a role in the development of modern art at a time when various forces and trends were transforming their traditional way of life. The exchange between 'primitive' and 'western' cultures would thus be mutual, as the African American artist Robert Colescott once noted,

with Picasso starting with, 'European art... abstracted through African art', and the African artist beginning with 'Africanism' and moving 'toward European art'.[62] As well as the revisionist, and more inclusive, surveys of the modernist terrain by scholars like Mosquera, Gibson, Craven, and to a certain extent Leja, Okoye's viewpoint will reorient our view of the assumed hegemonic relationship between the centre and the periphery by jettisoning the dichotomies of 'centre' and 'periphery', while preserving the richness offered by 'ethnic' notions of culture. The resulting 'open-ended exchange' would not only account for how 'objects in society accrete the meaning that they do' but also avoids the 'insertion of a covert hegemony' in the writing of history and institutes what Okoye describes as R. Radhakrishnan's version of Mosquera's 'heterogeneity'.[63]

In the context of these various methods of reorienting art history, Lam would be more than a follower. He would garner recognition for having reconciled, in the context of the period in which he matured as an artist, the dichotomous relationships that were perceived to exist among form and content, tradition and the future, figure and abstraction. Lam would gain recognition for finding in the reconciliation of these opposites an alternative to materialistic cultural values through the celebration of nature. That Lam's position has continued to be relevant to contemporary life is indicated by the endurance of this point of view over the last thirty years. The reconciliation of dichotomies was a central principle in the social and political liberation movements of the 1960s and such values returned in the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of a revived awareness of the consequences of societal excesses in terms of both natural resources and human potential.

Lam was indeed ahead of his time. For it has been only in the last two decades that the gods of the Lucumí have travelled beyond the borders of Cuba and are finding recognition and new adherents even in the USA, one of the most overtly technological societies in the world. This explains the renewed interest in Lam's work, which has begun to transcend differences of nationality and 'race'. My discussion has attempted to broaden and enrich the conventional view of Lam's career and indicate areas that need further investigation. As I have tried to demonstrate, in his person and eventually in his signature style, Lam posed questions about 'authenticity' within the context of modernist and later post-modernist practice. As such he demonstrated that artists of colour who navigated issues of assimilation and acculturation could at the same time manifest a distinct and integral relationship with their ancestral cultures within the rubrics of modernism or post-modernism and thus function as intermediaries between the old world of the formal avant-garde and the new world of iconographic modernism, from primitivist to ancestralist. When these achievements are fully recognised, with a greater comprehension of the exact nature of Lam's contribution, Lam and artists of colour who have followed comparable paths will be judged by criteria generated from their own centres rather than on the margins of modernism.

NOTES

1. Frank Bowling and Frank Thomson, 'A Conversation Between Two Painters', *Art International: The Art Spectrum*, Vol. XX, 9–10 (October–November, 1976), 65.
2. Jeffrey C. Stewart, 'Paul Robeson and the Problem of Modernism', in *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, essays by David A. Bailey, Richard J. Powell, Simon Callow, Andrea D. Barnwell, Jeffrey C. Stewart, Paul Gilroy, Martina Attille, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press and London: Hayward Gallery, 1997, 92.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Helen Shannon, unpublished exhibition prospectus for the exhibition *Challenge of the Modern: African American Artists, 1925–1945*, Fall, 2001. This exhibition was shown at The Studio Museum in Harlem, 23 January – 4 March, 2003.
7. See William Rubin, *'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, exh. cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984.
8. Along with Pre-Columbian art, Pacific art and the art of certain marginalised artistic communities such as the self-taught, children and the mentally and physically challenged.
9. Stewart, op. cit., 92.
10. See Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Vanguard, 1923–1982*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, 2.
11. Sartre quoted in Robert Linsley, 'Wifredo Lam: Painter of Negritude', *Art History*, 2, no. 4 (December 1988), 553.
12. Lam quoted in Gerardo Mosquera, 'Mi pintura es un acto de descolonización: Entrevista con Wifredo Lam', *Bohemia* 92, no. 25 (20 June 1980), 10–13.
13. The *femme cheval* literally represents a possessed devotee in the Afro-Cuban religion of Lucumí, known in popular parlance as the *caballo* or horse of the orisha, or Afro-Cuban deity – who 'rides' the devotee during possession who may be said to effect a shamanistic transformation in the midst of a ritual event.
14. Yau, 'Please Wait by the Cloakroom', *Arts Magazine*, 63 (December 1988), 59. This strategy countered what the surrealist apostate Georges Bataille described in 1930 as the 'sanitisation' of those tribal art forms by modernism. See Georges Bataille, 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transposition', *Documents*, 8 (1930), 49–52.
15. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, 102.
16. Ibid., 102–103.
17. This diagram is reproduced in David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, 23.
18. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.
19. Sims, op. cit., 18–19.
20. Giulio Blanc and Gerardo Mosquera, 'Cuba', in Edward J. Sullivan ed., *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, London: Phaidon, 1996, 85.
21. See for example Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*, trans. by Helen Sebba, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.
22. Rocío Aranda-Alvarez, 'New World Primitivism in Harlem and Havana: Constructing Modern Identities in the Americas, 1924–1945', PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 2001, 143.
23. This aspect of Chinese painting was the subject of the exhibition *Loyalty and Dissent in Traditional Chinese Calligraphy and Painting* organised by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (20 March – 9 September 1990).
24. See Suzanne Garrigues Daniel, 'The Early Works of Wifredo Lam: 1941–45', PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 1983 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1991), 88–90.
25. Ibid., 90.
26. Lam quoted in Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, S.A., 1976. Reprinted Paris: Editions Cercle d'art, 1989, 198.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. John Mason, *Four New World Yorùbá Rituals*, Brooklyn, N.Y.: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1985, 5.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. See Lydia Cabrera, *El monte*, Miami, 1975.
33. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, New York: Praeger, 1979, 67.
34. See Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*, exh. cat., Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1978, 18–19.
35. See Sidney Simon, 'Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939–1943: An Interview with Robert Motherwell conducted by Sidney Simon', *Art International*, 11, no. 6 (Summer 1967), 17–23.
36. See William Rubin's discussion of the surrealist legacy in American art in *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, exh. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968. Irving Sandler confirmed such ideas in a conversation we had at the Studio Museum in Harlem on 1 May 1998, in conjunction with the exhibition *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946–1977*.

37. See Sims, 'Wifredo Lam and Robert Matta: Surrealism in the New World', in Terry Ann R. Neff ed, *In the Mind's Eye: Dada and Surrealism*, exh. cat., Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, 94. In the 1950s, however, the trajectory of stylistic developments in American art diverged into two tendencies in the New York School – the gestural painterliness of Pollock and de Kooning and the colour fields of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. As these last two artists would eventually be recognised for predicting developments in American art in the later 1950s and 60s, Valerie Fletcher would assert that in his thinning of colour and soaking into the canvas, Lam – like Gorky – preceded the New York School and Washington Color School. See Valerie Fletcher, *Crosscurrents of Modernism: Four Latin American Pioneers: Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wifredo Lam, Matta*, exh. cat., Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in association with Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 175.
38. 'A Way to Kill Space', *Newsweek*, 28 (12 August 1946), 106.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid, 107. The emphasis on glyph-like shapes, forms that 'suggest rather than represent', and the perception of the 'premonition of danger' echo the primordial condition that the abstract expressionists were evoking in their own work, which Mark Rothko described as 'of the Earth, the Damned and the Recreated', Rothko quoted in Irving Sandler, op. cit., 67.
41. Forty years later Paul Schimmel would find 'counterparts' to Lam's work in Gottlieb's but again distinguishes Lam's work from other artistic developments in the 1940s by noting that the 'other worldly beings' that he created were not merely 'formal devices but a manifestation of his Chinese-Cuban-African heritage'. See Paul Schimmel, *The Interpretive Link: Abstract Expressionism into Abstract Expressionism*, exh. cat., Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1986, 22.
42. Pierre Mabille, 'The Ritual Painting of Wifredo Lam', *Magazine of Art*, 42 (May 1949), 188.
43. Ibid.
44. Clousseau, 'L'origine et l'écart', in *Paris-Paris: Créations en France 1937–1957*, exh. cat., Paris: Centre de Georges Pompidou, 1981.
45. Merewether, 'At the Crossroads of Modernism: A Limnal Terrain', Charles Merewether et al., *Wifredo Lam: A Retrospective of Works on Paper*, exh. cat., New York: Americas Society, 1992, 20.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 173–75.
51. Ann Gibson, The African American Aesthetic and Postmodernism', in David Driskell ed., *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*, Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, 85.
52. Ibid., 86–87.
53. Ibid., 88.
54. Lowery Stokes Sims, 'African American Artists and Postmodernism: Reconsidering the Careers of Wifredo Lam, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Robert Colescott', in David Driskell, op. cit., 103–104.
55. Ibid., 104.
56. Ikem Stanley Okoye, 'Tribe and Art History', *Art Bulletin*, 78, no. 4 (December 1996), 610–15.
57. Ibid., 610.
58. Ibid., 614–15.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 614.
61. See, for example, *Master Hand: Individuality and Creativity among Yoruba Sculptors*, exh. brochure, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997; and Z.S. Strother, *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
62. Quoted in *Robert Colescott: A Retrospective, 1975–1986*, exh. cat., essays by Lowery S. Sims and Mitchell D. Kahan, San Jose: San Jose Museum of Art, 1987, 8.
63. Okoye, 'Tribe and Art History', 615.