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Book Reviews

Literary Primitivism
By BEN ETHERINGTON
Stanford University Press, 2018, 218 pp.
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In *Literary Primitivism*, Ben Etherington contradicts the "conventional view" that aesthetic primitivism "was" an idealization projected by "Western artists and thinkers" onto "non-Western peoples." He conceives of it instead as a utopian project, in both the "West" and the "non-West," to negate "the social logic" of globalizing capitalism. Accordingly, the book has two parts. In the first part (chapters 1 to 4), Etherington rereads scholarship about primitivism in order to redefine it as an artistic mode peculiar to the era of "finance-driven imperialism." In the second part (chapters 5 to 7), he backs up his hypothesis by undertaking detailed studies—he calls his approach "slow reading," but it looks like old fashioned close reading—of primitivist works by Aimé Césaire, D. H. Lawrence, and Claude McKay.

In his theoretical chapters, Etherington disavows "methodologies" that center on representation and identity and, following Lukács, self-consciously adopts "the point of view of totality." He proposes to assess the social function of literature in the "evolution" of "a single, commonly experienced modern world-system": global capitalism (14). To this end, he sets aside "philo-primitivism," which idealizes peoples thought to be living "simpler, more natural lives," and zeroes in on "emphatic primitivism," which emerges when the capitalist world-system seems to be about to subsume all non-capitalist systems (26). Emphatic primitivism dreams of the "miracle" of "a social existence unmediated by capital." Though he focuses on works published in the 1920s, thirties, forties, and fifties, Etherington does not consider the communist world-system or its role in global movement toward decolonization. To seal his totality, he takes a model of history dating from 1989 onward and projects it into the past.

Etherington builds his reappraisal of primitivist aesthetics around Bloch's contrast between subjective non-synchronicity, which refers to the discontent of individuals who feel left out of the capitalist totality, and objective non-synchronicity, which refers to remnant objects and practices that persist, if only temporarily, in the self-totalizing capitalist system. What emphatic primitivism perceives in the remnant is the possibility of an unmediated social life that promises the non-synchronous negation of the imperial world-system (33–34 and 37).

Etherington's most compelling claim is that it was not just "Western" writers who were drawn to the "charge" of the remnant (38). Rather, "negation in the name of the primitive" was "system-wide" (39). He points to the example of Aimé Césaire. "Trying

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to envision a 'revolution' that would be more than 'a mere shaking of surfaces,'" he argues, "[Césaire] calls for his black readers to 'apprehend in ourselves the immediate Negro, plant our negritude like a beautiful tree until it bears its most authentic fruits'" (39). For Etherington, this quotation offers a "concise" statement of "the aims and means of the primitivist project" (39). Emphatic primitivism does not represent the primitive, but re-creates the possibility of primitive experience.

Etherington advertises chapter 5, the first of his literary readings, as a study of Césaire's poetry. In fact, it is mostly a reading of Frantz Fanon's 1951 essay, "The Lived Experience of the Black," which was later reprinted in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Etherington argues that Fanon "channels" Césaire's primitivism as a tactic for rebuffing Sartre's interpretation of the negritude poets in "Black Orpheus" (73). For Fanon, he argues, "the process of regression" or "primitivization" is a "leap of liberation" made necessary by particular historical circumstances (85). What critics suppress, he adds, is that for Fanon "this plunge" is "politically enabling" (90). Perhaps because he rejects "poststructuralism" on the grounds that it obliges criticism to pass through the phenomenological (and psychoanalytic) "category of the Other" (12), Etherington reads Fanon without engaging with his most basic question: How is it possible to experience one's own being through others?

In chapter 6, Etherington rehabilitates the notion of blood. Or, more exactly, he takes up Lawrence's question, "What does the blood know?" Blood, for Lawrence, has a "consciousness," and an agency, "of its own," and literature is "a medium for the revelation" of this blood knowledge, which he considers "more profound" than scientific knowledge (108–09). Etherington tries to pry Lawrence's notion of blood loose from eugenics and social Darwinism but neglects to consider the ways blood-discourse remains active today, for example in the legal definition of *race* in the United States. He might have benefited from reading *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, but such texts are not part of his totality.

In the final chapter, Etherington takes up the primitivist novels of Claude McKay, where "there is an abiding sense that authentic primitive experience [in the form of "immediacy"] is still within reach" (135). According to Etherington, McKay primitivizes narrative itself. Immediacy is a style of storytelling. Etherington calls it "jazz style" (139). Music is McKay's "conduit" for reanimating "the remnant of the precolonial self," and this reanimation unfolds among "the colonial lumpenproletariat": "vagabonds" and "drifters" who have no other relationship to the world-system than to take pleasure from it (136).

In his conclusion, Etherington sums up his thesis as follows: "Literary primitivism . . . had two key preconditions: the manifestation of an anguished world-historical consciousness that perceived that the conditions of possibility for primitive experience had been eliminated, and a pervasive belief in the capacity of aesthetic practice to revive the remnants of 'primitive' social realities" (162). Primitivism was a way of perpetuating "the illusion of natural existence"—in Adorno's phrase, "a fetish against commodity fetishism" (162–63). Note the play of quotation marks within this quotation. Etherington writes simultaneously of primitivism and "primitivism." One is a "social reality," the other an "illusion." There is no mention of the fact that for a long time *primitive experience* was defined as the inability to distinguish between reality and illusion.

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Etherington is a Marxist conservative. His thinking is dialectical; however, he practices a style of dialectics that reinforces totalities, and he rejects as "postmodern" the dialectics that produces irreducible differences. He favors the phrase "proper totality." Proper means clean, unblemished, sacrosanct. He practices a totalizing thought of totality. One consequence is that he perpetuates a developmental model of Marxism. As far as I can tell, he genuinely believes that there was a primitive stage of social evolution that was extinguished by the expansion of capitalism. (There is no place in his totality for Mick Taussig's lifelong study of the coexistence of peasant agriculture and capitalist agribusiness in contemporary Colombia.) Etherington's theory of primitivism reproduces the fantasy of the "non-West" as a vanishing civilization, as if he were following the passage of the sun in Hegel's Introduction to the *Philosophy of History*.

As Etherington himself demonstrates, Bloch's notion of the remnant is itself a product of primitivist thought. When nonsynchronous subjectivity dreams of nonsynchronous objectivity, writes Bloch, "Negro drums rumble and central Africa rises up" (36). Emphatic primitivism looks to the remnant for a model of unmediated existence, yet the remnant is itself a product of primitivism. Hence Etherington's reasoning is ultimately circular. Primitivism is a longing, within the closed circle of a capitalist totality, for a primitive condition. The explanation of primitivism is . . . primitivism.

Among the things that Etherington excludes from his totality are other genres of primitivism, such as anthropological, administrative, missionary, economic, and socio-biological primitivisms. He makes it easier for himself to celebrate the liberatory primitivism of Césaire, Lawrence, and McKay by insulating his study from the broader historical consequences of primitivist discourses—such as the seizure of land and resources from peoples called primitive. Etherington's totality has holes in it.

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Postcolonial Borges: Argument & Artistry
By ROBIN FIDDIAN
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Few literary reputations have traveled such a long and winding road as that of Jorge Luis Borges. After all, his first reception outside Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s saw in him an extraterritorial, as George Steiner called him. Underlying Steiner's and other interpretations of Borges's narrative proposed at the time is the notion that the author of *Ficciones* wrote in isolation from his native country's history, culture, and literature. Nowadays, however, it is not unusual to see in the

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