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A Role for Empathy in Decolonizing Aesthetics: Unlikely Lessons from Roger Fry

Ivan Gaskell

Abstract

Artist and art historian Roger Fry used Paul Gauguin's 1896 painting, *Poèmes barbares*, to advertise his 1910 exhibition, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*. In *Vision and Design* (1920), Fry promoted the so-called "primitive" art of Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa as depending on unmediated perception that he associated with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Although Fry's assumption of an "ultra-primitive directness of vision" on the part of African makers ignores their own mediating conventions, his reliance on the Vischers' notion of empathetic connection enhances the possibility of regarding the cultural products of peoples foreign to the percipient with what Paul C. Taylor terms an "ethical attentiveness that combats reductionism and objectification." Further, such a form of attention can displace attempts to privilege European and Eurocentric art and thought, by referring to "primitive" art and thought, promoting recognition of their value in their own right.

Key Words

aesthetic judgment; African sculpture; decolonization; empathy (*Einfühlung*); Roger Fry; Paul Gauguin; Oceania; primitive

1. Decolonizing cultural relations

Decolonization is not confined to ending particular forms of political rule as settlers and their metropolitan sponsors cede authority to the Native inhabitants whom they had dominated. It entails a purging of those attitudes that sustain the possibility of such behavior and sanction a continuing inequitable power relationship between colonizer and colonized.[1] Colonial

attitudes, by which hegemonic groups continue to discount or denigrate the thought and practice of subaltern groups, remain an insidious characteristic of those groups that enjoy power, even if their members proclaim their modes of inquiry to be dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of pancultural truth.

One of the major consequences of efforts to decolonize areas of hegemonic thought and practice is a tendency to promote cultural isolationism. That is, various culturally distinct subaltern communities, many, though not all, of which identify as Indigenous, assert an identity that their members hold to be impenetrable to members of other groups that generally enjoy an advantage in terms of power disparity. I do not doubt that subaltern communities have an absolute right to assert the validity of their own cultural knowledge and practices that their members alone are best placed to understand. Neither do I doubt that certain aspects of such cultural knowledge and practice should be reserved to members of those communities, remaining beyond what it might be proper for outsiders to inquire into. The assumption on the part of thinkers in hegemonic societies—primarily, though not exclusively, Westerners whom I shall henceforth term European, in the sense of being culturally members of the worldwide European settler diaspora—that they have an absolute right to the knowledge of other human communities has caused untold damage to countless such communities. Although not all cultural appropriation is unequivocally injurious, appropriation that amounts to intellectual despoliation, from theft to destruction, accelerated from the onset of large-scale European intrusion into the Americas in the early sixteenth century. Injurious appropriation has been and continues to be conducted worldwide.[2]

In some circumstances, Europeans have practiced appropriation out of admiration for aspects of the cultural knowledge and practice of colonial subjects and other subalterns. However, as formal European empire and colonial settlement took firm hold in large parts of the globe in the nineteenth century, encompassing the greater part of sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, northwest Asia (Siberia), south Asia, and Oceania,[3] contempt or, at best, condescension tended to displace any earlier admiration on the part of Europeans for Indigenous peoples. A notion of the *primitive* as inferior to the *civilized* came to dominate hegemonic thought, implying a hierarchy among human communities. *Ancient Society* (1877), by American historian and anthropologist, Lewis H. Morgan, sets out what was to become the dominant European notion of social evolution.[4] Morgan proposes human progress from savagery (characterized by the use of the bow, fire, and pottery) through barbarism (dominated by agriculture, the

domestication of animals, and metalworking), to civilization (which alone employs writing). Although long since superseded in anthropological scholarship, Morgan's model still underlies assumptions widely held in hegemonic societies about human social organization.

One of the most insidious and damaging aspects of European hegemonism has been its co-option of the primitive to sanction European achievements. From the late nineteenth century onwards, various European thinkers, including some artists, critics, museum curators, and art collectors, appealed to selected artifacts from subaltern communities not as examples of inferiority and error, as had been the case when, for example, between 1814 and 1910 the London Missionary Society had displayed "idols" from Oceania and elsewhere in its museum, but as sources of inspiration.[5] Various late nineteenth and early twentieth-century European artists responded to the works of Indigenous makers, creating new forms. Certain critics also discerned elements in novel European art practice that appeared to be consonant, in terms of certain values and practices, with characteristics of various Indigenous items, even if they differed in form. One such artist, curator, and critic was Roger Fry (1866-1934). Early in the twentieth century, thinkers such as Fry mobilized what they considered to be primitive art to sanction the practice of certain European artists. This indisputably drew European attention to select formal characteristics of some subaltern items leading to their positive aesthetic evaluation. Even though there is much to which to object in this kind of aesthetic apprehension, in which any European appreciation of subaltern items is solely on hegemonic terms, it can also help lead the way to questioning the inevitability of cultural isolation: that members of different cultural communities cannot hope to have any legitimate access whatsoever to aspects of one another's cultural products. Even while allowing for the danger of acquiescing in injurious appropriation, I propose that empathy has a role to play in fostering such access and overcoming the social isolation of cultural groups. I shall attempt to explore this proposal by appealing in the first instance to some of Fry's writings on "primitive" art and aesthetics.

The term *empathy* has become unwieldy in its elasticity and imprecision. I use it in the sense evoked by Fry, as a "feeling of a special tie" that the percipient can come to sense between herself or himself and the maker of an artwork, based on self-realization prompted by the work that evokes this feeling.[6] Fry's emphasis on empathetic connection enhances the possibility of regarding the cultural products of peoples foreign to the percipient in an ethically informed manner that promotes acknowledgement of the full human complexity of their makers.

Such a form of attention can promote recognition of the value of works that remain foreign to the percipient, even though they may have a role in sanctioning the percipient's own culturally familiar art and thought. Further, an acknowledgement of a capacity for empathy promises one way of circumventing claims that human cultural groups enjoy exclusive access to their own cultural products and knowledge.

2. Paul Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* and Roger Fry

No late nineteenth-century European artist practiced cultural appropriation more blatantly than Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). In 1896, during his second visit to the islands in Oceania known as French Polynesia, Gauguin made a painting, now in the Harvard Art Museums, to which he gave the title inscribed in the upper left corner, *Poèmes barbares*, sometimes translated as "Savage Poems"[7] (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Paul Gauguin, *Poèmes barbares*, 1896, oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest from the collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Gauguin derived the title from a collection of poems first published in 1862 by Charles Leconte de Lisle under the title *Poésies Barbares*, but which he renamed *Poèmes barbares* when he reissued the collection with a different publisher in

1871.[8] The poet chose this revised title to be a contrast to his collection published in 1852, *Poèmes antiques*, that had been largely inspired by the cultures of classical antiquity and ancient India.[9] In *Poèmes barbares*, Leconte de Lisle evoked the mythologies of non-classical—"primitive"—cultures, including Oceania. Among them is a poem with the title, "La Genèse polynésienne" (Polynesian Creation). Some scholars have proposed that Gauguin's painting follows this poem in evoking the Tahitian account of the creation of the universe, the gods, and humankind by the creator deity called, in Tahitian, Ta'aroa, who is represented by the figure at lower left.[10] This creation account has equivalents in most, if not all, southern and eastern Oceanic societies, from Aotearoa New Zealand to Hawai'i. It is not my purpose to elucidate the iconography of this painting. Rather, I want to examine how this work intersects with the aesthetic ideas of Roger Fry.

What is the connection between *Poèmes barbares* and Roger Fry? Admittedly, it is tenuous. In 1910, Fry, having quit his position at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York the previous year, organized an exhibition at the Grafton Gallery, London.[11] The Grafton Gallery had long shown a tolerance towards what has come to be seen, from a normative art historical perspective, as progressive art, showing, for instance, French Impressionist works in 1905 before these were generally admired. In 1910, it went a step further and hosted a loan exhibition conceived by Fry comprising paintings from France that he considered to be even more radical. In focusing on the work of Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh, in particular, Fry coined the designation "Post-Impressionist," using it in the title of his exhibition.[12] As art historian Anna Gruetzner Robins writes in her study of the exhibition: "What cannot be disputed is that *Manet and the Post- Impressionists*, through many canonical exhibits, ensured that Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso and to some extent Seurat were established as pre-eminent figures in the landscape of Modernism as perceived in the Anglophone art world. From there on it was impossible to ignore them." [13]



Figure 2. Exhibition poster, Manet and the Post-Impressionists, Grafton Gallery, London, 1910-11.

Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* dominates the publicity poster for the exhibition (Figure 2). It is hard to believe that Fry did not choose it for this purpose. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that Fry, who was an accomplished graphic designer in addition to being a painter and print-maker, did not design the poster himself. He saw value in what he termed "that ultra-primitive directness of vision" that he detected in the works of those whom he at times termed "savages."^[14] In his writings on sub-Saharan African art, in particular, he promoted an awareness of that specific value of what, at the time, was termed "the primitive" as a way of furthering the status of the works of contemporaneous European artists who had sought inspiration in sub-Saharan African and Oceanic material culture. This presumably led to the choice of a painting for the poster that makes explicit the connection between innovative European practice and so-called primitive sources of inspiration. The use of Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* on the poster implies not only that it held a special place in Fry's conception of the exhibition, but that it was actually included in the exhibition. However, that appears not to have been the case. Robins concludes, "it is possible that the picture was promised but did not reach the exhibition since there does not appear to be any reference to it in the extensive press commentary."^[15] I have been unable to discover unequivocally by whom it might have been promised. It may

have been owned at that time by the Munich banker, Alfred Wolff. The painting had been through the Hôtel Drouot auction rooms in Paris in 1906, and was acquired directly or indirectly by Wolff. Wolff collected avant-garde French art with the advice of the Belgian designer, Henry van de Velde.[16] By 1912, little more than a year after the Grafton Gallery exhibition closed, *Poèmes barbares* was in the collection of Michael Sadler. Michael Sadler was a historian and educational theorist who had been appointed vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds in northern England in 1911. Sadler became president of the Leeds Art Club, founded in 1903. The club was a proponent of the most avant-garde European art of the day from France and, especially, Germany.[17] Sadler owned not only Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* but his *Vision after the Sermon* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh). He was a notable supporter of Wassily Kandinsky, owning *Fragment 2 for Composition VII*, of 1913 (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY). Indeed, Sadler's enthusiastic support of German Expressionism in Kandinsky's Munich acknowledged the Bavarian city as of an importance in the production of avant-garde art equal to, if not greater than, that of Paris. The Leeds Arts Club explored progressive work even more outrageous to contemporary European taste than that championed by Fry, who focused on artists in Paris. And Sadler was undoubtedly acquainted with the Munich art collector, Alfred Wolff.

In Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* we see a prime example of the work of European artists who found inspiration in items from Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa. This is a familiar topic in European art history. Yet why should Gauguin and Picasso, emulating the work of Oceanic and African makers, be thought of as admirably inventive and innovative, whereas the work of Oceanic and African artists subsequently finding inspiration in that of Gauguin and Picasso be considered derivative? At one time, the argument that the attention of European artists to the work of supposedly primitive makers sanctioned, in turn, viewers' attention to such work, was a new and, to an extent, a liberating argument. That argument was made by Roger Fry in his collection of his essays, *Vision and Design*, published in 1920. We should note, though, that Fry's sympathetic observations regarding so-called primitive art were confined to material from Africa. He did not address Oceania or other non-Western areas of the world often described as primitive at that time.

3. Fry on "Bushman Paintings," and "Negro Sculpture"

Fry's first published thoughts on African art concerned drawings by members of the hunter-gatherer peoples of southern Africa, today predominantly grouped in Botswana and Namibia and known as the San, but then as Bushmen. Fry's thoughts

appeared originally as a book review, "Bushman Paintings," in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1910.[18] In 1920, Fry visited an exhibition of sub-Saharan African sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club with his friend, the author Virginia Woolf, and published a review in *The Athenaeum* as "Negro Sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club." [19] In the same year, he included both short essays (the former retitled "The Art of the Bushmen") in *Vision and Design*. This book is an incremental argument about how discerning what Fry termed "that ultra-primitive directness of vision" found in African art can open viewers' minds to related qualities in European Post-Impressionist art.[20] As such, even if the book invites attention to African material, it remains an example of the continuing subordination of subaltern cultural items to European values. In "Bushman Paintings," Fry argues that in the process of making art, "the retinal image passed into a clear memory picture with scarcely any intervening mental process." [21] This resulted, he claims, in images that incorporate the kind of foreshortening that many of his contemporaries thought absent from what he terms "early art," the term he uses to refer to Assyrian, Egyptian, archaic Greek, and Neolithic art. [22] He suggests that the art of the San, by contrast, is similar to the art of Paleolithic peoples, exemplified by the cave paintings of Altamira, in that it can depict appearances because the "concepts were not so clearly grasped as to have begun to interfere with perception." [23] He argues that in such works, the maker depended on an "immediacy and rapidity of transcription" rather than on "express[ing] a mental image which is coloured by his conceptual habits." [24] Early Greek artists, on the other hand, relied on the representation of visual concepts and showed what they knew to be the case regarding what they represented, rather than simply what they saw. Far from lauding the Greeks and denigrating the Africans, Fry points to the art practice of the San—"what we call the lowest of savages" [25] —as the very mode of perception and execution that the Impressionists were seeking in their paintings: that is, "that ultra-primitive directness of vision."

"Negro Sculpture," written ten years later, makes a different point. It is a salutary blast aimed at the unthinking valuation of the European sculptural tradition derived from ancient Greece. Here, Fry lauds sub-Saharan wood sculpture for what he terms its "expressive plastic form" and its "complete plastic freedom." [26] Its figures, he argues, are wholly free in conception from the predominantly two-dimensional constraints of the bas-relief that he argues characterize Greek and subsequent European statuary. Although Fry praises the qualities he discerns in sub-Saharan wood sculpture, ascribing a "creative aesthetic impulse" to their makers and associating them with the "most exquisite sensibility and the finest taste,"

he nonetheless holds that “[i]t is for want of a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison that the negro has failed to create one of the great cultures of the world.”[27]

It is not my purpose simply to echo the observations of scholars such as Marianna Torgovnick, who rightly points out the undertow of early twentieth-century racist assumptions in Fry’s remarks on African art.[28] Neither am I concerned to do more than merely mention that Fry’s striking enthusiasm for West African sculpture in wood was shared by a small number of European and American taste-makers, who, although informed by different philosophical considerations, shared with Fry an interest in emphasizing the formal properties of artworks. Readers get a glimpse of this shared concern in the sole illustration accompanying “Negro Sculpture,” in Fry’s *Vision and Design*: Plate III (Figure 3).

The item reproduced was subsequently identified as a Sãdo’o Society ritual female figure made by a member of the Senufo nation in Côte d’Ivoire in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Fry simply captioned it “Negro Sculpture” and “Collection Guillaume” on the plate in his book. “Guillaume” was the Parisian dealer, Paul Guillaume, who championed African sculpture, and from whom the pharmaceutical entrepreneur-turned- collector and art educator, Albert Barnes, bought nearly all the African works that he acquired for his institution in suburban Philadelphia, beginning in 1922.[29] The Senufo female figure is among the works Barnes acquired from Guillaume. Even though the French designation *l’art nègre* included Oceanic works during this period, Barnes acquired just one Oceanic piece, apparently believing it to have been African and Fry confined his brief discussions to works from Africa.[30]



Figure 3. Senufo artist (Côte d'Ivoire), Seated female figure of the Sādo'o Society, late 19th–early 20th century, wood, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, as illustrated in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (1920), Plate III.

4. The decolonizing response

When trying to establish grounds for why people from hegemonic societies might pay attention to works from subaltern communities in their own right, the familiar European appeal to works from both Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa as a means of sanctioning certain kinds of European art practice, outlined above, is beside the point. Two factors that might help promote ambition to respond across cultural boundaries meet fleetingly in the context of Gauguin's painting, *Poèmes barbares*. They are, first, Roger Fry's aesthetics, regardless of the range of artworks, whether African or European, to which he appealed; and, second, imagining a view not from the European world to Oceania, but in the other direction, from Oceania, such that European art by Gauguin and his European contemporaries diminish in importance and Oceanic things seen in an Oceanic light reappear. We might term this a *decolonizing response*.

An inkling of a decolonizing response came to my mind when viewing the exhibition *Gauguin, Tahiti* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2004, also shown at the Grand Palais, Paris.[31] The curators, George Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, included considerable numbers of works from Tahiti, the

Marquesas, and elsewhere in Oceania. They did so to invite comparisons with numerous works in various media—paintings, prints, wood, ceramics—by Gauguin. The works from Oceania were there in order to validate Gauguin's inspiration, yet on this occasion they overshadowed Gauguin's own efforts at anything other than painting, drawing, and printmaking. Although one can admire Gauguin's work in all the media he employed, a work in the exhibition such as the Māori carved wooden canoe stern (Musée national de la Marine, Paris) has an aesthetic presence just as compelling as anything that Gauguin himself fashioned in this medium.[32] The presence of Gauguin's art—art that in other circumstances I have admired—was on this occasion a distraction. Rather than enhance Gauguin's achievement, the Oceanic items drew attention to its shortcomings, and I found myself wishing that his works could be purged from the galleries to leave the Oceanic pieces there alone. In this exhibition, Gauguin's art had inadvertently and unfortunately taken on the role of epitomizing arrogant European intrusion in Tahiti, the Marquesas, and Oceania as a whole.

Do Western hegemonic institutions invariably have to subordinate works from subaltern societies to the role of sanctioning Western art practice, as in the case of *Gauguin, Tahiti?* Not necessarily. In 2006, anthropologist Steven Hooper organized the exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia, 1760-1860* at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England.[33] The Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, given to the university in 1973, intermingles works of European Modernism with ancient Mediterranean, African, and Oceanic pieces. Its explicit purpose is to draw attention to the formal properties of all. The Sainsburys owed their inspiration in part to Fry's principles, including an invitation to "dispense once and for all with the idea of likeness to Nature, of correctness or incorrectness, as a test, and consider only whether the emotional elements inherent in natural form are adequately discovered." [34] The Sainsbury Collection Website states that it "uniquely presents art as a universal global phenomenon." [35] However, its implicit purpose is to sanction European Modernism.

Hooper's exhibition transcended the premise of the institution that produced it. In *Pacific Encounters*, there was no overt intrusion of European Modernism. The encounters were of three kinds: first, among the inhabitants of Oceania themselves; second, between these inhabitants on the one hand, and Europeans, including European North Americans, on the other who visited Oceania and intruded increasingly from the mid-eighteenth century onwards; and, third, between the array of extraordinary and very varied things made and first used by

residents of Oceania then on view, and the exhibition visitors whom those things encountered and who encountered them. [36] Hooper eschewed pressing these things into the service of an art history concerned solely with gauging artistic progress from Impressionism through Post-Impressionism to the beginnings of Modernism. He also avoided a purely ethnographic presentation, for he skillfully invited aesthetic attention to the things he showed. Unlike the Musée du quai Branly that opened in Paris in the same year, 2006, dedicated to the so-called *arts premiers* of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, there was little sense of colonial superiority in *Pacific Encounters*. [37] Indeed, the exhibition opened the way for an engagement not only with Oceanic things, many of them invested with *mana* (spiritual power), but with the ideas of Pacific thinkers. It was as close to a decolonizing project as one could imagine in the heart of a society that had thrived by means of colonial exploitation.

I cannot claim that Fry's ideas directly affected Hooper's in his production of *Pacific Encounters*, but neither does Hooper's work implicitly reject Fry's ideas out of hand. Commentators, anxious to avoid complicity in racism, have accused Fry, among others, of having been a racist imperialist. [38] While Fry, albeit equivocally, shared certain racist assumptions, to follow this course entails the risk of rejecting those parts of Fry's thinking that might help to promote attention to sub-Saharan and Oceanic aesthetically charged items without reference to works in the European tradition.

5. Empathy in Fry's aesthetics

There is variety of opinion and there are disagreements among Oceanic thinkers, but a truly post-colonial Oceania—hard to imagine at present—free of the taint of ascriptions of the primitive, whether in the past or present, is at long last conceivable. For people of European origin, this change entails setting obsessions with the art of their own makers, that of Picasso, Gauguin, and the rest, in perspective. Perhaps surprisingly, Roger Fry, who subordinated the qualities he genuinely valued in African art to the promotion of European Post-Impressionism, can offer help in grasping aspects of the peculiar qualities of non-European creations. In his 1909 article in *The New Quarterly*, "An Essay in Aesthetics," subsequently included in *Vision and Design*, he points to what he conceived of as the purpose of the artwork:

But in our reaction to a work of art ...
there is the consciousness of purpose, the consciousness of a
peculiar relation
of sympathy with the man who made this thing in order to
arouse precisely the

sensations we experience. And when we come to the higher works of art, where sensations are so arranged that they arouse in us deep emotions, this feeling of a special tie with the man who expressed them becomes very strong. We feel that he has expressed something which was latent in us all the time, but which we never realised, that he has revealed us to ourselves in revealing himself. And this recognition of purpose is, I believe, an essential part of the aesthetic judgment proper.[39]

The notion that an artwork connects the mind of the maker with that of the percipient informs work in the philosophy and history of art, both earlier and later than Fry's. Fry, himself, acknowledged his debt to Leo Tolstoy, who published *What is Art?* in 1897, in spite of "disagreeing with almost all his results." [40] John Dewey also espoused an expressive theory of art. His arguments likely encouraged Albert Barnes, whom he supported intellectually, to see value in the sub-Saharan African art that we have seen him acquire. In *Art as Experience*, moreover, Dewey takes issue with Fry's near total subordination of "subject matter"—that which is represented in an artwork—to purely formal properties and his discounting of artists' experiences prior to creating artworks as informing those artworks. [41] Yet all these thinkers agree, in outline, that the artwork connects the mind of the maker with that of the percipient. A later, prominent advocate of this contention was Richard Wollheim, for whom the "marked surface must be the conduit along which the mental state of the artist makes itself felt within the mind of the spectator if the result is to be that the spectator grasps the meaning of the picture." [42] However, whereas Wollheim, and others who have followed his lead, believe that the "mental state of the artist makes itself felt within the mind of the spectator," Fry evokes something different that is less directly communicative; that is, a "feeling of a special tie" that the percipient can come to sense between herself and the maker based on self-realization prompted by the work that evokes this feeling. This is a variant of the influential notion of empathetic connection (*Einfühling*) proposed by Robert Vischer and taken up by his father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, notably in his 1887 article, "Das Symbol," even though his claims largely concern the putative relationship between the percipient, the representation and its referent rather than its maker. [43]

Insofar as Fry postulates the possibility of evoking an empathetic connection, a "feeling of a special tie," on the part of the (colonizing) percipient with the (colonized) maker, his idea promises help. But we should temper optimism with caution.

Whether such an aesthetically generated emotion can actually deliver on a promise of a revision of attitude, on the part of the hegemonic subject towards the subaltern subject, is open to question and generates a skeptical response among many subalterns and their supporters.[44] Furthermore, there is a possible serious flaw in the ascription of efficacy to Fry's claims. It seems likely that by drawing inferences from their visual material alone, Fry had failed to grasp that the San are no less dependent on cognitive processes and visual conventions than any other cultural group. In claiming that "the retinal image passed into a clear memory picture with scarcely any intervening mental process," he may have mistaken what in actuality are cognitive processes and distinctive San visual conventions for a supposed "ultra-primitive directness of vision," partly as a consequence of wishful thinking. Reliance on empathy in this instance may have come to naught in terms of analysis. Nonetheless, such a call for human empathy has a place in ongoing attempts to overturn the pernicious appeal to the primitive, in the denigratory sense that was in common use prior to the publication, in 1927, of *Primitive Art*, in which anthropologist Franz Boas discredited the idea of "primitive" humans as being inferior to "civilized" humans by arguing for a species of cultural relativism, suggesting that human communities have developed equally but in distinct manners that are the consequences of historic conditions rather than genetic predispositions.[45]

If rejecting Fry's ideas outright is not an adequate response on the part of those who enjoy hegemonic advantage, neither is an exclusive reliance on his appeal to empathetic connection. If an appeal to empathetic connection has a place in articulating aesthetic responses to items made within subaltern groups, so does it in attempting to come to terms with ideas expressed by members of those groups in other ways. Hegemonic theorizing routinely ignores the work of thinkers from subaltern communities. This is the very thinking that Europeans most need to address if they are to make any attempt to expand upon their own culturally circumscribed viewpoint. With regard to Oceania, I can do no more than signal the contributions of a few among the following Oceanic thinkers: Epeli Hau'ofa, Hūfanga 'Ōkusitino Māhina, Paul Tapsell, and Albert Tuaopepe Wendt.

For instance, Māhina, concurring with Hau'ofa, sees time and space in a manner different from Europeans. Māhina sees Oceanic people "walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future, both taking place in the present, where past and future are constantly mediated in the ever-transforming present." [46] This is an epitome of Tongan concepts of

temporality and spatiality, called *tā* and *vā*, that articulate human beings' experience of their place in the world.[47]

Unsurprisingly, tradition has a particularly urgent place in the work of all these Oceanic thinkers. Māori scholar Paul Tapsell writes of the return in 1993 of an especially important *taonga* (living ancestral physical item) to his *iwi* (tribe), Te Arawa. This is a dogskin cloak called *Te Kahumamae o Pareraututu* ("the cloak of pain of Pareraututu") that had been in the Auckland War Memorial Museum since the 1870s. In spite of the aesthetic characteristics that sustain attention to this exquisitely made, *mana*-charged item, he stresses the importance of Māori ancestral values, in particular, *whakapapa*, or genealogical order, over the aesthetic and historical values that attract Europeans.[48] Yet various Oceanic thinkers do not regard traditional values as immutable. For Epeli Hau'ofa, "Tradition was not the arid, formulaic routine of what had gone before. For Epeli, it was a living, breathing organism of the present day. It drew from the past, yet was neither bound nor limited by it." [49] Neither do all Oceanic thinkers see the cultural groups that sustain traditional values as necessarily unchanging. Some go so far as to deny that shared ethnicity is the sole basis for adhering to or understanding such values. For example, Samoan thinker, Albert Tuaopepe Wendt, argues that access to a culture is not a matter of ethnic belonging. He writes: "To advocate that in order to be a true Samoan, for example, one must be fully-blooded Samoan and behave/think/dance/talk/dress/and believe in a certain prescribed way (and that the prescribed way has not changed since time immemorial) is being racist, callously totalitarian, and stupid." He continues, "This is a prescription for cultural stagnation, an invitation for a culture to choke in its own body odour, juices, and excreta." [50] If Fry, an elite member of a hegemonic culture, holds out the possibility, albeit far from perfectly, that those in one culture can grasp aspects of another, so do some members of subaltern cultures.

Such a forthright rejection of social, cultural, and ethnic isolationism and stasis among scholars beyond the European mainstream is not found in Oceania alone. Distinguished Caribbean scholars, such as the Jamaican sociologist and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall and the Martiniquan literary theorist, Édouard Glissant, challenged assumptions regarding the static cultural identity of communities. Hall proposes a fluid notion of cultural belonging in what he terms "diasporic identity," while Glissant propounds an idea of *relation*—relational belonging—as opposed to the cultural and social isolation induced by an essentializing conception of cultural identity.[51] It is far from inconceivable that parts of Fry's thinking might be redeployed as a productive element of analysis in terms of *relation*.

6. The perils of appropriation, and the persistence of the “primitive”

Placing confidence in empathy offers no easy solution, for the question arises: How can European people who enjoy all kinds of hegemonic advantages engage with Oceanic art and thought, and the art and thought of other disadvantaged peoples, without appropriating them injuriously or offensively?[52] There are members of subaltern communities who deny that hegemonic peoples can ever respond to their cultural productions empathetically or without appropriating them. While we should not assume that some small degree of empathy might be available without instruction, correction, and hard work, for a community to assume a position of complete cultural isolation, by denying that it can be the subject of empathetic engagement by others, seems a denial of a basic human capability. Such a hyper-defensive attitude may be understandable as a consequence of the experience of injustice and inequity over generations, but it leads to extremes of identity politics that can seek to impose limits on comprehension and expression intolerably. As one graduate student put it: “I am a pregnant African American Jewish lesbian: Can I understand and speak only on behalf of pregnant African American Jewish lesbians?” Even while guarding against appropriation, aesthetic apprehension with an empathetic component has a distinct role to play in overcoming social isolation. As philosopher of Black aesthetics Paul C. Taylor puts it, “the aesthetic can be a resource for moving, as María Lugones and Peta Bowden might put it, from perceiving racial ‘others’ arrogantly to perceiving them lovingly, with the ethical attentiveness that combats reductionism and objectification.”[53] Aesthetics has a role to play in postcolonial reconciliation, if, even selectively, such a thing might be possible.

Unfortunately, pre-Boasian usage still has its supporters. At the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 2018, the respondent to a paper on Nietzsche and the origin of obligation mentioned “primitive human beings.” When asked, “Who or what is a primitive human being?” the respondent’s answer was: “A member of the species *Homo sapiens* who has not developed the ability to function in the complex contemporary world,” to which the questioner’s riposte was: “If you were to find yourself among the Asmat people of Papua, might you not take some time to develop an ability to function in their world?” The primitive in some pre-Boasian sense remains alive and well. It may fade further if Fry’s admittedly flawed appeal to human empathy, by evoking “that ultra-primitive directness of vision,” can serve to prompt serious engagement with works by Oceanic and sub-Saharan African makers and thinkers. Fry’s aesthetics offers no one-stop fix to

correcting the predominant hegemonic valuation of subaltern aesthetically charged items. On the contrary, we have seen that his argument subordinated such works to his championing of European Modernism. Yet aesthetic apprehension, with an empathetic component, has a distinct role to play in overcoming the social isolation of cultural groups. Fry's attention to subaltern works in the context of an aesthetics that postulates the "feeling of a special tie" on the part of the percipient to the maker paves the way to an opening of hearts as well as eyes. [54]

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Endnotes

[1] One early instance of the promotion of decolonization in this sense, by advocating the use of Indigenous languages, is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Curry and Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986).

[2] See, inter alia, James O. Young and Conrad Brunk, eds., *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[3] I use the terms *Oceania* and *Oceanic* rather than *Pacific*, in conformity with the preference expressed by Epeli Hau'ofa, who points out that the peoples of the ocean "viewed their world as a 'sea of islands', rather than 'islands in the sea,'" the latter being the prevalent European conception: Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of

Islands," in his *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 27-40, ref. on 32.

[4] Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Line of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1877).

[5] See Rosemary Seton, "Reconstructing the Museum of the London Missionary Society," *Material Religion*, 8, 1 (2012), 98-102; and Chris Wingfield, "'Scarcely more than a Christian trophy case'? The Global Collections of the London Missionary Society Museum (1814-1910)," *Journal of the History of Collections*, 29, 1 (2017), pp. 109-128.

[6] Roger Fry "An Essay in Aesthetics," in his *Vision and Design* (1920; Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), p. 21 (first published in *The New Quarterly* 2, April, 1909).

[7] Paul Gauguin, *Poèmes barbares*, oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Bequest from the Collection of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906.

[8] Charles Leconte de Lisle, *Poésies Barbares* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis, 1862), definitively retitled *Poèmes barbares* (Paris: Lemerre, 1872).

[9] Charles Leconte de Lisle, *Poèmes antiques* (Paris: Lemerre, 1852).

[10] The first to do so was Mary Lynn Zink, "Gauguin's *Poèmes barbares* and the Tahitian Chant of Creation," *Art Journal*, 38, 1 (1978), 18-21; ref. on 18-19.

[11] For Fry's agonistic relationship with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and its imperious chair of trustees, J. Pierpont Morgan, see Charles Molesworth, *The Capitalist and the Critic: J.P. Morgan, Roger Fry, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), esp. 79-135. Fry was successively Curator of Paintings, and European Advisor on Paintings from the beginning of 1906 until his dismissal at the end of 1909.

[12] Benedict Nicolson, "Post-Impressionism and Roger Fry," *Burlington Magazine*, 93 (1951), 10-15; ref. on 12.

[13] Anna Gruetzner Robins, "'Manet and the Post-Impressionists': A Checklist of Exhibits," *Burlington Magazine*, 152 (2010), 782-793; ref. on 793.

[14] Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 69.

[15] Robins, "'Manet and the Post-Impressionists,'" 787 n. 53.

- [16] Thomas Föhl and Stephan Wolff, *Alfred Wolff und Henry van de Velde: Sammelleidenschaft und Stil* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2018): "Alfred Wolff and Henry van de Velde: passion for collecting and style."
- [17] On Sadler as a collector, see Tom Steele, *Alfred Orage and the Leeds Arts Club 1893–1923* (Aldershot and Brookfield, Vermont: Scolar Press, 1990), and Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- [18] Roger Fry, "Bushman Paintings," *Burlington Magazine*, 16 (1910), 334-38.
- [19] Roger Fry, "Negro Sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club," *The Athenaeum* (April 16, 1920), 516.
- [20] Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 69.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- [26] *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- [28] Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 85-104: "The Politics of Roger Fry's *Vision and Design*."
- [29] See Christa Clarke, "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture and the Aesthetic Philosophy of Albert Barnes," *African Arts*, 36, 1 (2003), 40-51, 92-93; Christa Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of l'Art Nègre and the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015).
- [30] Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, p. 24 n. 6. The piece from the Marquesas, described by Clarke as a "stilt step" with figurative elements, is not included in the online database of the Barnes Foundation. My thanks to Christa Clarke for drawing my attention to this item.
- [31] George T.M. Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, *Gauguin, Tahiti* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004), the American edition of the catalog accompanying the exhibition at the Galeries du Grand-Palais, Paris and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2003-4.
- [32] Unidentified Māori carver, Canoe Stern, before 1829, wood, Musée national de la Marine, Paris: see

<http://mnmm.webmuseo.com/ws/musee-national-marine/app/collection/record/34600?vc=ePkH4LF7w6yelGA1ijESKelDn-gEh16kmBqhVR36doSTOTR7-SbmF2WCNcCCFgDBSkhT>, accessed February 14, 2019. I repeat some of these observations from Ivan Gaskell, "Encountering Pacific Art," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 21 (2009), 202-210.

[33] Steven Hooper, *Pacific Encounters: Art & Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860* (London: British Museum Press, 2006).

[34] Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 25.

[35] Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts: Collections Overview: see <https://scva.ac.uk/about/collections/collections-overview>, accessed July 25, 2019.

[36] I use this locution deliberately in order to acknowledge the belief of many Oceanic people in the living status of many Oceanic items.

[37] For a trenchant critique of the Musée du quai Branly, see Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[38] Most frequently cited in this respect is Torgovnick, 1990.

[39] Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 21.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[41] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1980) pp. 86-90.

[42] Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art: The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1984* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 22.

[43] Friedrich Theodor Vischer, "Das Symbol," in *Philosophische Aufsätze: Eduard Zeller zu seinem fünfzigjährigen Doctor-Jubiläum gewidmet* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887), pp. 153-93: "Philosophical essays dedicated to Eduard Zeller on the fiftieth anniversary of his doctorate." See also Friedrich Theodor Vischer "The Symbol," trans. Holly A. Yanacek, *Art in Translation*, 7, 4 (2015), 417-448.

[44] The most celebrated instance is Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

[45] Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927).

[46] Hūfanga 'Ōkusitino Māhina, "Tā, Vā, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity," *Pacific Studies*, 33, 2/3

(2010), 168-202; ref. on 170.

[47] See further, Tēvita O. Ka'ili, *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

[48] Paul Tapsell, "The Flight of Pareraututu: An Investigation of *Taonga* from a Tribal Perspective," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 106, 4 (1997), 323-374.

[49] Joni Madraiwiwi, "Epeli Hau'ofa: Muse, Mediator and Mentor," *Fiji Times*, January 19, 2009.

[50] Albert Tuaopepe Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," *Mana Review*, 1, 1 (1976), 49-60; ref. on 53 (original emphases).

[51] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996); Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), translated as *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

[52] I thank John Carvalho for asking this question in his formal response to an earlier version of this paper.

[53] Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 70. I owe this reference to John Carvalho. See also, for example, María Lugones, *Pilgrimages=Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Langham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), and Peta Bowden, *Caring: Gender-Sensitive Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[54] This article derives from a paper delivered at the symposium, *Primitivism Before/Beyond Modernism*, at Ithaca College in May, 2018. I should like to thank the organizer, Risham Majeed, for her invitation, and fellow participants, including Suzanne Blier, Josh Cohen, Iftikhar Dadi, Jennifer Jolly, Elizabeth Rodini, Linda Seidel, and Susan Vogel, for their comments. I presented a considerably revised version at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Eastern Division, in Philadelphia in April, 2019. Not for the first time, I owe a debt of gratitude to the respondent, John Carvalho, for his comments. My thanks also go to two anonymous reviewers whose observations led to improvements. I am particularly grateful to Anne Eaton for alerting me to the abiding philosophical pertinence of Roger Fry's thought.

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