

*The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*

Victor Li

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Victor Li's *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* is a timely, major contribution to cultural studies. Its richly-documented, insightful, thought-provoking analysis of what he calls neo-primitivism is a must-read for those who are concerned with how the cultural/ethnic Other is conceived and used in the West. After numerous wars and crises at different levels of social life, the twentieth century bears out the Nietzschean disillusionment and distrust in Western modernity; the lost confidence in the West catalyzes a changed attitude to the non-West. The discourse of modernity always presupposes the existence of a certain pre-modernity, and the critique of Eurocentrism always goes with revised notions of non-Western cultures. The past few decades have witnessed the concerted efforts of variously styled Western critics aimed at vindicating and safeguarding the primitive or aboriginal Other from West-centered representational violence. However, all such scholarly and critical efforts ironically end up reproducing representational violence against what they had intended to protect, for they all contribute, one way or the other, to neo-primitivism or anti-primitivist primitivism. This is the central thesis of Li's newly published book, which, through exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Marianna Torgovnik, Marshall Sahlins, and Jürgen Habermas, argues that their constructions of the primitive Other harbor a certain form of neo-primitivism. The most disturbingly enlightening message from Li's book is that neo-primitivism is not, to borrow a term from Derrida, a "scandal" or something locally encountered; rather, it is universal and unavoidable, and more important, it is what makes possible renewed knowledge of modernity and its pre-modern Other.

Li brilliantly asserts that the postmodern celebration of the indigenous Others' radical alterity only serves to redeem the modern Western self, for "the primitive is valorized *in order to save us*, its radical heterogeneity *all too predictably serving our desire* for a way out of modern civilization" (30; his italics). No matter how Western critics treat the subaltern Aboriginal, the latter is always used to serve the West's desire for a way of resolving the crisis of contemporary Western society.

The cultural Other is appropriated by the reflexive, critical Western self in an attempt to renew or reinvent the modern subject of knowledge. As such, the recalcitrant Otherness of the aboriginal or indigenous person is transformed into “an emptied alterity” (39), becoming something to be disposed of at will by the Western self, answering any need it has. Arguably, Li’s book can be taken as an extension of the Levinasian critique of ontological imperialism. For, according to Levinas, Western philosophy explores and expounds the other in a way that cancels the other’s alterity. Philosophy transforms the unknown into the known, difference into identity, through projecting the epistemological subject’s desire or self-serving logic onto the object of knowledge. It is for these reasons that the reader of *The Primitivist Turn* feels compellingly convinced that anti-primitivists and primitivists share similar Eurocentric structures of attitude and reference, for both make use of the primitive to the benefit of the West, both treat the primitive as of instrumental efficacy and, in both, the primitive does not exist for itself, but depends on the West for worth and meaning.

In the chapter on alterity, Li rigorously examines how in the writings of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Torgovnik the primitive Other is well-intentionedly violated and silenced. Whether it is Baudrillard or Lyotard dealing with the radically unrepresentable South American Indians or untranslatable Australian Aboriginals, or Torgovnik defending primitive alterity in African art, the concept of the Other is invariably deployed to acquire new horizons of thought and new resources for reconstructing Western modernity. Baudrillard’s and Lyotard’s relentless critique of Western primitivism derives its force from “a reconceptualization and reinscription of the primitive as culturally and cognitively incommensurable” and resistant “to [the] assimilation or appropriation by the West” (66), but such an argument is contradicted by a display of their own superior knowledge of the primitive Other. In much the same way, Torgovnik fervently celebrates the incommensurable Otherness of the primitive, but her defence of its alterity is weakened by her own “confident knowledge and description of the ritualistic function and collective values expressed by African art” (72). In the chapter discussing Sahlins’s cultural model of Otherness, Li demonstrates how Sahlins identifies culture with primordial difference, and how he keeps different cultures absolutely separate from each other. But in so doing, Sahlins only manages to offer a cultural holism, overlooking intracultural difference, and his rejection of the idea of Western capitalism as a universal logic of change ends up replacing one universal teleology with another. His deconstruction of the Enlightenment-endorsed dichotomy separating the West from the rest eventually turns into a relaunching of the great divide, for in his geopolitical mapping, the disenchanting West is confronted with a non-Western world “still remain[ing] enchanted by spirits and the like” (134).

Li’s chapter on “Modernity: Jürgen Habermas” investigates a different approach to the primitive Other. In his estimate, Habermas’s

acultural theory of modernity insists on the idea of a singular modernity, which ignores multiple or alternative modernities that are emerging in previously colonized or semi-colonized countries. Starting with a convenient divide between the modern and the pre-modern, or the world of differentiation and autonomous thought and the world of insufficient differentiation and lack of reflexivity, Habermas is revealed to be subscribing to an undifferentiated, single, totalizing way of thinking himself, for his theorizing of “the myth-modernity antithesis is mythical insofar as both myth and modernity are described in a totalizing and undifferentiated manner” (178). The implications of this ironic reversal in Habermas call attention not only to his inconsistency, but to the blurred distinction between the modern and the pre-modern. There are two narratives in Habermas’s theory of modernity, the narrative of modernity and the narrative of the archaic, pre-modern forms that modernity is supposed to have superseded. According to Li, however, the two narratives are entwined in a logic of inclusive exclusion. Habermas’s initial construction and exclusion of modernity’s Other only serves his purpose of drawing upon the pre-modern life world for semantic resources in dealing with the crises and problems of the modern life world. Despite his pronounced divergences from Baudrillard, Lyotard, Torgovnik, and Sahlins, Habermas shares their neo-primitivism in that he, in much the same way, speculatively appropriates the cultural Other only in order to reconstruct the modern subject of knowledge. In all these critics the Other is idealized and emptied of its alterity. What they secure from the idealized primitive Other is a “*discursive* element of rupture, a *structural* antithesis to Western thought” (52), which enable them to critique Western subjectivity to reassert its superiority.

What is most invaluable in Li’s book is the discovery that—after all the impassioned efforts to dissolve the West as the norm of the world, after all the inspired energies to unmask economical, political and representational violences against the racial/ethnic Others, after all the counterhegemonic celebrations of semantic, ethnic, cultural, and epistemological alterity—the non-Western Other continues to be exploited and appropriated by the West. However, with the disappearance of the empirical primitive Others, it is the spectral existence of the Other that is being used and abused today. The spectralized primitive Other offers its Western appropriators unforeseen opportunities and advantages for doing all kinds of academic and intellectual businesses. Li refutes Jameson’s and Vattimo’s assertions that the pre-modern alterities have been erased in the postmodern age; instead, he insists that “a strengthened idea of the primitive returns to haunt us” and that “the disappearance of the empirical primitive has led to its firmer entrenchment as a theoretical concept” (34). The spectralized primitive Other as a critical concept, a regulating idea for critiquing capitalism or postmodern culture has nothing to do with the lived material history of the non-Western Other, and offers no genuine knowledge of it. The postmodern transformation of the racial/cultural Other into a spectral presence betrays a triple neo-primitivist violence

directed at the non-West: it arrogantly cancels the historical content of the primitive Other and makes it whatever Euro-Americans want it to be; it reproduces epistemological imperialism; it maintains the relationship of domination between the West and the non-West. For what the Western critic/theorist does, be it Lyotard, Baudrillard, Torgovnik, Sahlins, or Habermas, as Graham Huggan notes in a different context, is to create “the superimposition of a dominant way of seeing, speaking and thinking onto marginalized peoples and the cultural artifacts they produce” (24).

There is no doubt that Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn* will be read and cited as an important intervention in the field of cultural studies whose chief agenda consists of a universal valorization of variously defined and conceptualized Others, particularly the ethnic/racial Others. It rigorously investigates some of the major ironies and inconsistencies of the postmodern/postcolonial discourses of the modern and the pre-modern; it offers the readers an enabling perspective and an effective method for detecting various incarnations of primitivism and Orientalism; it calls critical attention to the looming fact that in tandem with West-centered global capitalism and its consumerist culture-ideology that neocolonizes the peripheral non-West, Western academia is consuming and appropriating the alterity of the non-Western Others with a view to reaping academic and intellectual capital. Lurking behind such undertakings is Baudrillard’s aphorism that “The Other is what allows *me* not to repeat *myself* forever” (qtd. in Li 224). What is especially worth noting of *The Neo-Primitivist Turn* is the self-conscious audacity with which its author admits that his own critique of various forms of neo-primitivism is in no way innocent of “the trace-structure, the spectral presence of neo-primitivism itself” (228). It seems to invite its readers to critically negotiate with its author in the way he has done so with others. Obviously, what Li writes of Torgovnik, Sahlins, Baudrillard, and Habermas can be said of him as well: his confident unmasking of the neo-primitivist violence committed by the above-mentioned critics against the indigenous Others may be taken as an implicit claim that he has secured authentic knowledge of the primitive Other. If that is true, then he is in much the same way projecting ideas and assumptions onto Others, hence reasserting the supremacy of the Western self. Besides, in seeing different Western cultural critics and theorists subscribing to neo-primitivism in the same way, Li seems to fall victim to the kind of totalizing and undifferentiated thinking with which he charges neo-primitivists. More seriously, if all contemporary Western scholarly and intellectual engagements with the primitive or the pre-modern one way or the other contribute to neo-primitivism, then what is left of the critique of (neo-) primitivism is a questioning or negation of the critique itself. Such inconsistencies and contradictions point not only to the limitations of Li’s book, but to a perpetual dilemma confronting us: one “can neither theorize without the savage nor theorize with it” (Li 277). It is amazing that, caught up in such an agonizing neither/nor dilemma, Li has managed well to

alternate between theorizing the primitive Other and critiquing the theorizing of it.

Works Cited

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*.  
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