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Inventing Wifredo Lam: The Parisian Avant-Garde's Primitivist Fixation

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"It is — or it should be — a well-known fact that a man hardly owes anything but his physical constitution to the race or races from which he has sprung." 1 This statement made by art critic Michel Leiris could not have been further from the truth when describing the social realities that Wifredo Lam experienced in France in the late 1930s. From the moment he arrived in Paris on May 1, 1938, with a letter of introduction to Pablo Picasso given to him by Manuel Hugué, prominent members of the Parisian avant-garde developed a fascination with Lam, not only with his work, but more specifically with how they perceived race to have shaped his art. 2 Two people in particular took an avid interest in Lam—Picasso and André Breton—each mythologizing him order to validate their own perceptions of non-western cultures. This study will examine interpretations of Lam and his work by Picasso, Breton and other members of the avant-garde, as well as Lam's response to the identity imposed upon him.

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In 1931, the Colonial Exposition set the mood for a decade in which France asserted its hegemony – in the face of Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Fascist Italy – through a conspicuous display of control over its colonial holdings. The exposition portrayed the colonies as a pre-industrial lost arcadia, occupied by noble savages who were untouched by the industrial advances of the western world. They were represented as existing only to provide France with the raw materials of commercial success. Any view toward colonial hybridism 3 was deliberately concealed. The 1937 World's Fair, in turn, perpetuated this showcasing of “the foreign” as distinguished from the essentially French by presenting the cultures of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands as exotic, uncivilized, and historically constant.

France's perception of Caribbean and Latin American peoples paralleled views of its own colonial subjects. With the craze for negrophilia in the early twentieth century, Latin American blacks in particular were sexualized and infantilized. 4 Yet French fascination with this assumed exotic culture was balanced by fear. They became alarmed at the number of Cubans and Brazilians coming to France in the 1920s and accordingly attempted to control or contain the portrayal of their cultures. 5 For example, in 1930 a law was implemented stating that foreign musicians could only perform as "variety artists" and were therefore required to wear ethnic costumes. Under such conditions, the famous Tango musician, Carlos Gardel, amongst others, was obliged to play dressed as an Argentinean cowboy. 6 Indeed, in an article on Cuban music written for *Documents*, the surrealist magazine that claimed to support anti-racist ideologies, Cuban Alejo Carpentier himself was party to these racist stereotypes. He asserted: "In the Negro's eyes this [profane music] takes second place. He needs esoterism, incantations, mystery... And when they are among themselves, far from white men, they know how to make their drums produce rhythms having a much deeper meaning. Certain drums, covered with magic signs can only be used for secret percussions." 7

Despite the prevalence of racial stereotypes, interest in non-western cultures in the Parisian art world of the 1930s acquired a level of complexity that it had lacked during prior decades, when exploration of such art was primarily formal (i.e. Picasso's use of African masks) rather than cultural. Yet as conceptions of non-European expanded, those interested in such art required a greater knowledge of its cultural origins.

The surrealists, in particular, took an interest in non-western arts and cultures. As a means of resistance to France's blatant assertion of global imperialism in the 1930s, the surrealists began to question traditional beliefs and engaged in an attempted reshuffling of cultural hierarchies. They sought, through their artistic experimentation, a de-centered perspective that critiqued European ethnocentrism. Moreover, with the completion of the Dakar-Djibouti mission in 1933 and the inauguration of the Musée de l'Homme in 1938, newly established ethnographic methods were made readily available to these artists. Yet, as I argue below, by assuming the position of privileged viewer of both the modern and the primitive, they perpetuated the ethnocentrism that they were trying to undermine. 8 The surrealists concealed, through the guise of ethnography, their continued use of the exotic "other" in opposition to the western. 9 Instead of employing ethnography to reformulate their conceptions of the primitive other, the Parisian avant-garde used it as a means of extracting from the non-western those forms and ideas beneficial to their own objectives.

Thus when Wifredo Lam arrived in Paris in 1938, it is not surprising that notions of

race were clearly defined. Those who met him identified Lam by the color of his skin, and assumed, because of this, that he himself and his work had an innate connection to primitive culture. Although Lam was only one quarter black (his father was Chinese and his mother a mulatta of Spanish and African descent), because he physically appeared more African than Asian, European artists and critics aligned their visual perception of the man with their own interpretation of African societies.

The first person to express an interest in Lam in Paris was Picasso. 10 Picasso openly asserted his admiration for Lam and later remarked to him, "Even if you hadn't brought me a letter from Manolo, I would have noticed you in the street, and I would have thought: I absolutely must make a friend of this man." 11 Picasso certainly went out of his way to assist Lam. He introduced him to numerous members of the Parisian avant-garde including Braque, Matisse, Léger, Eluard, Ernst, Tzara, Breton and Leiris amongst others. 12 Picasso also insisted that Pierre Loeb become his dealer, and when Lam was forced to leave Paris before World War II, he entrusted Picasso with all his works completed at that time. The two artists even exhibited together in New York in November 1939, at the Perls Gallery, in a show entitled *Drawings by Picasso and Gouaches by Wifredo Lam*. 13

Lam's deliberate decision to explore Picasso's artistic techniques and Picasso's encouragement of Lam's artistic development led to a period of intense interaction between the two artists. Lam's work during his residence in Paris displays a strong visual resemblance to Picasso's early paintings. Lam severely simplified his forms and reduced three-dimensional figures in a way similar to Picasso, as seen in a comparison between Picasso's *Head of a Woman* [fig. 1] of 1907 and Lam's *Self-Portrait* [fig. 2] of 1938. Yet despite similarities, Lam's work displays a penchant for geometrical shapes, right angles, and bilateral symmetry, whereas Picasso's forms are more fluid and asymmetrical. Like Picasso, however, Lam's self-portrait appropriates the modernists' vision of the primitive, and thus seems to acknowledge the primitivist perception of him by his Parisian colleagues. But his use of a mask, which acts as a hiding or transforming mechanism, actually serves to negate the validity of the identity imposed upon Lam. His decision to paint a self-portait as a mask, I argue, indicates that this particular representation is neither a depiction of his true appearance nor his real identity. Rather, by using a mask, he has presented a self that is both invented and malleable. And although Picasso frequently used the African mask as a motif in his work, he never associated the mask with the self, but rather as a reference to something outside the European tradition. The leap from mask to painted self-portrait is therefore unique to Lam. This work, I argue, appears to be Lam's first reaction to the primitivizing identities imposed on him, an idea that he did not fully develop until he later returned to Cuba.

Lam's Paris compositions usually comprised an individual or a pair of female figures, as in *Woman and Child* [fig. 3] of 1939, and *Woman with Long Hair* [fig. 4] of 1939-40. His figures can be characterized by their flat, geometricized bodies, teardrop-shaped heads, long, angular noses, flat, linear eyes, extremely long hair or no hair at all, and oversized expressive hands. Lam employed bold black outlines to define essential forms that emphasized geometrical planes. Yet as Jacques Leenhardt has pointed out, Lam's experimentation with Picasso's Africanizing style was not merely formal; Lam also began to capture the expressive quality present in African masks. 14 Two such examples are *The Awakening* [fig. 5] and *Madame Lumumba* [fig. 6] both of 1938.

Yet during his time in Paris, Lam did not employ Africanizing forms as a reflection of his Afro-Cuban heritage, but rather he engaged these forms as a means of emulating the modernity of the Parisian avant-garde, and in so doing, definitively breaking with his academic training. *Lam was attracted to Picasso's incorporation of primitive forms to invent visually new and challenging images*. 15 As I explore further below, it was only in response to the repeated voicing of primitivizing perceptions by Paris artists that Lam began to explore the possibility of imbuing these formal constructions with meaning specific to his identity as an Afro-Cuban. 16

Beyond their artistic connections, there were other reasons that a bond formed between Picasso and Lam. The most obvious of these was their common language. Lam arrived in Paris speaking little French, emphasizing the aura of mystery that surrounded his persona. 17 Thus, Lam's ability to communicate his ideas to Picasso in his native tongue certainly led to a mutual understanding that he did not immediately achieve with his French-speaking colleagues. 18 Also, although Picasso was well-established in Paris, he was nonetheless still a foreigner and could relate to Lam’s sense of alienation. While jointly being identified as other, Picasso and Lam were united in their Spanish nationalism. Their political views also aligned. When Lam was studying in Spain he joined the Republican Army in the defense of Madrid during the Civil War, a cause that Picasso adamantly supported. 19 A final connection between the two artists resulted from Picasso's family ties to Cuba, since his great-grandmother was Cuban. 20

Yet the nature of the relationship between Picasso and Lam was continually manipulated in then contemporary criticism of the latter’s art. In November 1939, for example, *Cahiers d'art* featured a brief article on Lam that not only defined him by his ethnic background, but also categorized his art within the context Picasso’s oeuvre. Indeed, Lam’s own work is not even represented. The essay concludes

with a photograph of an iron sculpture *by Picasso* rather than Lam. 21

American critics also co-opted the French reliance on Picasso to validate Lam. In a review of the New York exhibition in which they both participated, Lam is understood only as a follower of Picasso. In discussing Picasso's contribution to the exhibition the author states, "Ten or a dozen follow the artist's course" and in the next paragraph proceeds to discuss Lam's work. The writer then refers to Lam as "a young Cuban artist, who has been a protégé of Picasso since the end of the Spanish war, and now lives with him." His paintings are described as "harking back faintly to Picasso's cubist phase." 22 Although Picasso was never Lam's teacher, rather he was a friend and confidant, and Lam never lived with Picasso, references to Lam as the elder artist's protégé persisted. The term “protégé,” although in this context referring to a person in whose career another takes interest, also implies protection and thus serves to relegate Lam to the position of one in need of supervision. Varian Fry later referred to Lam as "the tragic-masked Cuban Negro who was one of the very few pupils Picasso ever took." 23 This particular description of Lam not only places him under the tutelage of Picasso, but actually conflates the artist with the images in his paintings, stripping him of all creative autonomy.

In another review of the same New York show, published in November 1939, Picasso is actually credited for Lam's exploration of Africanizing forms. The author states: "Picasso was impressed by Lam's work and encouraged him from the start, urging the younger man to develop his self-expression in keeping with the cultural characteristics of the mixed racial strains of his native Cuba." 24 By presenting the relationship in this manner, Lam is denied his power of conscious discovery. Positioned as the passive follower of a more renowned and experienced artist, Lam is ostensibly infantilized.

Yet, in reality, Lam *deliberately chose* to embrace this particular aspect of Picasso's art as a vehicle for establishing his own means of creative expression and engagement with modernism. He first viewed Picasso's paintings in a traveling exhibition that came to Madrid in 1936. 25 Before electing to employ the stylistic techniques of Picasso's Africanizing works from 1906-07, Lam had engaged in a systematic process of stylistic investigation and simplification of forms. Prior to coming to Paris, Lam spent fifteen years studying art in Spain where he became a member of the Spanish avant-garde group called the "Generación del Veintiseite." 26 During that period he rejected the conservatism of his academic training and experimented with fauvist, cubist, and surrealist styles. Unfortunately, Lam left all his early work in Barcelona when he left Spain. French and American critics were therefore unaware of Lam's artistic progression and conscious development; they only saw his then current interest in Picasso. From their perspective, the younger

artist was merely a passive protégé.

When Lam first began to experiment with Picasso's Africanizing forms, he did so as a means of engaging with modernism. Initially, the formal characteristics of African art were as foreign to him as they were to his European colleagues. Yet, as Lam began to realize that his counterparts and critics aligned their conception of him as a person with the Africanizing elements in his work, he decided to explore new means of imbuing these primitivizing forms with meaning relevant to his heritage, a meaning that differed fundamentally from those imposed on him by the Parisian avant-garde. 27

Yet despite the fact that Lam was a mature artist and that he had made a deliberate decision to explore Picasso's forms, the latter often treated him not as a capable colleague, but rather as an ingénue who required instruction and encouragement. Picasso took an interest in Lam's artistic process and was curious to observe how an artist of African descent would proceed when presented with African sculpture. While showing Lam his collection of African sculptures Picasso remarked, "You should be proud! ...Because this sculpture was made by an African and you have African blood." 28 Picasso also introduced Lam to the prominent French ethnographer Michel Leiris with instructions to teach Lam about African art and accompany him on a tour of the Musée de l'Homme. 29 Leiris had a long history of engagement with ethnography and surrealist thought. Since 1934, he had directed the Black Africa department at the Trocadero (which became the Musée de l'Homme in 1938) and had been the archivist for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission from 1931-33. He had also been a contributor to the surrealist journal Documents. 30 Of the people who came to know Lam well, Leiris developed the most complex understanding of Lam's cultural heritage, although his fixation on Lam's race became almost obsessive. Even in 1969, when he published a book on Lam, Leiris dedicated more than half the text to Lam's ethnic background rather than his art. He painstakingly detailed Lam's parents' heritage and emphasized the fact that Lam came from a hybrid colonial society, not a tribal society. Leiris viewed Lam's work not as derivative of primitive culture, but rather as the result of a unique cultural amalgamation. 31 Leiris thus wondered whether Lam's mixed race allowed him to look at the world in a privileged way—neither exclusively European nor "primitive— and therefore create art from a unique perspective. Perhaps Leiris' fascination with Lam resulted from his own desire to rupture the boundaries of European experience and to challenge the construct of the cosmopolitan/primitive dichotomy.

Another key contact Picasso established for Lam was Pierre Loeb, who became Lam's dealer and sponsored his first solo exhibition in Paris in the summer of 1939. 32 For Loeb, the perceived connection between Lam's art and his race was of

primary significance. From the moment he met Lam, Loeb's assessment of the Cuban artist was influenced by his appearance. In describing his first impression of Lam, Loeb exclaimed, "Your African face drawn by a refined and subtle Chinese, your pin of a head topped with a smooth matted helmet of black cotton wool." Loeb maintained that he visited Lam's studio at Picasso's insistence and while looking at Lam's paintings remarked, "He is influenced by blacks!" to which Picasso responded, "He has the right, he IS black!" 33 As it was for Leiris, Lam's race played a critical role in Loeb's understanding of his art.

Yet Leiris' and Loeb's understanding of Lam's work as "African" was misleading. Ironically, as I stated above, Lam was learning about these cultures for the first time through people like Loeb and Leiris 34 , as well as the work of Picasso, not through an inherent connection to the tribal. Lam's understanding of these "primitive" methods and forms, in short, was *acquired* rather than *intuitive*.

Lam's first exhibition in the Pierre Loeb Gallery was well-received and attended by various members of the Parisian avant-garde, including Le Corbusier and Marc Chagall. 35 Yet those who attended made the same assumptions about Lam's art as had Loeb, Leiris, and Picasso, especially since the gallery had a consistent history of hosting exhibitions of non-western art. For example, in a review of the show published in *Marianne*, Charles Théophile explored the relationship between Lam's paintings and Pre-Columbian sculpture. He comments that Lam painted with the "force of primitive peoples" without "false ingenuity" or "false archaism," since Lam was "liberating the atavistic meaning of the forms." 36 This reading of Lam clearly stems from preconceived European notions of primitivism rather than from an objective assessment of Lam's newfound interest in the Africanizing elements of Picasso's style. The comparison of Lam's work to Pre-Columbian forms is clearly the result of the author's awareness of Lam's Latin American origin rather than any actual relationship, since Lam had never traveled to other regions of Latin America before living in Europe and no monumental Pre-Columbian art was ever produced in Cuba. Although Lam may have been familiar with Pre-Columbian art through textbooks, he would have had no more access to it than the reviewer of the exhibition. By stating that Lam's connection to primitive forms was genuine, as opposed to European artists' false engagement with the primitive, the author perpetuates the idea that, through his race and culture, Lam had an inherent connection to this nebulous concept of primitive society defined by European minds.

Clearly, Picasso's decision to present Lam to a circle of intellectuals with a vested interest in non-western art led to the conception of Lam as a quasi-primitive artist. Picasso had opened many doors for Lam, but at the same time, in the eyes of his critics, his association with Lam eclipsed the Cuban artist's creative autonomy. Yet,

as I have suggested above, Lam's engagement with Africanizing forms and ostensibly primitive imagery was *learned*, not instinctual. It was through critical and very *conscious* evaluation of Picasso's art that Lam explored means of achieving modernism through African forms. Moreover, Lam's work during this period was not his ultimate style, it merely served as a transition to what would become his signature aesthetic, one that blossomed after his return to Cuba in 1941. 37

In July 1940 Lam traveled to Marseilles to escape persecution by the Nazis and attempt to obtain a passage back to Cuba. While in Marseilles, Lam frequently visited the Villa Air-Bel, the official headquarters for the "Defense of Intellectuals Menaced by Nazism" run by Varian Fry. 38 There he met Pierre Mabille, René Char, Max Ernst, Victor Brauner, Oscar Domínguez, André Masson, and Benjamin Péret, but developed a particularly close relationship with André Breton. 39

During his visits to Air-Bel, Lam participated in surrealist games organized by Breton. These activities were intended to penetrate the unconscious and eliminate self-censorship, and included the "Game of Truth," the "Exquisite Corpse," and automatic writing. 40 Breton in turn selected Lam, along with Brauner, Domínquez, Ernst, Herold, Lamba, and Masson, to participate in the creation of a new game and its playing materials: a deck of cards. Lam designed the *Genius: Lautréamont card*, which replaced the King, and the *Mermaid: Alice in Wonderland* to replace the Queen. 41 Soon after viewing these works, Breton chose Lam to illustrate his poem *Fata Morgana*. 42

The drawings for *Fata Morgana* provide a key to understanding the development of Lam's mature style. He made numerous preparatory drawings for Breton's poem and eventually chose six for the final publication [fig. 7]. The dynamic line drawings Lam created mark a transition from his exploration of Picasso to his signature style, a style that challenged the European interpretation of the primitive. Under the creative inspiration of the Marseilles surrealists, Lam began to invent horse-headed females, horned hybrid creatures, and visual puns involving sexual organs that later became distinguishing features of his paintings. 43

Yet Breton's initial interest in Lam may have stemmed not solely from his talent, but also from Picasso's unwavering support of the artist. Although Picasso never officially joined the surrealists, Breton declared him as "one of our own." And Breton's connection to Picasso went beyond admiration. 44 During Breton's exile in Marseilles, he received significant financial assistance from Picasso. 45 Therefore Breton may have felt some need to include Lam as a favor to Picasso. In his writings on Lam, Breton also gave priority to Picasso's opinion; however, in attempting to explain Picasso's connection to Lam, Breton sheds light on his own

construction of Lam as inherently primitive. Breton writes:

> It seems probable that Picasso found in Lam the only confirmation acceptable to him, that of a man who, in relation to his own work, had traveled the same path in the opposite direction. Lam started off with a great fund of the marvelous and the primitive within him, and sought the highest point of consciousness by then assimilating the most skillful discipline of European art, this point of consciousness being also the meeting point with the artist – Picasso – who commenced his own journey with perfect mastery over his disciplines but has always insisted on the necessity of a constant return to basic principles in order to retain the power of rejoining the marvelous. 46

Breton ponders whether Picasso developed a special interest in Lam because of his desire to experience a primitive vision. Yet, ironically, this explanation also exemplifies what Breton himself wished to find in Lam. Breton claims that Picasso began with a "perfect mastery of a discipline" and through his art arrived at a comprehension of the primitive; whereas Lam already possessed an inherent primitive vision and only had to master European technique in order to express it. By structuring his argument in this way, Breton denies Lam the conscious choice to employ primitivist forms, as well as the creative ability to arrive at these ideas as an artist. Lam, in short, merely becomes a conduit for the expression of his innate ethnic identity.

Before meeting Lam, Breton had already developed an interest in “non-western” cultures. In 1938 he traveled to Mexico where he met Frida Kahlo, whom he subsequently dubbed a surrealist. 47 When he returned, Breton exhibited Pre-Columbian and popular Mexican objects that he had collected during his travels at the Galerie Renou et Colle in Paris. 48 According to Charles Merewether, "By that time [1939], the Grand Époque — the great historical and theoretical age of Surrealism — had passed, the movement was in search of a second breath, one that would be found in the 1940s in the Americas through the discovery of the art and myths of non-European cultures in Mexico, among Native North Americans, in the Antilles, and in Oceania." 49 If we extrapolate from Merewether’s assessment, it seems more than likely that Breton's engagement with foreign cultures, women artists, and marginalized groups and individuals, *including Lam*, was strategic, a means of revitalizing surrealism at a moment when the movement was in decline. In other words, Breton’s interest in Lam’s work was not the result of its innate quality or artistic interest. It was a way of stimulating interest in surrealist activity by forging a connection with the primitive.

At the time he met Lam, Breton had been exploring notions of the primitive as a

means of achieving a state of “pure mental representation.” In *Surrealist Situation of the Object* (1935), Breton states that one of the goals of the Surrealist movement is to “liberate instinctive impulses” by eliminating the boundaries of consciousness found in “civilized” society. He concludes that primitive peoples could express themselves in a purely instinctual manner, and thus through the study of primitive societies, civilized man could emulate the intuitive state. 50 His 1937 publication *L’Amour Fou* again theorized the primitive mind. 51 In this work, Breton invented exotic worlds in which subjects were free to explore their dreams and unconscious desires. 52 This creation of marvelous settings, unaffected by the modern world, reveals Breton’s affection not for the formal aspects of non-western art, but rather his interested in the assumed world-view of primitive societies. 53 Yet as Hal Foster has pointed out, by equating primitive vision with the unconscious mind, the exotic other serves the ethnocentric needs of the West by assisting in the establishment of a contrasting western identity or in this case Breton's intellectual identity. 54

Beyond Foster’s statement, more specific problems also result from Breton’s assessment of Lam and other “non-western” peoples. The first stems from the creative value that Breton, like Picasso and the rest of the Parisian avant-garde, placed on primitive vision. By attributing Lam’s creative ability to his “primitive” heritage, Breton denies Lam a conscious and learned approach to art. Although Breton advocated a conscious probing of the workings of the unconscious mind 55, in Lam's case, Breton believed that he had an innate link to the unconscious through his race and culture. He supposed that Lam’s artistic process was linked to his ethnic heritage in a way that other surrealist artists’ were not. Highlighting this fact is information gained from a 1945 interview, in which Breton was asked which sciences influenced avant-garde artists. He ascribed metaphysics to Kandinsky, embryogenetics to Arp, optics to Magritte, mineralogy to Herold, cynegetics to Toyen, antiquity to De Chirico, alchemy to Carrington, but to Lam he assigned Voodoo. 56 Breton singled out Lam as the only artist whose influence was dictated by what Breton perceived to be his heritage rather than personal artistic preference.

The second problem stems from Breton's misconception of Lam's background, since Lam did not actually originate from a so-called "primitive" society. Cuba, in the early twentieth century, had only recently emerged from nearly four hundred years of Spanish colonial rule. Cuban society, although hybrid, was governed by conservative Spanish customs. Lam's family, although of modest means, was economically stable. 57 His father was an educated man who spoke several Chinese dialects and worked as a public scribe. 58 The art Lam was exposed to as a boy in Cuba was not tribal but rather it consisted of Christian paintings and manufactured statuettes. 59 In 1916, Lam moved to Havana to study law, which he abandoned in favor of painting. Lam's artistic training in Cuba could not have been

more conservative. He enrolled in the Academia de San Alejandro where he studied with Armando Menocal and Leopoldo Romañach. 60 In 1923 he received a government grant to study in Spain, where he continued his academic training under F. Alvarez de Sotomayor the curator of the Prado. 61 *His Self-Portrait* [fig. 8] of 1921, as well as his 1927 *Portrait of Eulalia Soliño* [fig. 9] demonstrate Lam's early naturalistic style. His career, in other words, progressed in a manner similar to any other artist of his generation.

Yet despite Lam's colonial roots and conservative academic training, Breton chose to focus on the one aspect of his background that was aligned with his theories on the primitive. Lam's godmother was a priestess in the Lucumi religion, which combined elements of Afro-Cuban spirituality with Catholicism. 62 Nevertheless, although Lam had witnessed ritual visions, trances, and animal sacrifices, he never joined the Lucumi religion. Later in his career, after his contact with the surrealists, Lam clearly chose to exploit and re-appropriate this aspect of his history as a means of developing an art that expressed, through a technique developed by contact with the European avant-garde, the hybrid quality of Cuban identity. Lam's decision to explore this aspect of his heritage, however, was a conscious choice with a specific artistic and intellectual purpose. It was not, as Breton would have wanted, a liberation of his inherent primitive nature. The perspective he gained during his years in Europe, in other words, allowed Lam to rediscover his own culture, while the Parisian avant-garde's repeated assessments of Lam as aligned with the primitive inspired him to re-evaluate his own use of both primitive and modern forms.

Regardless, therefore, of the surrealist engagement with non-western cultures, their definition of the primitive state was clearly contrived to conform to their theories on artistic creativity. Indeed, according to Jean-Claude Blanchère, the surrealists chose amongst then current theories set forth by ethnographers, naïvely supporting some hypotheses and rejecting others in accordance with their degree of relevance to surrealist thought. 63 Their fascination with non-western cultures, in turn, resulted in the continued exoticization and mystification of the primitive other. 64

When Lam returned to Cuba, he began – through his studies of ethnography, his contacts with Aimé Cesaire of the Negritude movement, and the anthropologist Lydia Cabrera – to employ modernist forms to construct a new Afro-Cuban identity. From the 1920s onwards, literary journals such as *Camagüey Gráfico* and *Lis*, as well as *Revista de Avance* (published by the vanguard group, Grupo Minorista), had been engaged with the issue of defining Cuban national identity through the assertion of Afro-Cuban culture. 65 These publications presented a challenge to the west and the colonial dynamic. Thus, when Lam arrived in Cuba in 1941, the

intellectual environment encouraged him to further pursue his exploration of Africanizing forms. Nevertheless, due to his long absence, Lam stood apart from the established Cuban avant-garde. He once again experienced the severe racism of Cuba's conservative society and was not even granted a solo exhibition until 1946. 66 According to Lowery Stokes Sims: "What sustained Lam in Cuba was the reputation he had established during his two year residence in Paris" which was reinforced by the arrival of Pierre Loeb in Cuba. 67 Ironically, in Cuba, Lam was once again an outsider, an “other” to the members of his own society.

Lam's residence in Europe and, accordingly, his later return to Cuba, transformed his perception of both modernity and national identity. In an unpublished interview Lam states:

> I went to Europe to escape from my homeland. I thought this journey would resolve everything. But in Europe I encountered other problems as oppressive as those I left behind. My return to Cuba meant above all, a great stimulation of my imagination, as well as the exteriorization of my world. I responded always to the presence of factors which emanated from our history and our geography, tropical flowers and black culture. 68

In Cuba, Lam challenged and re-configured western perceptions of his race through his art, a discourse that those not familiar with western modernism could never enter. Lam reinterpreted the identity of the primitive imposed on him not as a dichotomy between the western and non-western, but rather as a fusion of the two. He inverted the primitive, re-appropriating the Africanizing forms employed by European artists and transforming them into specific symbols of his Afro-Cuban identity. Lam's employment of signifiers of his own cultural heritage, in the place of an unidentified or vaguely identified exotic other, transformed the relationship of the modern to an imagined primitive. And once signs for the primitive are invested with culturally specific meaning, they no longer embody the “uncivilized” character of the other. They therefore take on a new relationship to the European modernist idiom, thereby challenging western constructions of the primitive.

In conclusion, Wifredo Lam arrived in France in the late 1930s, a time of increasing political and social turmoil. In this period of national insecurity, race served as a visible determinant of the other. The French were both intrigued and wary of people from non-western cultures and thus invented an understanding of these people in opposition to their conception of Frenchness. Although Lam was readily accepted into the ranks of the Parisian avant-garde, their perception of him was directly linked to his race. Yet in spite of this distorted vision, he was never the passive victim of primitivist speculations. Lam certainly benefited from his relationship with Picasso in Paris and the surrealist group in Marseilles. Through

their creative intensity and revolutionary spirit, as well as in response to their primitivist vision, Lam was able to arrive at a new approach to his own art. It is up to contemporary art historians, however, to re-write Lam's history with an understanding of the forces that led to certain Eurocentric constructions of the artist by those who knew him in Paris.

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1. Michel Leiris, Preface to *Lam* (Fratelli Fabbri, 1970) quoted in Max-Pol Fouchet, Wifredo Lam (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 28.
2. Maria-Luisa Borrás, "Lam in Spain" in ed. Lou Laurin-Lam, *Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work* (Lausanne: Sylvio Acatis, 1996), 46-49.
3. As defined in Post-Colonial theoretical writings, hybridism refers to the merging of cultures through contact, a process that, although most often characterized by the oppression of native traditions by the colonizer, was clearly not solely unilateral.
4. In advertisements for tropical liqueurs such as Panama Vermuth and Jamaican Rum, for example, blacks are portrayed as grinning natives, concerned only to perpetuate the good life.
5. Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930's* (New York: Norton, 1994), 104.
6. Jacques Leenhardt, Pierre Kalfon, Michèle et Armand Mattelart, *Les Amériques Latines en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 44.
7. Alejo Carpentier, "La Musique Cubaine" in *Documents* (Paris, 1929), 327.
8. "Anti-ethnocentric" refers to the surrealists' awareness and rejection of Europe's perception of other cultures as inferior and less civilized.
9. David Richards, *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature,*

Anthropology and Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 231.

10. Although Lam developed a long and sustained friendship with Picasso, unlike Breton and Leiris, Picasso did not write about his relationship with the Cuban artist. Thus, Picasso's assessment of Lam must be derived through his actions and the observations of others.
11. Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 110.
12. Sebastià Gasch, *Wifredo Lam à Paris* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa S.A., 1976), 43.
13. Lou Laurin-Lam, ed. *Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work* (Lausanne: Sylvio Acatis, 1996), 182.
14. Jacques Leenhardt, Pierre Kalfon, Michèle et Armand Mattelart. *Les Amériques Latines en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).
15. Gerardo Mosquera maintains that even though Lam employed the geometry of African masks, he derived his ideas mainly from Picasso. Gerardo Mosquera, "Modernidad y africanía: Wifredo Lam en su isla" in *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Wifredo Lam* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 1992), 31.
16. Although not until his return to Cuba in 1941.
17. Lowery Stokes Sims, "Wifredo Lam: From Spain Back to Cuba" in ed. Maria R. Balderrama, *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938-1952* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 19.
18. Even after spending two years in and France Lam was still not entirely confident with his command of French. He required a translation of André Breton's poem Fata Morgana before he began to illustrate the work.
19. Jacques Leenhardt, "Introduction." in ed. Maria R. Balderrama, *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938-1952* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 13.
20. Fundación Cultural Televisa, *Wifredo Lam obra sobre papel* (México D.F.: Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1992), 135.
21. "Wifredo Lam." *Cahiers D'Art* 14 no. 5-10 (nov. 1939) 179.
22. "Picasso footnotes: his drawings, Lam's painting" *Art News* (New York, Nov. 18, 1939): 22.
23. Varian Fry, *Assignment Rescue* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1968), 121-22.
24. "Wifredo Lam." *Pictures on Exhibit* vol. 3, no. 2 (New York, Nov. 1939): 16.

25. Laurin-Lam, 179.
26. Fouchet, 118.
27. Yet it was not until he returned to Cuba that Lam established a visual language that specifically expressed his hybrid colonial identity through a modern visual idiom, a process that received its impetus from the perceptions formed of Lam in Paris.
28. Wifredo Lam, "Mon amitié avec Picasso, 1938" in *Wifredo Lam 1902-1982* exh. cat. (Paris: Editions Amis du Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1982), 13.
29. It was during this time that Lam became a collector of African sculpture, although like Picasso, many of the pieces he owned were fakes. Thus, Lam's initial interest in African art seems to have been aesthetic rather that ethnographic. William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction" in ed. William Rubin, "Primitivism" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 14.
30. His articles employed categorical juxtapositions—a means of reordering and thus destabilizing conventional classifications of people and objects—to undermine bourgeois hierarchies. In an essay entitled “Civilisation,” Leiris compared the savage's use of a telegraph pole as a poison arrow to the western practice of removing ethnographic objects from their context and putting them on display in a museum. The two photographs that accompanied the article by Leiris exemplify this idea through the juxtaposition of semi-nude showgirls with semi-nude African school children. Leiris's preoccupation with categorical juxtapositions, however, clearly dictated his fascination with Lam, in particular with his ethnic heritage.

    Michel Leiris, "Civilisation," *Documents* (Paris: 1930): 221.
31. For more on Leiris’s writings on Lam see http://www.devillez.be/lam.htm
32. \Pierre Loeb's exhibition of Lam's work was the last held before Loeb was forced to close the gallery and move his family to escape the Nazis. He then traveled the Cuba, where he stayed with Lam for a period. Galerie Albert Loeb, Wifredo Lam oeuvres de 1938 à 1946 en hommage à Pierre Loeb (Paris: Galerie Albert Loeb, 1974), unpaginated. The only other time Lam exhibited in Paris before World War II was as part of a group show entitled "Art représentatif de notre temps" at the Mai Gallery. Laurin-Lam, 183.
33. Pierre Loeb's statement was originally written in 1942 and published in 1943 in *Tropiques* (Galerie Albert Loeb 1974), unpaginated.
34. It is possible that Lam visited the Archaeology Museum in Madrid while living in Spain where he would have seen African sculptures; however, at that time he was not interested in the ethnography of these images. Suzanne

Garriques Daniel, "The Early Works of Wifredo Lam 1941-1945," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Maryland, 1983), 20.

35. Antonio Nuñez Jiménez, *Wifredo Lam* (Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982), 143.
36. Charles Théophile, "Wifredo Lam: Peintures et dessins," *Marianne*, Paris, July 12, 1939.
37. José Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), 140.
38. Daniel, 26.
39. Laurin-Lam, 183. Lam's passage out of the country, as well as that of many of the artists and intellectuals trapped in Marseilles, was facilitated by the American Emergency Rescue Committee founded by Eleanor Roosevelt, the American Federation of Labor and MOMA. Lam, Breton and Levi-Strauss finally left Marseilles on a boat bound for Martinique on March 24, 1941. Helena H. Benítez, *Wifredo Lam: Interlude Marseilles* (Copenhagen: Edition Blondal, 1993), 12-14. Interestingly, in the literature on Lam, this list of Parisian avant-garde artists is repeated over and over again as a means of validating Lam through his documented association with acclaimed European artists.
40. Benítez, 14.
41. Benítez, 21.
42. *Fata Morgana* was banned by the Vichy government in 1941. Benitez, 16.
43. Sims in Balderrama, 23.
44. Fouchet, 148.
45. Marcela Godoy Divin, *Breton Entre dos Estrellas: Presencia de Hispanoamérica en el Surrealismo Francés* (Santiago: Ediciones Manquel, 1997), 32.
46. Breton, *Le Surrealisme et la Peinture*, 171.
47. Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 19.
48. Charles Merewether, *Wifredo Lam: A Retrospective of Works on Paper*, exh. cat. (New York: The Americas Society, 1992), 42.
49. Merewether, 42.
50. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver, Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 273.

51. Philippe Peltier, "The Arrival of Tribal Objects in the West: From Oceania" in ed. William Rubin, "Primitivism" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 114.
52. Mauer in Rubin, 548.
53. Mauer in Rubin, 541.
54. Hal Foster, "The Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 59.
55. Robert Goldwater, "Primitivism in Modern Painting" Ph.D. Unpublished Dissertation (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1939), 257.
56. André Breton and André Perinaud, *Entretiens 1913-1952* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1952) 302.
57. Divin, 91.
58. Fouchet, 23.
59. Michel Leiris, *Wifredo Lam* (Paris: Didier Devillez Editeur, 1997) 49-50. Originally published in 1969.
60. Laurin-Lam, 173-174.
61. Daniel, 18.
62. Laurin-Lam, 174.
63. Jean-Claude Blanchère, *Les Totems d'Andre Breton Surréalisme et primitivism littéraire* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1996), 109.
64. Indeed, by 1955, Breton had despaired of European artists' ability to recreate primitive states and advised artists to return to their European heritage. Maurer in Rubin, 584.
65. Lowery Stokes Sims, "Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde 1947-1982." Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation (City College of New York, Graduate Center, 1995) 21-22.
66. Sims, "Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde," 40 and 47.
67. Sims, "Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde," 43.
68. Lam in an unpublished interview in Spanish. Archives SDO Wifredo Lam, Paris. Translated and quoted from Sims, "Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde," 21.