

# COSMOPOLITAN CONTACT ZONES

KOBENA MERCER

During the 1940s the imaginative epicentre of Afro-Modernism moved beyond the New York environment of Harlem and migrated towards the Caribbean contexts of [Negritude](#). In this way, various black modernist practices that were scattered around the globe became self-consciously diasporic for the first time – artists and writers saw themselves as part of a trans-national movement in twentieth-century art and culture rather than one restricted to a national milieu. We face something of a paradox here because while the 1935–55 period has a clear-cut shape in black popular culture – from the music of Charlie Parker to the zoot suits worn by Malcolm X when he was ‘Detroit Red’ – the era seems more amorphous in the visual arts, being often regarded as merely a transition from Social Realism to Abstract Expressionism.

The modernist strategies of formal experimentation put into play by painters such as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Wifredo Lam, like the inventiveness that drove Aimé Césaire’s epic prose poem *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1938–41), rejected naturalism and realism so as to break apart the prevailing image of ‘Africa’ in the West and thus open a space for new understandings of black cultural influences as a core feature of global modernity. Our ability to comprehend the trans-national networks of artistic connections that were put into place across Anglophone, Francophone and Spanish-speaking regions at mid-century, which defined major transformations in Afro-modernism, is severely compromised, however, by the linear chronology whereby art history is ordinarily laid out in terms of a narrative arc.

It is entirely fitting that the [Harlem Renaissance](#) has received the lion’s share of attention in our general understanding of the historical origins of the Afro-modern – it defines the primal moment of *Ursprung* or ‘origination’ from which a distinctive variant in modernism emerged from a specifically African-American source. But when it is narrated as an exclusively national story, as in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (1987), which starts with the [New Negro](#) era of 1895–1914 and moves through the 1918–29 Jazz Age before concluding with the Federal Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration, such an ending underplays the irony whereby many signature ‘Harlem’ artworks were actually produced during its ‘afterlife’ in the early 1940s. Conversely, when it is told in trans-national terms, as in *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (1997), we see that curatorial methods based on the wider concept of [diaspora](#) give us an inter-active rather than a separatist narrative and show how artists of different ethnicities were constantly entangled in cross-cultural dialogue. Such a trans-national model also shows that, far from coming to complete closure, the impetus for black modernism simply made a lateral move by migrating sideways towards Caribbean nations such as Haiti and Cuba or the Jamaican locale of sculptors such as Edna Manley and Ronald Moody.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas the struggle to reclaim an ancestral African origin for modern black identities was initially surrounded by a euphoric mood of possibility, which then gave way to scepticism, ambivalence and doubt, by the 1940s the modernist primitivist paradigm had diffused into more complex debates about the survival of hidden African traces brought into contact, fusion and synthesis with cultural forms generated by the advanced industrial civilisation of modernity. Having studied with the émigré artist George Grosz at the Art Students League in New York, and participated in discussions among the post-[Harlem Renaissance](#) cohort that formed the 306 Group, Bearden was critical of the romantically idealised version of 'Africa' evoked by earlier artists – 'to try and carry on in America where African sculpture left off would be to start on a false basis,' he wrote in 1942: 'the gap of the years, the environment and ideology is too great'.<sup>2</sup> While this outlook led Bearden towards the vernacular 'folkways' of the American South – a thematic focus he shared with Charles Alston, John Biggers and Elizabeth Catlett – it is revealing that in 1942 the critic Alain Locke made similar modifications to his earlier views on the 'ancestral arts'. Taking issue with 'over-simplified conceptions of culture', Locke stressed 'the general composite character of culture', and boldly declared: 'To be "Negro" in the cultural sense, then, is ... to be distinctively composite'.<sup>3</sup>

Arguing that black cultural identities were to be understood as 'a hybrid product of Negro reaction to American cultural forms and patterns', Locke took an anti-essentialist standpoint that was echoed by Bearden, who stated: 'whatever creations the Negro has fashioned in this country have been in relation to his American environment. Culture is not a biologically inherited phenomenon ... However disinherited, the Negro is part of the amalgam of American life'.<sup>4</sup> Once we note how 'amalgam' acts as a synonym for cross-cultural mixing, we begin to observe that many of the metaphor-concepts put into play by the [postcolonial](#) turn of the 1980s – [hybridity](#), syncretism, [creolisation](#) – were first registered in debates of the 1940s that saw cross-cultural exchange as a source of fresh aesthetic possibilities brought about by the global conditions of modernity. For their part, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, for instance, pursued abstraction as one such possibility opened up by their artistic 'borrowings' from Native American sources. But where post-primitivist notions of the tribal, the indigenous, the folkloric and the vernacular were also put under immense political pressure by anti-colonial movements for national liberation – as symbols of cultural autonomy in the struggle for independence – one might add that the contradictory outcomes of the post-1945 period effectively shut down the critical potential of hybrid aesthetics as something that only returned in the 1980s as a result of the ground-clearing critique of modernist [primitivism](#).

Accepting that [diasporas](#) are the product of forced migrations which separate populations from their natal origins, we find that instead of time's arrow moving in a straight line, the traumatic ruptures and breaks that characterise the [Black Atlantic](#) as a chronotopia of multiple stops and starts are offset by unexpected patterns of repetition, detour and return. Thinking of the modern art world in Mary Louise Pratt's terms as a 'contact zone' – a 'social space [...] where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical conditions of

domination and subordination<sup>5</sup> – we can identify some key sites where a cosmopolitan model of cross-cultural translation is glimpsed in Afro-modernism’s negotiations between the conflicting demands of anti-colonial nationalism, on the one hand, and the ascendent formalist narrative of metropolitan institutions of modern art, on the other.

It is vital to know that Haiti was under US military occupation between 1915 and 1934 on account of its strategic importance to American trade routes. Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) alluded to this quasi-colonial situation while telling the story of Henri Christophe, the sovereign of Haiti’s first independent republic in 1805. When John Houseman and Orson Welles staged their all-black production of ‘Voodoo Macbeth’ in a tropical scenario that alluded to Haiti, they too expressed leftist dissent, but their allegorical critique of colonialism involved extreme depictions of blackness as atavistic savagery. Fully locked into the primitivist mindset of ‘racial’ fear and fantasy, it was exoticism that took the upper hand in these forays into the discursive space of ‘Haiti’ – and it was precisely the representational strategy of such ‘othering’ that Jacob Lawrence overturned in *Toussaint L’Ouverture* 1937–8 by telling the broader story of Haiti’s 1791 insurrection. Led by a former slave who directed a twelve-year campaign against invading European troops, this revolution defeated Bonaparte’s 1803 expedition long before Christophe’s rise to power.

Laid out sequentially, the 40 panels create an unprecedented stylistic hybrid. Lawrence’s flat planes of bold colour, and graphic simplification of figure and ground, connote a ‘folk art’ idiom, but by either pulling in like a close-up or pulling back to a wide-angle master-shot, as it were, he reveals a cinematic ability to alternate between the miniature and the monumental, which creates multi-perspectival viewpoints. Rather than illustrate past events in black history as though they were already widely known, Lawrence’s formal innovations in pictorial narrative addressed the past genealogically so as to focus on the political relevance of the Haitian revolution to the quest for black self-determination. In *The Migration of the Negro* 1940–1 his serialised and imagistic form of story-telling took the ‘Great Migration’ in African-American life after the First World War as its subject-matter, but Lawrence’s remarks on this work – ‘I don’t think in terms of history about that series. I think in terms of contemporary life. It was such a part of me that I didn’t think of something outside’<sup>6</sup> – also illuminate the way that his critical response to the erasure of black history in American national culture led him to create a black modernist variant of ‘history painting’ that one scholar likens to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or ‘total artwork’.<sup>7</sup>

Where Lawrence acted as a genealogist of [Black Atlantic](#) counter-memory, it is significant that Trinidadian scholar and activist C.L.R. James published *The Black Jacobins* in 1938. Without conflating the disciplines of art and history, one might observe that this mutual interest in Haiti gives us a striking confirmation of the constructionist view that ‘history’ does not exist as such prior to the moment of being written up as a text and thereby entering the contested realm of representation. As he shuttled between Paris and London to research his book,

James created a new textual genre of history-from-below. In his preface to a new edition in 1980 he also recalled how South African activists found *The Black Jacobins* to be 'of great service' in their battle against apartheid – a vivid case of genealogy in action.<sup>8</sup>

## NÉGRITUDE AND SURREALISM

Turning to our second contact zone, we find that Antillean and African students who met in Paris during the inter-war years similarly 'discovered' their African ancestry for the first time only by encountering images of sub-Saharan civilisation that offered an alternative to the distortions of the colonial policy of assimilation in which they were raised. When Césaire coined the term '[Négritude](#)' in 1935 in *L'Étudiant Noir*, a journal he established with Leopold Senghor from Senegal, it gave rise to a literary movement that eventually went in different philosophical directions, but it initially acted as a rallying cry for a subjective sense of black 'authenticity' hitherto denied expression by the internalisation of a Eurocentric worldview.

Radiating outwards from the literary salon convened by Jane and Paulette Nardal, whose periodical *Revue du Monde Noir* translated [Harlem Renaissance](#) writers into French, what made Paris 'a special place for black trans-national interaction' was the way that a new kind of black internationalism arose from convergences among African anti-colonial movements.<sup>9</sup> In addition, 'Paris Noir' was further distinguished as a key site in the diasporic networks of Afro-modernism by the critical role played by Surrealism as a counterweight to exoticist tendencies within modernist [primitivism](#).

Instead of valuing so-called 'negro art' on aesthetic grounds alone, critic Carl Einstein and writer Georges Bataille embraced the 'otherness' of tribal artefacts in the journal *Documents* (1929–30) as part of their political critique of colonialism. The 1931 exhibition of commodity kitsch that Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard and Yves Tanguy held to reveal 'The Truth About the Colonies' was an open riposte to the Exposition Coloniale of the same year. In short, French West Indian students sent to the metropolis to be trained as middle-class professionals not only laid claim to their 'blackness' as an empowering act of cultural affirmation, but also went back to the Caribbean with altered perceptions of the region's indigenous 'folk' cultures as a potential route towards the higher reality or sur-reality that would transform the experience of everyday life.

Whereas Senghor returned to Africa with a classicist version of [Négritude](#), the dialogue between Surrealism and [Négritude](#) that led to a shared focus on the syncretic religions of the Caribbean is crucially important to understanding the context in which Wifredo Lam produced *The Jungle* 1943. This was the centrepiece of a new line of avant-garde enquiry into the hybrid mix of African and European elements that had fused into new combinations under colonial modernity. The contact zone in which Lam and other artists explored the Afro-Cuban religion of [lucumi](#), for instance, is thus best approached in conceptual rather than simply geographical terms.

Just as Césaire returned to Martinique in 1941, Lam took flight from war-torn Paris, travelling to Marseilles where he encountered André Breton, before all three artists met in the Antilles. While Breton continued on his journey to New York, discussing Lam alongside Frida Kahlo and Robert Matta in his writings, Lam himself resided in Havana with his partner Helena Holzer from 1948 to 1952. Crossing paths in Port-au-Prince in 1945/6, where Breton wrote 'A Night in Haiti' for Lam's exhibition, both men witnessed the ritual trance states in which the devotee is possessed by the ancestral spirit evoked by the voodoo priest. Their mutual friend, critic Pierre Mabille, wrote up what they saw.<sup>10</sup> Having witnessed similar rituals in Cuba, in works such as *The Murmur* 1943 Lam arrived at the enigmatic iconography of the *femme cheval* – part human, part animal – in direct reference to the liminal trance state whereby the loa or gods take possession of the [lucumi](#) worshipper much as a rider takes control of his horse. Lam's response to his source of inspiration had far-reaching implications.

In a world where [Enlightenment](#) beliefs in the perfectibility of humankind were being violently torn apart by the global conflagration of the Second World War, the search for a 'new man' took numerous forms. The aggregate of Egyptian and Buddhist icons among the motifs of modern industry in Aaron Douglas' *Building More Stately Mansions* 1944 evoked an ecumenical synthesis of world cultures. Ronald Moody had earlier explored similar themes in the hieratic composure of *Johanan* 1936. In 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre's essay 'Orphée Noir' ('[Black Orpheus](#)') introduced Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* with a dialectical schema that saw [Négritude](#) as the antithesis to colonial racism, which would eventually lead to a universalist synthesis (although Frantz Fanon argued that Sartre's vision allowed no room for cultural autonomy). Against the backdrop of this profound crisis of humanism, Lam's voyages into the contact zone of Caribbean syncretism pursued a quest for the transformation of subjectivity through the process of 'transculturation', whereby different cultural identities change their self-conception as a result of their mutual encounter. Lam's *femme cheval*, in this view, is a hybrid go-between who travels between material and spiritual worlds, and journeys from the lost African past towards the uncertain future of the West. In Lam's pictorial space of modernist transculturation, symbolic boundaries are transgressed and the ecstatic loss of self brought about by ritual trance puts the very identity of universal 'man' at risk.

Other artists who also passed through this contact zone included Zora Neale Hurston, whose *Tell My Horse* (1938) was a travelogue of her ethnographic journeys in the Caribbean, and film-maker Maya Deren, whose travels to Haiti in the 1940s resulted in *Divine Horsemen*, an avant-garde film that remained uncompleted until the 1970s. What curtailed these explorations were two post-war developments that pushed questions of [hybridity](#) to the margins of inquiry, such that they lay dormant for forty years before resurfacing with the [postcolonial](#) turn. On the one hand, Surrealism played a key role in perceptions of Caribbean life as itself a 'marvellous realism'. This later morphed into 'magical realism' in the broader Latin American context, but the critique of exoticism that Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier expressed

in 1949 was also inflected by a strident evocation of cultural 'authenticity' in his view that 'the European surrealist was condemned to paucity of vision because Surrealism was not embedded in society ... Its real domain was Latin America and the Caribbean, where magic remains part of everyday life.'<sup>11</sup>

If such indigenist notions of 'authenticity' were a touchstone for the nation-building process after independence in the Caribbean and West Africa, the shift away from cross-cultural experimentation was also reinforced, on the other hand, by the metropolitan institutionalisation of modernism, which relied on a parallel criterion of 'authenticity' in classificatory distinctions between the tribal and the modern.

Faced with an 'art and culture system' that valued non-Western art forms for their 'otherness' to Western conventions,<sup>12</sup> black [diaspora](#) artists found themselves in a double bind: one could be included by being purely primitive and authentically 'other' to modernism, or one could assimilate to an unmarked position in abstract art, for instance, but the idea of combining elements from a mixture of sources – that is to say, being both 'Afro' and 'modern' – simply did not fit within the binary sightlines of the leading institutions of modern art that emerged in the mid-1930s and which, by the mid-1950s, had gained considerable influence.

## MODERNISM AS A SCENE OF TRANSCULTURATION

The 'still life' treatment of African masks in works by Walker Evans and Norman Lewis, both made in 1935, draws attention to the ways in which white and black artists alike articulated a response, in the contact zone of the New York art world, to the 'de-contextualisation' of the tribal artefact as it entered the symbolic economy of modernity. But these shared interests had split apart by the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

During the integrationist 1940s black artists were represented by commercial galleries for the first time. Lewis exhibited with Marian Willard from 1946 to 1964, Jacob Lawrence held six solo shows at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery between 1941 and 1953, and Bearden exhibited with Samuel Kootz Gallery as part of a group that included Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell. But when Bearden was 'dropped' in 1948 alongside other figurative artists who lost out to an incoming cohort that included Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, cross-cultural flows were blocked by a wall that separated 'pure' painterly abstraction from signifying elements previously associated with the primitive, the ethnic and the folkloric. William Edmonson, the first African-American to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1937, could fit within the institution as a self-taught 'naïve' who was visibly 'non-modern', but for Bearden, Lewis, and other African-American artists such as Hale Woodruff, it was not until the Spiral Group, which they formed in the 1960s, that they could achieve a break-out from the post-primitivist enclosure.

Regarding the second contact zone, MoMA readily purchased *The Jungle*; but in the unitary formalist narrative that saw modernism as unilinear 'progress', the

institution was never sure where Lam should be placed, and for decades the painting languished by the cloakroom.<sup>14</sup> Re-reading Lam within a globalised conception of modernism, contemporary scholars point out that *The Jungle* alludes to two crops that were national symbols of Cuba's colonial economy.<sup>15</sup> In *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), Fernando Ortiz stressed the composite mix of disparate ethnicities that was specific to Cuba and the Caribbean – 'Men, economies, cultures, ambitions were all foreigners here'.<sup>16</sup> His deconstruction of the 'intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition', gave emphasis to both 'the destruction of cultures and the creativity of cultural unions'.<sup>17</sup> This dynamic and agonistic relation of two phases, 'the loss or uprooting of a culture ("deculturation") and the creation of a new culture ("neoculturation")', is precisely how contemporary thinkers approach the question of cosmopolitanism under the universal conditions of modernity at large.<sup>18</sup>

In cross-cultural situations where adaptation to the 'foreign' or 'strange' is brought about coercively (as in Caribbean histories of slavery and colonisation), the resulting process of [creolisation](#) always involves two-way traffic in which, as Stuart Hall puts it, 'the colonized refashions the colonizer to some degree, even as the former is forced to take the imprint of the latter's cultural hegemony'.<sup>19</sup> But in the act of purposively choosing a self-questioning relationship to strangeness or foreignness, such a critically cosmopolitan outlook is one in which identity is always creatively put at risk in the uncertainties and potentialities of the cultural encounter with difference and multiplicity.

Venturing towards the African context in which Uche Okeke produced *Ana Mmuo* 1961, one might say that the formation of the Zaria Arts Society around Okeke's idea of [Natural Synthesis](#) was an extension of the exploratory interest in the combinatory logic of hybridisation and [creolisation](#) that crystallised in the 1940s. As the agency of the *uli* line, indigenous to Igbo culture, enters into a poetic dance of transculturation with the playful line associated with Paul Klee or Joan Miró in European modernism, a further hybrid variation arises. Okeke's inscriptive practice of mark-making is Afro-modern by virtue of the polyvocal sources it draws upon. With the formation of the Mbari arts group in Ibadan in 1961, this would be the location of a third contact zone in continental Africa, even though the crisis of nationhood that resulted in the Biafran civil war in Nigeria set severe limits to the possibilities that Okeke had begun to explore. In widening our understanding of the global conditions of artistic production in different moments of twentieth-century art, we realise that our overall view of the mid-century period is incomplete without taking the contributions of Afro-modernism into account, and that the factors which constrain the aesthetic potential of cross-cultural relations are still with us as unresolved questions today.

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<sup>1</sup> Studio Museum in Harlem, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1987; Hayward Gallery, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, London and Berkeley, CA, Hayward Gallery, Institute for International Visual Arts and University of California Press, 1997.

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- 2 Romare Bearden, letter to Walter Quirt, 20 January 1942, quoted in Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and his Art*, New York, Abrams, 1990, p. 121.
- 3 Alain Locke, 'Who or What is Negro?', *Opportunity*, Feb./March 1942, reprinted in Jeffrey C. Stewart (ed.), *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of his Essays on Art and Culture*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1983, p. 311.
- 4 Romare Bearden, 'The Negro Artist's Dilemma', *Critique*, Nov. 1946, p. 19.
- 5 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 4.
- 6 Jacob Lawrence quoted in Carrol Green, 'Oral history interview with Jacob Lawrence, 1968 Oct 26', Washington, dc, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 7 Sieglinde Lemke, 'Diaspora Aesthetics: Exploring the African Diaspora in the Works of Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence and Jean-Michel Basquiat', in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, London and Cambridge, MA, Institute for International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2008, p. 133.
- 8 C.L.R. James, 'Preface', *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, London, Allison & Busby, 3rd edn, 1980, p. x.
- 9 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 11.
- 10 Pierre Mabile, 'The Jungle' (1945), reprinted in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (eds.), *The Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, London, Verso, 1996.
- 11 Alejo Carpentier, 'The Marvellous Real in America' (1949), in Lois Zamora Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham, nc, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 76.
- 12 See James Clifford, 'On Collecting Art and Culture', in *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988.
- 13 See Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997.
- 14 See John Yau, 'Please Wait by the Coatroom', in Russell Ferguson, Marth Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, London and New York, New Museum and MIT, 1990.
- 15 See Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923–1982*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002.
- 16 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham, nc, Duke University Press, 1996, p. 101.
- 17 Fernando Coronil, 'Introduction to the Duke University Press Edition', in *ibid.*, p. xxvii.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Stuart Hall, 'Créolité and the Process of Creolization', in Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash and Octavio Zaya (eds.), *Créolité and Creolization*, Ostfilden-Ruit, Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 31.