

# The modernist traveller in Africa: Africanism and the European author's self-fashioning

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The central question in this paper is the relationship between European modernist traveller's self-fashioning and the representation of Sub-Saharan African cultures, spaces and cross-cultural encounters in the early 20th century. The premise is that the cultural production of identity, including the question of artistic identity and poetics, is most productive where it is most ambivalent and uneasy. High modernist critical narratives pose the question of the phenomenology of travel in terms of textual authority. Authority, in the perception in late colonial European writing, was often simultaneously questioned and affirmed, meaning that Western art, and the modern society, were seen as lacking something significant outside of its margin. At the same time, the idea of the pure exotic emerged as incompatible with modern historical consciousness, and colonial texts anticipate many later theoretical ideas in postcolonial studies. The question is how to portray cross-cultural encounters, and how to fashion the self in the contact zone of travel and sojourn. Modernist travel writing asks what was the writer's self and the recognition of identity and difference in others. The modernist image of Africa carries important implications for the re-evaluation of art and literature and the renewal of artistic or narrative forms.

In *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said promoted the study of textuality as a source of authority. This concerns both the individual author's relationship to the cultural material he represents and the referential power of the intertextual field of knowledge to which his work contributes. More precisely, *strategic location* is the author's position in a text with regard to the material, such as Oriental cultures, that he writes about. This means that anyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient, and translate this into his text. *Strategic location* includes also the kind of narrative voice the writer adopts, and

the kinds of images, themes, and motifs that circulate in his text. Further, the strategic position comprises deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the other culture, even speaking on the other culture's behalf. *Strategic formation*, in contrast, points to an intertextual formation. It concerns relationships between texts and the way in which groups and types of texts, or textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large.

As many critics have pointed out, Said's scheme of textual authority is monolithic with regard to the specificity of individual texts and their genres. For instance, Said makes little substantive distinction between literary and non-literary texts (this is a much-commented problem in Said),<sup>1-3</sup> nor does he pay much attention to the differences in the Western writers' identity with regard to their gender, language, cultural or social background. The distinction between strategic location and formation also raises theoretical problems. Does not the representation of another culture always take the form of a translation between signs based on previous signs and texts? What would, for instance, be the African material that is different from an Africa translated into a text? The notion of Orientalist discourse appears as a totality, as a kind of total intercultural translation that has no particular reference even if it assumes to know its reference well, for there is no object to which it corresponds.<sup>4</sup> Neither is there any inner conflict in this discourse, but, as for instance Robert Young has pointed out, it is defined by a simple will to dominate. If this is so, an even more difficult question of referentiality emerges: how can one distinguish any proper *other* culture, say Orient or some African culture, that would have a reference and that would help one to determine what, in comparison, is a misconception, or nothing but a translation?

With regard to literary texts, it makes sense to ask whether the writer's strategic location is made possible by the narrative voice that is adopted in a text, and not vice versa. A narrative voice can be different from the writer's strategic location; it may also be at variance with the real author's opinions. As literary scholars know, polyphonic narration, typically, puts forward contradictory intentions for the reader's evaluation and investigates multiple strategic locations. The question of an authorial audience is similarly important in modern literature: how does the text imply its reader? A text may be designated for a hypothetical audience that is different from the actual audience. Every text implies a reader but the reader does not have to agree with the suggested position.

Further problems arise with modernist texts that imply that, in another culture, there is nothing either to see or experience. When Henri Michaux states, in the motto of his travelogue *Un Barbare en Asie*, that in India 'there is nothing to see, but everything to interpret', he poses the question of intercultural translation, a central dilemma in present-day postcolonial studies. What can be translated over

the semiotic border of cultures if the representation of other cultures, in a kind of solipsistic circle, is starting with interpretation and ending with it? In Michaux's case, intercultural translation is no longer a matter of projection or description, but it includes the very act of enunciation, the process of interpretation and the means of stereotyping. Michaux, and Raymond Roussel, were great explorers of the futility of travel, the discourse of exhaustion and of the ontological propositions of travel. Their mock-travel narratives gave voice to the question of why travel in the first place, if it only meant to meet one's own phantasms. Roussel insisted on the purely linguistic status of his fictional inventions of Africa.

What seems to be missing in the Saidian type of colonial discourse analysis is the possibility of multi-voiced narratives and contradictions in terms of transmittal of meanings in intercultural translation and the colonial subject's self-designation. How has the Self, in early 20th-century modernist travel writing and primitivism, been fashioned through the other – not just projected onto the other or imitated through forms of 'going native' and intercultural transvestisms? This is an especially appropriate question at a point in the early 20th century when colonial possession, colonial mission and even the introversion of this mission, in the form of the colonialist adventure novel, had become problematic. For Said, the Western artist has always been a more or less conscious proponent of his Orientalism or Africanism. In recent postcolonial studies, however, it has become increasingly acknowledged that it is necessary to see the contentious nature of colonialism as an essential part of its history. In European literatures, this does not necessarily mean any explicit difference of opinion or disagreement concerning the imperial project and possession, anti-colonial politics as such, apart from André Gide and some others. Rather, it should include an examination of counter-intentions and self-transgression within the colonial discourse. For instance, the Bambola-Bragamance episode in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* makes use, on the one hand, of the eroticized stereotype of the African continent as a voluptuous woman's body to be conquered. On the other hand, however, the same novel also expounds French colonialism as a despotic and thoroughly corrupt system. Further complexities in the rapport between literature and colonialism arise if we consider Céline's African letters and journal alongside his fiction and evaluate their varying claims for the reference of 'Africa'.

Such self-transgression is perhaps best seen in the modernist travellers' accounts, both fiction and fact, including the self-contradictory exploitation and exaggeration of stereotypes of Michaux, Roussel, Céline and Georges Simenon. The Africa in European literatures articulated and at times also defined colonial preoccupations. Yet, the modernist European travel writing of the inter-war period, characterized by a decadent belatedness with regard to the exotic other, functioned also as an apparatus for a variety of questions with 'domestic' difference including questions of nationality, gender, class, sexuality, religion,

language and the meaning of literature and art. The encounter with African spaces and cultures, the Orient, the Pacific Islands and Central or South America was in many cases a pretence for investigating one's own ethno-national boundaries and the criteria that maintained them. The exiled posture of the anti-tourist traveller – travelling for art and literature or for renewing one's life – was for many a means to manipulate cultural ascription and the means to ascribe, to disorganize, the effects of staying at home and travelling.

### Self-designation

In colonial and colonialist modernist writing, the definition of Self is often provoked by a preoccupation with what is marginal, or with the idea of a cultural frontier between us and the other that may be somehow breached (see Ref. 5, p. 7; Ref. 6). Such preoccupation with the outside of one's culture – which necessitates the definition of what constitutes its 'outside' – or with the frontiers of all known cultures, typically involves the very concept of authority in perception. To speak in very general terms, authority in late colonial European writing was often simultaneously questioned and affirmed, meaning that Western perspectives on life and art, and modern society, were seen as lacking something significant with regard to the outside of its margin.

On the one hand, Western authority in perception was reaffirmed through the appropriation of its outside. The modernists, from Cubism to Surrealism to Expressionism, claimed authority to present non-western materials and to appropriate them for forging themselves, and their art, anew. Typically, the non-western objects and artefacts were severed from their immediate contexts so that they could be used to represent the recovery of lost pure forms or the breaking of habitual ways of perception through abstracted contours and shapes. At the same time, certain non-western cultures were seen as the last bastions of unrestricted, non-formalist energy. F. T. Marinetti, for instance, expressed the Italian futurist search for primordial vitality and cultural revitalization with the help of the trope of African bestiality in his early novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (1909) (Ref. 8). The protagonist of Marinetti's novel, the African king Mafarka, has a 'manufactured son', who is an animated aeroplane, thus suggesting a sort of counter-primitivism of the machine, an anti-modern modernism.

On the other hand, modernist primitivism and colonial travel literature frequently foregrounded the question of the epistemology of its perception instead of simply projecting hackneyed stereotypes. The various primitivisms from André Breton to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, from Max Ernst to Russian neo-primitivism questioned predominant Western ways of artistic perception through their appropriation of non-western cultures.

The picture of Africa enjoys a specific status in the modernist representation of the non-western other. Although attention has been paid to the Pacific Islands, the Far East and American Indian cultures, Africa remained the most intense locus of conflicting meanings in much European modernism. This must have been partly due to the radical racist or 'primitive' separation of the African continent during the 19th century, and partly to the fact that the sub-Saharan African cultures were still relatively unknown. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was the inspiring model for Gide, Evelyn Waugh and Céline. Conrad's novel made it possible, perhaps for the first time, to transform the ancient mode of intercultural projection into a question of epistemological perception. This perception concerned not so much the African object as the Africans' subject – the explorer, the writer – who was called into question. The specificity of the European travelling artists and writers in Africa at the time was that, while they undoubtedly participated in the colonial situation, they often also asked what the recognition of identity and difference between themselves and others meant in the first place. The stress was on *representing* us and others, rather than on *other* cultures in representation. In this respect, some of the modernist travellers and emigrants anticipated the critical perspective of later postcolonial studies.

The othering of Africa in European modernism often enjoyed an identity-endowing function related to the challenge of renewing one's art. The questioning and even the discrediting of Western authority was part and parcel of the use of African materials. A further complexity of the situation was that the travelling modernist artist's Self and artistic production were defined, not so much in relation to some representatives of other cultures, but against one's own home *through* the other culture. The dilemma of many modernist African travellers of the inter-war period, such as Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh, was the modernity of home.

The identity-endowing function of Africa is often made apparent through a certain mythical quality of the continent or a personal myth of the frontier 'Africa' that makes possible the reinvention of one's identity. This is not simply the heroic 'I have been there' speciality of a travel story that determines the trope of Africa, but the process of self-fashioning, including the often contradictory and uneasy confrontation with one's self-image – with the 'internalized exotic' – in the course of travelling. At times, as is the case with Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*, an ex-surrealist-future-ethnologist's memoir of travel through central Africa, such self-fashioning included an anti-heroism that tackled the issue of displacement and the hackneyed forms of personal travel writing. This could be phrased as something like 'I was there and suffered a loss' or, perhaps, 'I was there and imagined myself anew (but again I was lost)'. One can think of other varieties. The modernist, artificial Africa, in Leiris or in Gide's travel writing, replete with critical observations of colonial administration, revealed its capacity to collect and

exhibit otherness, including the traveller's otherness to him or herself. Leiris's work especially opened up the intertextual question of disaffection with the cultural burden of knowledge concerning Africa. In the course of his travel, Leiris suddenly lists possible texts, from Verdi's *Aida* to the legends concerning Arthur Rimbaud selling arms to Ménelik in Ethiopia, from the news of the death of Livingstone to Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique*, that had conditioned his pre-travel image of Africa. While Leiris and his travel experience is submerged in this textual network, the listing of the texts also moves him a step beyond their simple repetition in his own journal. For Leiris, Africa, in some sense, enabled an investigation of the strategic formation of texts. But not just that, Africa also estranged him from the cultural baggage of texts within.

In many cases, the modernist artist in Africa projected identity through a personal myth of Africa that resonated with the contradictions between national identity and artistic creation. In the beginning of his African *Journal*, the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela reminisces how, many years before, he sat in some parish clerk's old sauna in Finland, beating himself on the shoulders with a bath whisk. It is significant that these ruminations concerning the ugliness of modern society and the beauty of the ancient take place in the warmth of an age-old sauna. The sauna, for Gallen, is a sacred place. It is also a place for nudity, lack of shame, navels, and origins. To his surprise, the masseuse who tends the steam and washes him is a young, robust woman from the Finnish backwoods who is naked down to her waist. Gallen starts a flirtatious conversation with the masseuse and points to the sacral nature of the sauna as well as to 'the sauna as the navel of the earth'. There is not much surprise in this comparison between the sauna and navels as many Finns, perhaps most of them at the time, were born in a sauna. The further association between the sauna, navel, and Africa, however, is worth more attention.

While cooling off on the threshold of this sauna, Gallen comes to the theme of Africa by way of asking the masseuse whether she might follow him on a trip to Africa. The woman is startled by the idea: 'Is Africa where people are black devils, pagans and walk about naked everywhere? This is the place where the air is hot as in the sauna steam and that is so far that it would take years to walk there?' The short conversation, despite the fact that it stresses the distance between Africa and Finland, and the woman's stereotyping of the black Africans, relates a certain key Finnish experience, the sauna, to the image of Africa. The sauna, like African nature, is located outside the confining modern social codes of clothes and rank, and even more, Africa, like the sauna and the navel, is a privileged realm that conserves an experience of an origin of existence. For Gallen, the sauna and Africa are also places for meeting naked or semi-nude women.

Both the sauna and Africa function in Gallen's *Journal* as projection screens that test and endow identity. They also make possible the experience of the archaic

that, in a sense, authorizes the projection of identity. Specifically, the archaic means here a sense of origination and the criteria that maintain a sense of an origin. For Gallen, a journey to Africa was a way to reinvent the past and to become national, paradoxically it seems, by forgetting the immediate surroundings of modern Finland and Europe; at the time of departure for British East Africa, Gallen and his family lived in deliberate exile in Paris. The same definitive experience of finding the African '*Kalevala*' also implies the option of forgetting one's limits. Sub-Saharan exoticism, just like a meditative sauna bath, suggests a dream space without limits, a realization of a space that is non-space. One needs not to have visited this place in order to know it. Africa presents a *rêverie du repos*, a carefree time, a free flow of the imagination.

The comparison between the sauna, a supposedly Finnish invention, and the heat of Africa, sets the tone for the *Journal's* anti-modernist modernism and its nationalistic emphasis. The comparison also points to the possible, but largely unacknowledged, comparison between the Tzarist colony of Finland and colonial East Africa. Finland and British East Africa are in no way directly compared in Gallen's *Journal*, but they do get juxtaposed through other comparisons, like that between the sauna, the navel, women's' bodies and the heat. The question of nation overlaps and colludes with the idea of artistic experiment and invention. The depiction of the African heat in Gallen's many paintings undertaken during his travels necessitated new ways of perceiving light and the contours of figures.

### Decline of the exotic

While the idea of the pure exotic and pure authenticity is put forward in Gallen's *Journal*, the same notion emerges as incompatible with much modern historical consciousness, for instance, in the critical ethnology of Leiris. Céline explodes the romantic exoticism of Pierre Loti and others in the ambiguous narrative voices of his *Voyage au bout de la nuit* where the protagonist Ferdinand Bardamu boasts of going to the 'real' Africa that is not the flattened image of the everyday. Céline's 'Africa', however, is an explicitly *literary* invention based, amongst others, on the descriptions of Conrad, Voltaire and Defoe. Céline and Waugh explored, in their different ways, hermeneutic pessimism – the sarcastic traveller in Africa who learns nothing but is bound to travel – and the question of translatability between different cultures. There is a sense of plurality and interpenetration of worlds in Waugh's fiction and non-fiction, in his African travelogues such as *Remote People*, or his novels, such as *Black Mischief* and *Scoop*, set in an imaginary African space, but these different worlds are not necessarily translatable into each other. The traveller's identity persists despite the efforts to change it. It is perhaps even frivolous to try to change it. Graham Greene claimed, in his *Journey Without*

*Maps*, that the noble savage perhaps never existed. Greene's version of the personal myth of West Africa is a fantastic, subjectivist Africa informed by psychoanalysis. For Greene, it is not a fully conscious mind that chooses to go to West Africa instead of Switzerland. Yet, he admits, one cannot possibly think of avoiding Africa since it 'has represented more than I could say'. Africa is not a conscious destination nor a fully perceivable thing, *Journey Without Maps* (London: Vintage, 2002), 20.

What was gained in such testimonies of the decline of the romantic exotic was knowledge of the effects that the earlier vision and description had brought, such as 19th century exoticism, moralizing and the justification of conquest, and the concomitant destruction. Loss of familiarity, or the question of the fractal dimension of travel, meaning the problem of the indefinite number of details, also became an issue. 'It is difficult to look at the people and things in the tropic directly since they reflect too many colours,' explains Céline's Bardamu in *Voyage*. Description was to be made thick and resistant. Modernist African travel, typically, raises the question of the cultural models of the *vraisemblable*, investigating for instance the generic framing of texts, the distinction between fact and fiction or the very value of literature.

For instance, Karen Blixen's presentation of African responses to the great Western classics like the *Odyssey* or *The Merchant of Venice*, implies at least two things about the African reader that are significant with regard to her own poetics. On the one hand, the African's interest in Western literature is curiously concrete and literal in a way that is also imaginative. The Kikuyu servant Kamante, who listens to her recitals, ties the characters and the plot of the *Odyssey* to issues in his immediate surroundings. To Kamante, the ram under which Odysseus escapes from the Cyclops's cave must have been of the same race as the breed of sheep he knows. Kamante, in Blixen's description, also likens the feeling of fear that the Kikuyu boys sometimes have, while tending sheep on the plain, to the fear of *Outis*, or *Noman*, the name Odysseus invented to confuse Polyphemus. In the context of Blixen's African texts, however, such misreading, meaning the fusion of distant times and remote places with the present here and now, is not to be understood as a form of naivete or as misunderstanding. The imaginative literalizing, rather, is a case of the creative appropriation of literature that is in harmony with the very idea of storytelling. The African confluence of story space and time, and the juxtaposition of told and lived narratives, is an indication of an actual possibility to experience stories as lived entities and to fashion one's life anew through stories. The Africans live out stories, including distant myths and epics, in the present. This is another meaning for Blixen's idea that the Africans, unlike Europeans, have maintained the art of narration.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the reading of Western classics to Africans functioned for Blixen as a means to investigate literary communication. What is essential in this investigation is not any 'civilizing' imposition of Western classics on illiterate



Africans, but the modifications the texts undergo in response to their retelling. Further, since the operations of writing and reading are foregrounded in the text through the African responses to and appropriation of Western literature, the writing and reading mind is also objectified within the text as its visible reflecting surface. Blixen portrays the African readers as side-participants of her narrative art who participate in her stories. In that role, the author also intends the readers to be genuinely informed by narrative utterances, not to be passive listeners. The Africans' skill in listening to stories and telling them orally is contrasted to their literary asceticism of living with no written texts.

To summarize, then, one can say that the modernist European traveller's return to the modernity of his or her home was only possible through the figure of the other, who, however, was not always a specific person of another culture, nor always a certain 'culture'. Instead, Africa may be said to have functioned as a spatial configuration or a kind of artificial sign of the cultural margin that was to be reused in the repertoire of the home culture. This sense of being home and not home at the same time cannot be separated from the colonial position that all the above-mentioned writers shared and enjoyed in their varying ways. Yet, the obvious, pronounced malleability of the trope of Africa, and the investigation of the authority of its earlier strategic formations and uses, opens up new questions in the present of our early 21st century. These include both the investigation of the relationship between literature and colonialism as well as the historical formation of high modernist poetics. Africa in this sense, anything 'African' from masks to maps, suggested a space of possibility, of possible meanings, forms of storytelling and reception. At the same time, the old 'African' metaphors and stereotypes were often transformed, literalized, exaggerated and exploded. Typically, the European artist's self-fashioning took place in a kind of colonial drama between other Europeans and 'Africans', in a vexed relationship with Western companions and countrymen, immigrants and travellers, and others who stayed at home in Europe. For most, the travel to Africa enabled the questioning of one's own identity, artistic and otherwise – or a kind of anti-modern return to the forgotten or unknown part of the self. It also involved the exploration of the notion of travel as well as the creative manipulation of earlier images concerning the African space of travel and sojourn.

### References and notes

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2. D. Porter (1994) Orientalism and its problems, in: P. Williams and L. Chrisman (Eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press): 150–161 [first published in 1983].

3. C. Prendergast (2000) *The Triangle of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press): 83–100.
4. Robert Young argues that Said's 'Orientalism is a totality which has no reference – for there is no object to which it corresponds – nor inner conflict, but solely an intention to dominate, Said must then demand a counter-intention from outside the system for any resistance'. R. Young (1990) *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge): 135. Homi K. Bhabha's critique is similar when it comes to Said's unclear discrimination between what he calls 'latent' and 'manifest' Orientalism. H. K. Bhabha (1994) *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge): 43.
5. E. J. Hughes (2001) *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: from Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
6. I follow on Elleke Boehmer's distinctions between 'colonial' and colonialist' literature. 'Colonial literature' means, for Boehmer, 'writing concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times.' Colonial literature thus includes literature written in the colonising Empire during the colonial period. 'Colonialist literature,' in turn, is specifically concerned with colonial expansion. This means 'literature written by and for colonising Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them.' Colonialist literature embodies the imperialists' point of view, while 'postcolonial literature' is literature that 'critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship' and in one way or another resists colonialist perspectives. See E. Boehmer (1995) *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 2–3.
7. Kamante's naive interest in big books that are well bound and hang well is not so naïve after all: by way of humour, it points to the fact that the book is to be understood as a technology separate from the art of storytelling.
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