On Victor Li's *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*

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The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity, by Victor Li. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. 272. $50.00 cloth.

IN HIS STUDY of primitivism as a subject and a concept in recent criticism and theory, Victor Li uses the words *good* and *bad* a lot. What's "good" also gets described as "insightful" or "brilliant." What's bad gets described as "reductive" or "contradictory." Discussed, as they are, in substantial detail, the theorists in the subtitle of Li's book—Baudrillard, Lyotard, Sahlins, Habermas, and myself—are sometimes "good" and sometimes "bad." Even though most of these theorists have a strong deconstructive and relativist streak, it's hard for anyone to meet Li's stringent standards and be deconstructive and relativist enough, which, for Li, requires not only the exposure or deconstruction of binary thinking but also thinking and writing without the use of binaries at all.

At times, I found myself wanting to remind Li that tentative categories and place markers often have to be used in writing, that thought evolves and changes, often within the act of writing itself, and that writing can be playful as well as earnest. But by the end of the book—perhaps in the process of writing the book—Li becomes less judgmental and more generous, so the theorists of the primitive who have been exhaustively analyzed and both praised and criticized are recuperated in the end.

I felt grateful that Li's book ends on a generous note, because I had done a "bad" thing when I began to read by looking first at the section on my work. I thought, correctly, that the section would be of most immediate interest to me and would be the one I'd be best equipped to judge. Still, reading the section

about myself first was absolutely a bad thing to do, because it's almost impossible to forget what an author thinks of your work as you evaluate his.

If I were Li, I'd be pulling the sentence I've just written apart for the contradiction between its saying "absolutely" in a sentence that also includes an "almost impossible." Since I'm not Victor Li, I see "absolutely" and "almost impossible" not as inconsistent but rather as capturing (even in a straw man of a sentence like the one above) the both/and rather than either/or quality, the progressive, volatile, and labile quality of so much thought and perceived experience. Instead of "inconsistency," one might also see play with language or with the possibility of multiple judgments, or a combination of relativism and the pragmatic need to settle somewhere in order for thoughts to have consequences.

Because Li is by and large respectful and always serious, I felt grateful for his careful, detailed reading of my work and the work of other writers on the subject of the primitive. His readings operate at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, the essay and the book, but they also consider a total oeuvre of writing, so that (in my case) *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* is read in terms of *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy,* a sequel. That move seems to me fair enough, but it also seems to distort my overall argument in each book. The books address substantially different aspects and manifestations of primitivism, and I wouldn't apply everything I say in *Primitive Passions* to the topics and subjects in *Gone Primitive.* Li, however, introduces a certain element of misreading when he does so. When I talk, for example, in *Primitive Passions,* about traditions that recognize "the oceanic" within premodern cultures and within the West, I'd hate to be seen as maintaining that tribal peoples exist constantly and continuously within states of mind accessed mostly during ritual and meditation, states of mind not coextensive with or fully viable in quotidian life. I state, or thought I did, quite clearly, that such a belief in the continuously spiritual primitive is in itself a major form of primitivism. At any rate, my point is not, as Li puts it, that "primitives R us." My point is that, in virtually all cultures, ritual and meditation and artistic creation recognize something in us that is also more than us, an element of spirit that outlasts these bags of bones, our bodies. I get that sense in meditation; some get it in church; others get it in sweathouses or other sites of ritual; and still others get it through painting or dance. I would always want to maintain specificity as to cultural and individual differences, and to recognize the contingencies and the emotional surround of any spiritual feeling, as well as of any act of thinking and writing.

Speaking of specificities: Lyotard's, Baudrillard's, Sahlins's, Habermas's, and my writing all took shape in different countries, at different times, in different contexts, and within different disciplines and genres—a factor Li sometimes scants, and a factor to which I'll want to return. Still, as Li shows, when taken together the work does hang together as a "neo-primitivist turn," which uses Western conceptions of "the primitive" to critique Eurocentrism and modernity itself.

Li's title embodies several puns: neo-primitivism represents a "turn" because it looks back at primitivism, the Western fascination with premodern, non-technological peoples; but by making places, people, things, or concepts of the primitive their subject, theorists of the primitive also, and necessarily, end up by turning into neo-primitivists who inscribe a new form of primitivism. Finally, for Li, and especially in the work of Sahlins and Habermas, the word "primitive" becomes another—Li says "nicer"—word for the basic building block of anthropology, *culture,* and because our culture is modernity, "culture" becomes a code word for *modernity*. Primitivism's scope is wide, even all-inclusive; so are the stakes of the neo-primitivist turn.

A great deal of the energy in Li's book swirls around the question of whether what the West calls "primitive" does or does not correspond to something in the historical or social world. Clearly, many places and groups have been called "primitive" or treated in analogous terms: that much seems both evident and uncontested. But do the places/people/things called primitive correspond to something in the phenomenal world?

Li correctly notes that all of the theorists of modernity he considers, including me, do not endorse a simple or essential notion of the primitive per se. For some theorists (Lyotard, Baudrillard), the term exists in the abstract only, free of reference to any specific group or peoples. For others (Sahlins) it exists within specific ethnographic encounters, like Captain Cook's with the Hawaiians; and for still others (Habermas), it exists as a counterpoint to the idea of modernity. For me, "the primitive" exists in both the registers used by Baudrillard and Lyotard, Sahlins, and Habermas, but it also exists as an ultimately unknowable "reality" (Nabokov says it's a word that should always be in quotation marks, and I agree) that we in the West embody in specific groups or peoples, and changes according to the circumstances and temperament of the perceiver.

Indeed, in my work the status of "the primitive" often depends on point of view, a perspective, and on a continuum. Some of the figures I write about believe that an authentic primitive exists and that the term "primitive" can be used unproblematically; for me, as narrative voice, theorist, and critic, it exists only along a continuum of terms from the technologically replete, perhaps now overly replete, and the relatively free of technology. It's a central contention of my work that no choice of words to describe the continuum can be entirely neutral and objective. In the preceding sentences, for example, "replete" is more neutral than "overly replete," and "technology-free" has, in 2008, a positive connotation that "non-technological" does not always have and would generally not have had in 1900 or 1920 or even 1980.

What Li missed most in my work, and perhaps therefore in the work of others, is that prose sometimes gets located (as in the novelistic technique called *le style indirect libre*) inside the mind of the figure or concept being analyzed (Freud, Lawrence, modernity, capitalism) rather than in the narrator/critic's mind itself.

Any work, like mine, that positions itself within the minds of Western primitivists from Bronislaw Malinowski to Margaret Mead, Roger Fry to Dian Fossey, collectors of masks to body piercers, has to work within various idioms—which are "mine" no more than Elizabeth Bennet's thoughts are Jane Austen's or Emma Bovary's are Gustave Flaubert's. It seems to me that it is a critic or theorist's job both to evoke and to represent various views, and to take a stand insofar as ideas have consequences. My use of the term "authentic primitive" needs to be understood within the framework of a continuum from the patently fanciful (for example, the belief that Atlantis could be found in the core of Africa) to the ethnographically demonstrable (for example, communal dance as ritual).

Li's approach to his topic is thorough and serious, at times even magisterial. He's read a lot, and one of the strengths of his book is that it quotes extensively from the theorists and writers he discusses.

Still, there's a core peculiarity to the book, one with which I'd like to end. Most of the theory Li discusses was written during the lively theory crucible of the 1980s or 1990s—not so very long ago, especially because theory has been quieter since, but long ago enough to make a difference. Li doesn't always seem to take account of that fact. The issue is not so much the question of "relevance," for the work he discusses seems to me, by and large, still to be quite relevant. The issue is the one stated in the title, the idea of a "neo-primitivist turn" and the factors that control its direction.

That a critique of primitivism simultaneously formed a critique of modernity was news in the 1990s, when the term "primitive" had fallen into a disuse that masked the widespread and continuing role of primitivism within Western culture. Li's book made me remember, with some vividness, the time and attention I devoted to the question of whether to use the word "primitive" in my book at all and whether to surround it with quotation marks each time, once I decided that I would. Here is what I say in my 1990 book, *Gone Primitive*:

> Given the mixed history of the word *primitive,* the urge to jettison it is understandable. But before we could responsibly do that we would need a viable alternative to designate the kinds of societies it describes. Currently, we do not, since all its synonyms are either inexact or duplicate in various ways the problematics of the term *primitive* itself. And here I include savage, pre-Columbian, tribal, third world, underdeveloped, developing, archaic, traditional, exotic, "the anthropological record," non-Western, and Other. Some of these alternatives (third world, underdeveloped, exotic) blur necessary, indeed vital distinctions between third world nations (which are often urban and industrial) and the remote, relatively primitive societies they may still harbor. All take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and subordinatable. We simply do not have a

neutral, politically acceptable vocabulary. Short of reaching the true, essential Primitive (a goal even dedicated ethnographers have disavowed), the best we can do is to uncover, from a political and cultural perspective, the kinds of work key terms like *primitive* have performed within modern and postmodern culture and the kinds of work they have evaded or shortchanged. (21)

Though I'd want to make some nips and tucks and alternations in that statement, by and large I'd stand by it. And because making the same argument would seem unnecessary now in an essay or a talk, I often just simply use quotation marks around the word "primitive" and its aggregate, "the primitive." As Li's book shows, since 1990 both terms have been recuperated and critiqued.

The "turn" I would question most, or at least want to historicize, is Li's slide from *primitive* to *culture* to *modernity,* a slide I believe exists in our culture, as well as in our theory, but one conditioned by history rather than by theory itself. Encounters with non-technological Others occurred under the shadow of imperialism; theories of modernity unrolled under its shadow, too, as well as those cast by imperialism's twin in the twentieth century and thus far in the twenty-first century: world war and a consequent sense that we are living either on the brink of future war (World War II, World War III) or in the middle of a continual, ongoing war (the cold war, the war on terror). Because of its proximity to war, the stakes in primitivism and the way we talk about it are large and always have been.

Li gravitates toward theory terms like "deconstruction," "relativism," "subaltern," "culture," and "modernity," and spends a lot of time on reviews of the theorists he addresses and the consequences of those reviews in literary journals. He's not oriented toward the social or political world and tends to see criticism that moves in that direction as "politically correct"—a period term in itself, and one I had hoped to have seen the back of. But the implications of his topic have been, and continue to be, political.

A loaded but not inapt example comes from the twenty-first century. The Bush White House has been notorious for making plans without taking cultural differences into account. When it decided to invade Iraq in 2003, Iraq was not by any means a "primitive" place. Two cornerstones of U.S. policy depended on that fact: first, the belief that Iraq possessed enough technology (weapons of mass destruction, or WMDs) to menace not just its neighbors but the world; and, second, the belief that Iraq's core was secular and middle-class enough to allow for rapid rebuilding after a U.S. invasion. Some of the plan's multiple failures—and there were so many, both tactical and moral—involve both primitivism and, ironically, the failure to be primitivist enough. Some of Saddam Hussein's values—macho and bluster—matched those of his Western antagonists, George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld. But others—for example, the desire to save face before his neighbors by refusing to admit that he did not possess weapons of mass

destruction—did not. Similarly, since 2003 some of the values shared by many Iraqis—concern for the dignity of Islam, whether Sunni or Shiite, sometimes even beyond concern for personal or family safety—do not correspond to common Western values, while others (like resistance to invaders) do. As Edward Said noted long ago, Islam tends to be portrayed as an irrational mass, a frenzied mob, tropes that are also common in representations of "the primitive"—a tactic seen again and again in pre- and postwar coverage of events in the Middle East, including religious processions. Primitivism lives—not just as a theoretical term but also as a fact of political life. Indeed one could say that in this instance a larger dose of primitivism—a belief in the difference of Others and their adherence to alternative values—might have done the Bush administration some good!

In the end, as Li himself is aware, his approach runs out of gas, and his conclusion, in a way, takes back the criticisms mounted in his chapters:

> My criticisms, sometimes severe, of the theorists in this book should not therefore be seen as a rejection of their valuable contributions to the critical questioning of the West. They offer considerable insights into the problems generated by modern Western thought, and what I have attempted to do is to develop these insights by turning them back upon their sources. The book's critique of neo-primitivism is thus not about scoring critical points but about drawing attention to a problematic we all share. The problematic can be posed in the following manner: Can we avoid the figure of the Other when we engage in theorizing? (222)

That's a worthy question, even when the Other is not a group, not a people, not a nation, but only a fellow critic and theorist.

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