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Author(s): Kwame Anthony Appiah

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Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Tu t'appelais Bimbircokak
Et tout était bien ainsi
Tu es devenu Victor-Emile-Louis-Henri-Joseph
Ce qui
Autant qu'il m'en souviennne
Ne rappelle point ta parenté avec
Roqueffellère

—YAMBO OUOLOGUEM, "A Mon Mari"

In 1987, the Center for African Art in New York organized a show entitled "Perspectives: Angles on African Art." The curator, Susan Vogel, had worked with a number of "cocurators," whom I list in order of their appearance in the table of contents of the exhibition catalogue: Ekpo Eyo, quondam director of the department of antiquities of the National Museum of Nigeria; William Rubin, director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art and organizer of its controversial exhibit, "Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art"; Romare Bearden, African-American painter; Ivan Karp, curator of African ethnology at the Smithsonian; Nancy Graves, European-American painter, sculptor, and filmmaker; James Baldwin, who surely needs no qualifying glosses; David Rockefeller, art collector and friend of the mighty; Lela Kouakou, Baule artist and diviner from the Ivory Coast (this a delicious juxtaposition, richest and poorest, side by side); Iba N'Diaye, Senegalese sculptor; and Robert Farris Thompson,

Yale professor and African and African-American art historian.¹ In her introductory essay, Vogel describes the process of selection used to pick artworks for the show. The one woman and nine men were each offered a hundred-odd photographs of "African art as varied in type and origin, and as high in quality, as we could manage" and asked to select ten for the show. Or, I should say more exactly, this is what was offered to eight of the men. For Vogel adds that "in the case of the Baule artist, a man familiar only with the art of his own people, only Baule objects were placed in the pool of photographs" (*P*, p. 11). At this point we are directed to a footnote to the essay, which reads:

Showing him the same assortment of photos the others saw would have been interesting, but confusing in terms of the reactions we sought here. Field aesthetics studies, my own and others, have shown that African informants will criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of their own traditional criteria, often assuming that such works are simply inept carvings of their own aesthetic tradition. [*P*, p. 17 n. 2]

I shall return to this irresistible footnote in a moment. But let me pause to quote further, this time from the words of David Rockefeller, who would surely never "criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of [his] own traditional criteria," discussing what the catalogue calls a "Fanti female figure":

I own somewhat similar things to this, and I have always liked them. This is a rather more sophisticated version than the ones that I've seen, and I thought it was quite beautiful. . . . the total composition has a very contemporary, very Western look to it. It's the kind of thing, I think, that goes very well with . . . contemporary Western things. It would look very good in a modern apartment or house. [*P*, p. 138]

We may suppose that Rockefeller was delighted to discover that his final judgment was consistent with the intentions of the sculpture's creators. For a footnote to the earlier checklist—the list of artworks

1. *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (exhibition catalogue, Center for African Art, New York, 1987), [p. 9]; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor of philosophy and literature at Duke University, is the author of a number of books, including *For Truth in Semantics* (1986), *Necessary Questions* (1989), and *In My Father's House* (forthcoming), a collection of essays on African cultural politics. His first novel, *Avenging Angel*, was published in 1990.

ultimately chosen for the show—reveals that the Baltimore Museum of Art desires to “make public the fact that the authenticity of the Fante figure in its collection has been challenged.” Indeed, work by Doran Ross suggests this object is almost certainly a modern piece produced in my hometown of Kumasi by the workshop of a certain Francis Akwasi, which “specializes in carvings for the international market in the style of traditional sculpture. Many of its works are now in museums throughout the West, and were published as authentic by Cole and Ross” (yes, the same Doran Ross) in their classic catalogue, *The Arts of Ghana* (*P*, p. 29).

But then it is hard to be *sure* what would please a man who gives as his reason for picking another piece, this time a Senufo helmet mask, “I have to say that I picked this because I own it. It was given to me by President Houphouet Boigny of the Ivory Coast” (*P*, p. 143); or who remarks “concerning the market in African art”:

the best pieces are going for very high prices. Generally speaking, the less good pieces in terms of quality are not going up in price. And that’s a fine reason for picking the good ones rather than the bad. They have a way of becoming more valuable.

I look at African art as objects I find would be appealing to use in a home or an office. . . . I don’t think it goes with everything, necessarily—although the very best perhaps does. But I think it goes well with contemporary architecture. [*P*, p. 131]

There is something breathtakingly unpretentious in Rockefeller’s easy movement between considerations of finance, aesthetics, and decor. In these responses, we have surely a microcosm of the site of the African in contemporary—which is, then, surely to say, postmodern—America.

I have quoted so much from Rockefeller not to emphasize the familiar fact that questions of what we call “aesthetic” value are crucially bound up with market value, nor even to draw attention to the fact that this is known by those who play the art market. Rather I want to keep clearly before us the fact that David Rockefeller is permitted to say *anything at all* about the arts of Africa because he is a *buyer* and because he is at the *center*, while Lela Kouakou, who merely makes art and who dwells at the margins, is a poor African whose words count only as parts of the commodification²—both for those of us who consti-

2. I should insist now, the first time that I use this word, that I do not share the widespread negative evaluation of commodification; its merits, I believe, must be assessed case by case. Certainly critics such as Kobena Mercer (for example, in his “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *New Formations* 3 [Winter 1987]: 33–54) have persuasively criticized any reflexive rejection of the commodity form, which so often reinstates the hoary humanist opposition between the “authentic” and the “commercial.” Mercer explores the avenues by which marginalized groups have manipulated commodified artifacts in culturally novel and expressive ways.

tute the museum public and for collectors, like Rockefeller—of Baule art.³ I want to remind you, in short, of how important it is that African art is a *commodity*.

But the cocurator whose choice will set us on our way is James Baldwin, the only cocurator who picked a piece that was not in the mold of the Africa of "Primitivism." The sculpture that will be my touchstone is a Yoruba piece that carries the museum label, *Man with a Bicycle* (fig. 1). Here is some of what Baldwin said about it:

This is something. This has got to be contemporary. He's really going to town! It's very jaunty, very authoritative. His errand might prove to be impossible. . . . He is challenging something—or something has challenged him. He's grounded in immediate reality by the bicycle. . . . He's apparently a very proud and silent man. He's dressed sort of polyglot. Nothing looks like it fits him too well. [P, p. 125]

Baldwin's reading of this piece is, of course and inevitably, "in terms of [his] own . . . criteria," a reaction contextualized only by the knowledge that bicycles are new in Africa and that this piece, anyway, does not look anything like the works he recalls seeing from his earliest childhood at the Schomburg Museum in Harlem. His response torpedoes Vogel's argument for her notion that the only "authentically traditional" African—the only one whose responses, as she says, could have been found a century ago—must be refused a choice among Africa's art cultures because he—unlike the rest of the cocurators, who are Americans and the European-educated Africans—will use his "own . . . criteria." The message is that this Baule diviner, this authentically African villager, does not know what *we*, authentic postmodernists, now know: that the first and last mistake is to judge the Other on one's own terms. And so, in the name of this relativist insight, we impose our judgment: that Lela Kouakou may not judge sculpture from beyond the Baule culture zone, because he, like all the other African "informants" we have met in the field, will read them as if they were meant to meet those Baule standards.

Worse than this, it is nonsense to explain Kouakou's responses as deriving from an ignorance of other traditions—if indeed he is, as he no doubt is supposed to be, like most "traditional" artists today, if he is, for example, like Francis Akwasi of Kumasi. Kouakou may judge other artists by his own standards (what on earth else could he, could anyone, do save make no judgment at all?), but to suppose that he is unaware

3. Once Vogel has thus refused Kouakou a voice, it is less surprising that his comments turn out to be composite also. On closer inspection, it turns out that there is no single Lela Kouakou who was interviewed like the other cocurators. Kouakou is, in the end, quite exactly an invention, thus literalizing the sense in which "we," and more particularly "our" artists, are individuals while "they," and "theirs," are ethnic types.

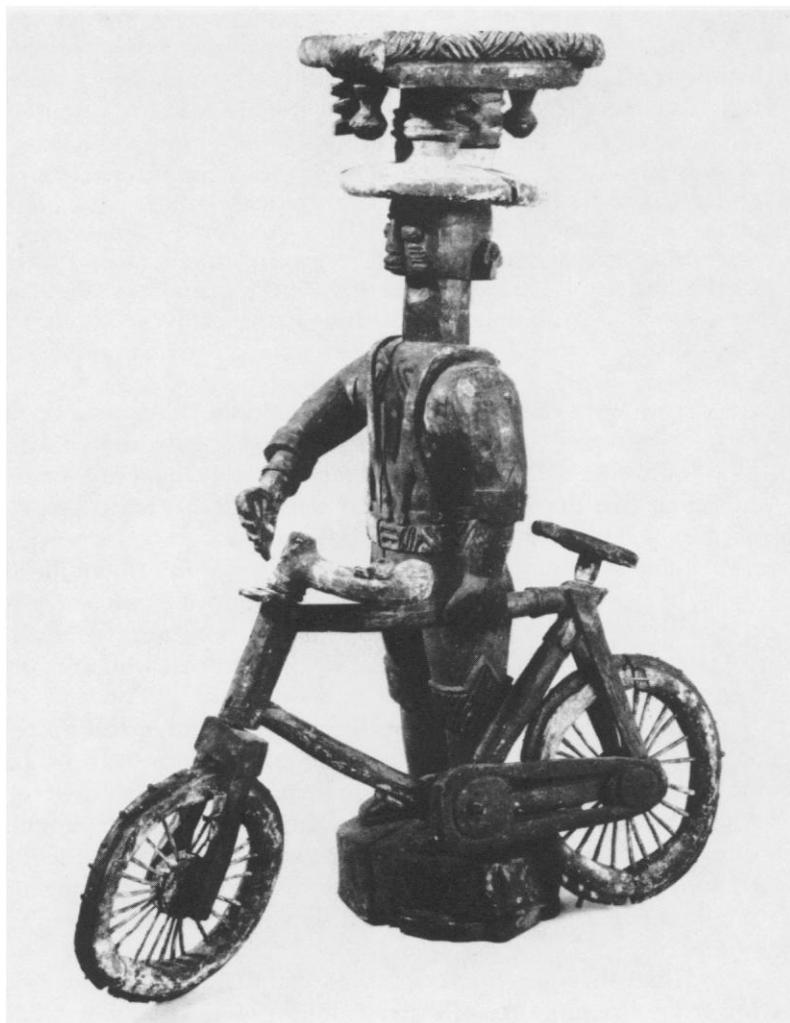


FIG. 1.—*Man with a Bicycle*, Yoruba, Nigeria, 20th century. Wood, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Collection of The Newark Museum, Purchase 1977 Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund and The Members' Fund. Photo: Jerry Thompson, 1986.

that there are other standards within Africa (let alone without) is to ignore a piece of absolutely basic cultural knowledge, common to most precolonial as well as to most colonial and postcolonial cultures on the continent: the piece of cultural knowledge that explains why the people we now call "Baule" exist at all. To be Baule, for example, is, for a Baule, not to be a white person, not to be Senufo, not to be French.⁴

But Baldwin's *Man with a Bicycle* does more than give the lie to Vogel's strange footnote; it provides us with an image that can serve as a point of entry to my theme, a piece of contemporary African art that will allow us to explore the articulation of the postcolonial and the postmodern. *Man with a Bicycle* is described as follows in the exhibition catalogue:

Man with a Bicycle
Yoruba, Nigeria 20th century
Wood and paint H. 35¼ in.
The Newark Museum

The influence of the Western world is revealed in the clothes and bicycle of this neo-traditional Yoruba sculpture which probably represents a merchant en route to market. [*P*, p. 23]

It is this word *neotraditional*—a word that is almost right—that provides, I think, the fundamental clue.

But I do not know how to explain this clue without first saying how I keep my bearings in the shark-infested waters around the semantic island of the postmodern. The task of chasing the word *postmodernism* through the pages of Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson and Jürgen Habermas, in and out of the *Village Voice* and the *TLS* and even the *New York Times Book Review* is certainly exhausting. Yet there is, I think, a story to tell about all these stories—or, of course, I should say, there are many, but this, for the moment, is mine—and, as I tell it, the Yoruba bicyclist will eventually come back into view.

I do not (this will come as no surprise) have a definition of the postmodern to put in the place of Jameson's or Lyotard's, but there is now a rough consensus about the structure of the modern/postmodern dichotomy in the many domains—from architecture to poetry to philosophy to rock music to the movies—in which it has been invoked. In each of these domains there is an antecedent practice that laid claim

4. It is absolutely crucial that Vogel does not draw her line according to racial or national categories: the Nigerian, the Senegalese, and the African-American cocurators are each allowed to be on "our" side of the great divide. The issue here is something less obvious than racism.

to a certain exclusivity of insight, and in each of them “postmodernism” is a name for the rejection of that claim to exclusivity, a rejection that is almost always more playful, though not necessarily less serious, than the practice it aims to replace. That this will not do as a *definition* of postmodernism follows from the fact that in each domain this rejection of exclusivity assumes a particular shape, one that reflects the specificities of its setting. To understand the various postmodernisms this way is to leave open the question of how their theories of contemporary social, cultural, and economic life relate to the actual practices that constitute that life—to leave open, then, the relations between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*.⁵

It is an important question *why* this distancing of the ancestors should have become so central a feature of our cultural lives. The answer surely has to do with the sense in which art is increasingly commodified. To sell oneself and one’s products as art in the marketplace, one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products—and one does this by the construction and the marking of differences. To create a market for bottled waters, for example, it was necessary, first, to establish that subtle (even untastable) differences in mineral content and source of carbonation were essential modes of distinction.

It is this need for distinctions in the market that accounts for a certain intensification of the long-standing individualism of post-Renaissance art production: in the age of mechanical reproduction, aesthetic individualism, the characterization of the artwork as belonging to the oeuvre of an individual, and the absorption of the artist’s life into the conception of the work can be seen precisely as modes of identifying objects for the market. The sculptor of the man with a bicycle, by contrast, will not be known by those who buy this object; his individual life will make no difference to the future history of his sculpture. (Indeed, he surely knows this, in the sense in which one knows anything whose negation one has never even considered.) Nevertheless, there is *something* about the object that serves to establish it for the market: the availability of Yoruba culture and of stories about Yoruba culture to surround the object and distinguish it from “folk art” from elsewhere.

Postmodern culture is the culture in which all postmodernisms operate, sometimes in synergy, sometimes in competition; and because contemporary culture is, in a certain sense to which I shall return,

5. Where the practice is theory—literary or philosophical—postmodernism as a *theory* of postmodernity can be adequate only if it reflects to some extent the realities of that practice, because the practice itself is fully theoretical. But when a postmodernism addresses, say, advertising or poetry, it may be adequate as an account of them even if it conflicts with their own narratives, their theories of themselves. For, unlike philosophy and literary theory, advertising and poetry are not largely *constituted* by their articulated theories of themselves.

transnational, postmodern culture is global—though that emphatically does not mean that it is the culture of every person in the world.

If postmodernism is the project of transcending some species of modernism, which is to say some relatively self-conscious, self-privileging project of a privileged modernity, our *neotraditional* sculptor of *Man with a Bicycle* is presumably to be understood, by contrast, as premodern, that is, traditional. (I am supposing, then, that being neotraditional is a way of being traditional; what work the *neo-* does is matter for a later moment.) And the sociological and anthropological narratives of tradition through which he or she came to be so theorized is dominated, of course, by Max Weber.

Weber's characterization of traditional (and charismatic) authority *in opposition* to rational authority is in keeping with his general characterization of modernity as the rationalization of the world; and he insisted on the significance of this characteristically Western process for the rest of humankind:

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value.⁶

Now there is certainly no doubt that Western modernity now has a universal *geographical* significance. The Yoruba bicyclist—like Sting and his Amerindian chieftains of the Amazon rain forest or Paul Simon and the Mbaqanga musicians of *Graceland*—is testimony to that. But, if I may borrow someone else's borrowing, the fact is that the Empire of Signs strikes back. Weber's "as we like to think" reflects his doubts about whether the Western *imperium* over the world was as clearly of universal *value* as it was certainly of universal *significance*; and postmodernism fully endorses his resistance to this claim. The man with a bicycle enters our museums to be valued by us (Rockefeller tells us *how* it is to be valued), but just as the *presence* of the object reminds us of this fact, its *content* reminds us that the trade is two-way.

I want to argue that to understand our—our human—modernity, we must first understand why the rationalization of the world can no longer be seen as the tendency either of the West or of history, why, simply put, the modernist characterization of modernity must be chal-

6. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 1930), p. 13.

lenged. To understand our world is to reject Weber's claim for the rationality of what he called rationalization and his projection of its inevitability; it is, then, to have a radically post-Weberian conception of modernity.

T. S. Eliot abhors the soullessness and the secularization of modern society, the reach of Enlightenment rationalism into the whole world. He shares Weber's account of modernity and more straightforwardly deplores it. Le Corbusier favors rationalization—a house is a “machine for living in”—but he, too, shares Weber's vision of modernity. And, of course, the great rationalists—the believers in a transhistorical reason triumphing in the world—from Kant on, are the source of Weber's Kantian vision. Modernism in literature, architecture, and philosophy—the account of modernity that, on my model, *post*modernism in these domains seeks to subvert—may be for reason or against it, but in each domain rationalization, the pervasion of reason, is seen as the distinctive dynamic of contemporary history.

But the beginning of postmodern wisdom is to ask whether Weberian rationalization is in fact what has occurred historically. For Weber, charismatic authority—the authority of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah—is antirational, yet modernity has been dominated by just such charisma. Secularization hardly seems to be proceeding: religions grow in all parts of the world; more than ninety percent of North Americans still avow some sort of theism; what we call “fundamentalism” is as alive in the West as it is in Africa and the Middle and Far East; Jimmy Swaggart and Billy Graham have business in Louisiana and California as well as in Costa Rica and Ghana.

What we can see in all these cases, I think, is not the triumph of Enlightenment Reason—which would have entailed exactly the end of charisma and the universalization of the secular—not even the penetration of a narrower instrumental reason into all spheres of life, but what Weber mistook for that: namely, the incorporation of all areas of the world and all areas of even formerly “private” life into the money economy. Even in domains like religion where instrumental reason would recognize that the market has at best an ambiguous place, modernity has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads “for sale.”

If Weberian talk of the triumph of instrumental reason can now be seen to be a mistake, the disenchantment of the world, that is, the penetration of a scientific vision of things, describes at most the tiny—and in the United States quite marginal—world of the higher academy and a few islands of its influence. What we have seen in recent times in the United States is not secularization—the end of religions—but their commodification; and with that commodification religions have reached further and grown—their markets have expanded—rather than died.

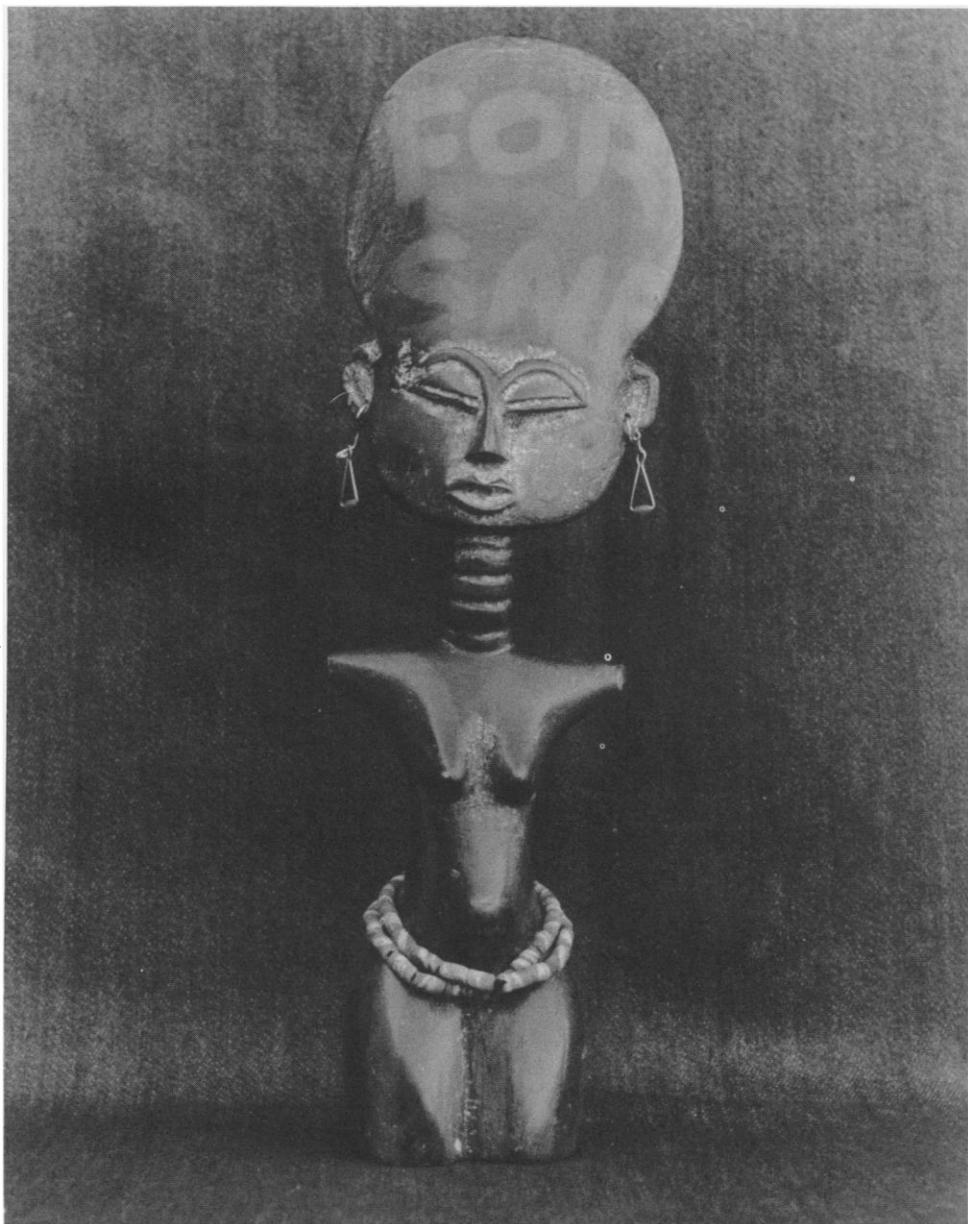


FIG. 2.—In August 1990, after I had completed this piece, I found this figure on sale at the Ghana National Cultural Center in Kumasi. It exemplifies and expresses my argument in ways too obvious to require spelling out. It is a “traditional” Akan *Akuaba* doll, a kind often sold to tourists. When I inquired who had carved it, the saleswoman pointed out a man who happened to be passing by outside the shop. He gave me his card, and so I am able to record that this piece (“from the collection of Anthony Appiah,” as the museum world might have it) is more importantly the work of Gyau Apraku, manager of Acarv Enterprise, a carver from Foase-Atwima in Ashanti. Photo: CCI Photographics.

Postmodernism can be seen, then, as a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space. Modernism saw the economization of the world as the triumph of reason; postmodernism rejects that claim, allowing in the realm of theory the same proliferation of distinctions that modernity had begun.

That, then, is how I believe the issue looks from here. But how does it look from the postcolonial spaces inhabited by *Man with a Bicycle*?

I shall speak about Africa, with confidence both that some of what I have to say will work elsewhere in the so-called Third World and that it will not work at all in some places. And I shall speak first about the producers of these so-called neotraditional artworks and then about the case of the African novel, because I believe that to focus exclusively on the novel (as theorists of contemporary African cultures have been inclined to do) is to distort the cultural situation and the significance of postcoloniality within it.

I do not know when *Man with a Bicycle* was made or by whom; African art has, until recently, been collected as the property of “ethnic” groups, not of individuals and workshops, so it is not unusual that not one of the pieces in the “Perspectives” show was identified in the checklist by the name of an individual artist, even though many of them are twentieth-century works. (And no one will be surprised, by contrast, that most of them *are* kindly labeled with the names of the people who own the largely private collections where they now live.) As a result I cannot say if the piece is literally postcolonial, produced after Nigerian independence in 1960. But the piece belongs to a genre that has certainly been produced since then: the genre that is here called *neotraditional*. Simply put, what is distinctive about this genre is that it is produced for the West.

I should qualify. Of course, many of the buyers of first instance live in Africa; many of them are juridically citizens of African states. But African bourgeois consumers of neotraditional art are educated in the Western style, and, if they want African art, they would often rather have a “genuinely” traditional piece, by which I mean a piece that they believe to be made precolonially, or at least in a style and by methods that were already established precolonially. These buyers are a minority. Most of this art—*traditional* because it uses actual or supposed precolonial techniques but *neo-* (this, for what it is worth, is the explanation I promised earlier) because it has elements that are recognizably colonial or postcolonial in reference—has been made for Western tourists and other collectors.

The incorporation of these works in the West’s museum culture and its art market has almost nothing, of course, to do with postmod-

ernism. By and large, the ideology through which they are incorporated is modernist: it is the ideology that brought something called "Bali" to Antonin Artaud, something called "Africa" to Pablo Picasso, and something called "Japan" to Roland Barthes. (This incorporation as an official Other was criticized, of course, from its beginnings: hence Oscar Wilde's observation that "the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.")⁷ What is post-modernist is Vogel's muddled conviction that African art should not be judged "in terms of [someone else's] traditional criteria." For modernism, primitive art was to be judged by putatively *universal* aesthetic criteria, and by these standards it was finally found possible to value it. The sculptors and painters who found it possible were largely seeking an Archimedean point outside their own cultures for a critique of a Weberian modernity. For *postmodernisms*, by contrast, these works, however they are to be understood, cannot be seen as legitimated by culture- and history-transcending standards.

The *neotraditional* object is useful as a model, despite its marginality in most African lives, because its incorporation in the museum world (as opposed to the many objects made by the same hands that live peacefully in nonbourgeois homes: stools, for example) reminds one that in Africa, by contrast, the distinction between high culture and mass culture, insofar as if it makes sense at all, corresponds, by and large, to the distinction between those with and those without Western-style formal education as cultural consumers.

The fact that the distinction is to be made this way—in most of sub-Saharan Africa, excluding the Republic of South Africa—means that the opposition between high culture and mass culture is available only in domains where there is a significant body of Western formal training. This excludes (in most places) the plastic arts and music. There are distinctions of genre and audience in African music, and for various cultural purposes there is something we call "traditional" music that we still practice and value; but village and urban dwellers alike, bourgeois and nonbourgeois, listen, through discs and, more important, on the radio, to reggae, to Michael Jackson, and to King Sonny Adé.

And this means that, by and large, the domain in which such a distinction makes the most sense is the one domain where that distinction is powerful and pervasive: namely, in African writing in Western languages. So that it is here that we find, I think, a place for consideration of the question of the *post*coloniality of contemporary African culture.

7. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," *Intentions* (London, 1909), p. 45.

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a *comprador* intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.

All aspects of contemporary African cultural life—including music and some sculpture and painting, even some writings with which the West is largely not familiar—have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies *through* colonialism, but they are not all in the relevant sense *postcolonial*. For the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture I characterized earlier, and many areas of contemporary African cultural life—what has come to be theorized as popular culture, in particular—are not in this way concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality. Indeed, it might be said to be a mark of popular culture that its borrowings from international cultural forms are remarkably insensitive to, not so much dismissive of as blind to, the issue of neocolonialism or “cultural imperialism.” This does not mean that theories of postmodernism are irrelevant to these forms of culture, for the internationalization of the market and the commodification of artworks are both central to them. But it *does* mean that these artworks are not understood by their producers or their consumers in terms of a postmodernism: there is no antecedent practice whose claim to exclusivity of vision is rejected through these artworks. What is called “syncretism” here is a consequence of the international exchange of commodities, but not of a space-clearing gesture.

Postcolonial intellectuals in Africa, by contrast, are almost entirely dependent for their support on two institutions: the African university, an institution whose intellectual life is overwhelmingly constituted as Western, and the Euro-American publisher and reader. Even when these writers seek to escape the West—as Ngugi wa Thiong’o did in attempting to construct a Kikuyu peasant drama—their theories of their situation are irreducibly informed by their Euro-American formation. Ngugi’s conception of the writer’s potential in politics is essentially that of the avant-garde, of left modernism.

Now this double dependence on the university and the European publisher means that the first generation of modern African novels—the generation of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*—were written in the context of notions of politics and culture dominant in the French and British university and publishing worlds in the 1950s and 1960s. This does not mean that they were like novels written in Western Europe at that time, for part of what was held to be obvious both by these writers and by the high culture of

Europe of the day was that new literatures in new nations should be anticolonial and nationalist. In one respect, these early novels seem to belong to the world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary nationalism; they are theorized as the imaginative recreation of a common cultural past that is crafted into a shared tradition by the writer. They are in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott, whose *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* was intended, as he said in the introduction, to "contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally."⁸ The novels of this first stage are thus realist legitimations of nationalism: they authorize a "return to traditions" while at the same time recognizing the demands of a Weberian rationalized modernity.

From the later sixties on, such celebratory novels become rare.⁹ For example, Achebe moves from the creation of a usable past in *Things Fall Apart* to a cynical indictment of politics in the modern sphere in *A Man of the People*. But I would like to focus on a francophone novel of the later sixties, a novel that thematizes in an extremely powerful way many of the questions I have been asking about art and modernity: I mean, of course, Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence*. This novel, like many of the second stage of which it is a part, represents a challenge to the novels of the first stage: it identifies the realist novel as part of the tactic of nationalist legitimation and so it is—if I may begin a catalogue of its ways-of-being—*post-this-and-that—postrealist*.

Now postmodernism is, of course, postrealist also. But Ouologuem's postrealism is motivated quite differently from that of such postmodern writers as, say, Thomas Pynchon. Realism naturalizes: the original "African novel," such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, is "realist." Therefore, Ouologuem is against it; he rejects, indeed assaults, the conventions of realism. He seeks to delegitimize the forms of the realist African novel, in part, surely, because what it sought to naturalize was a nationalism that, by 1968, had plainly failed. The national bourgeoisie that took the baton of rationalization, industrialization, and bureaucratization in the name of nationalism, turned out to be a kleptocracy. Their enthusiasm for nativism was a rationalization of their urge to keep the national bourgeoisies of other

8. Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads* (London, 1883), pp. 51–52.

9. Somewhat along these lines, Neil Lazarus's *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), pp. 1–26, offers a useful periodization of African fiction in relation to the "great expectations" of the independence era and the "mourning after."

nations, and particularly the powerful industrialized nations, out of their way. As Jonathan Ngate has observed, the world of *Le Devoir de violence* is one “in which the efficacy of the call to the Ancestors as well as the Ancestors themselves is seriously called into question.”¹⁰ That the novel is in this way postrealist allows its author to borrow, when he needs them, the techniques of modernism, which, as we learned from Jameson, are often also the techniques of postmodernism. It is helpful to remember at this point how Ouologuem is described on the back of the Éditions du Seuil first edition:

Né en 1940 au Mali. Admissible à l'École normale supérieure. Licencié ès Lettres. Licencié en Philosophie. Diplômé d'Études supérieures d'Anglais. Prépare une thèse de doctorat de Sociologie.¹¹

Borrowing from European modernism is hardly going to be difficult for someone so qualified. To be a Normalien is indeed, in Christopher Miller's charming formulation, “roughly equivalent to being baptized by Bossuet.”¹²

Miller's discussion of *Le Devoir de violence* in *Blank Darkness* focuses usefully on theoretical questions of intertextuality raised by the novel's persistent massaging of one text after another into the surface of its own body. Ouologuem's book contains, for example, a translation of a passage from Graham Greene's 1934 novel *It's a Battlefield* (translated and improved, according to some readers!) and borrowings from Guy de Maupassant's *Boule de Suif* (hardly an unfamiliar work to francophone readers; if this latter is a theft, it is the adventurous theft of the kleptomaniac, who dares us to catch him at it). The book's first sentence artfully establishes the oral mode, by then an inevitable convention of African narration, with words that Ngate rightly describes as having the “concision and the striking beauty and power of a proverb” (*FAF*, p. 64), and mocks us in this moment because the sentence echoes the beginning of André Schwarz-Bart's decidedly un-African 1959 Holocaust novel, *Le Dernier des justes*, an echo that more substantial later borrowings confirm.¹³

10. Jonathan Ngate, *Francoophone African Fiction: Reading a Literary Tradition* (Trenton, N.J., 1988), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated *FAF*.

11. Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence* (Paris, 1968), back cover; hereafter abbreviated *D*.

12. Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago, 1985), p. 218.

13. Ngate's focus on this initial sentence follows Aliko Songolo, “The Writer, the Audience and the Critic's Responsibility: The Case of *Bound to Violence*,” in *Artist and Audience: African Literature as a Shared Experience*, ed. Richard O. Priebe and Thomas Hale (Washington, D.C., 1979); cited in *FAF*, p. 64.

Nos yeux boivent l'éclat du soleil, et, vaincus, s'étonnent de pleurer. Maschallah! oua bismillah! . . . Un récit de l'aventure sanglante de la négraille—honte aux hommes de rien!—tiendrait aisément dans la première moitié de ce siècle; mais la véritable histoire des Nègres commence beaucoup, beaucoup plus tôt, avec les Saïfs, en l'an 1202 de notre ère, dans l'Empire africain de Nakem. [D, p. 9]

Nos yeux reçoivent la lumière d'étoiles mortes. Une biographie de mon ami Ernie tiendrait aisément dans le deuxième quart du xx^e siècle; mais la véritable histoire d'Ernie Lévy commence très tôt, . . . dans la vieille cité anglicane de York. Plus précisément: le 11 mars 1185.¹⁴

The reader who is properly prepared will expect an African holocaust. These echoes are surely meant to render ironic the status of the rulers of Nakem as descendants of Abraham El Héït, "le Juif noir" (D, p. 12).

The book begins, then, with a sick joke against nativism at the unwary reader's expense. And the assault on realism is—here is my second signpost—postnativist; this book is a murderous antidote to a nostalgia for *Roots*. As Wole Soyinka has said in a justly well-respected reading, "the Bible, the Koran, the historic solemnity of the griot are reduced to the histrionics of wanton boys masquerading as humans."¹⁵ It is tempting to read the attack on history here as a repudiation not of roots but of Islam, as Soyinka does when he goes on to say:

A culture which has claimed indigenous antiquity in such parts of Africa as have submitted to its undeniable attractions is confidently proven to be imperialist; worse, it is demonstrated to be essentially hostile and negative to the indigenous culture. . . . Ouologuem pronounces the Moslem incursion into black Africa to be corrupt, vicious, decadent, elitist and insensitive. At the least such a work functions as a wide swab in the deck-clearing operation for the commencement of racial retrieval.¹⁶

14. For this comparison I have made my own translations, which are as literal as possible:

Our eyes drink the flash of the sun, and, conquered, surprise themselves by weeping. Maschallah! oua bismillah! . . . An account of the bloody adventure of the nigger-trash—dishonor to the men of nothing—could easily begin in the first half of this century; but true history of the Blacks begins very much earlier, with the Saïfs, in the year 1202 of our era, in the African kingdom of Nakem. [D, p. 9; my emphasis]

*Our eyes receive the light of dead stars. A biography of my friend Ernie could easily begin in the second quarter of the 20th century; but the true history of Ernie Lévy begins much earlier, . . . in the old Anglican city of York. More precisely: on the 11 March 1185. [André Schwarz-Bart, *Le Dernier des justes* (Paris, 1959), p. 11; my emphasis]*

15. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge, 1976), p.

100.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

But it seems to me much clearer to read the repudiation as a repudiation of national history, to see the text as postcolonially postnationalist as well as anti- (and thus, of course, post-) nativist. Indeed, Soyinka's reading here seems to be driven by his own equally representative tendency to read Africa as race and place into everything.¹⁷

Raymond Spartacus Kassoumi—who is, if anyone is, the hero of this novel—is, after all, a son of the soil, but his political prospects by the end of the narrative are less than uplifting. More than this, the novel explicitly thematizes, in the anthropologist Shrobenius (an obvious echo of the name of the German Africanist Leo Frobenius, whose work is cited by Léopold Senghor) the mechanism by which the new elite has come to invent its traditions through the “science” of ethnography:

Saïf fabula et l'interprète traduisit, Madoubo répéta en français, raffinant les subtilités qui faisaient le bonheur de Shrobénius, écrevisse humaine frappée de la manie tâtonnante de vouloir ressusciter, sous couleur d'autonomie culturelle, un univers africain qui ne correspondait à plus rien de vivant; . . . il voulait trouver un sens métaphysique à tout. . . . Il considérait que la vie africaine était art pur. [*D*, p. 102]

Saif made up stories and the interpreter translated, Madoubo repeated in French, refining on the subtleties to the delight of Shrobenius, that human crayfish afflicted with a groping mania for resuscitating an African universe—cultural autonomy, he called it—which had lost all living reality; . . . he was determined to find metaphysical meaning in everything. . . . African life, he held, was pure art.¹⁸

At the start we had been told that “there are few written accounts, and the versions of the elders diverge from those of the griots, which differ in turn from those of the chroniclers” (*BV*, p. 6). Now we are warned off the supposedly scientific discourse of the ethnographers.¹⁹

Because *Le Devoir de violence* is a novel that seeks to delegitimize not only the form of realism but the content of nationalism, it will to that extent seem to us, misleadingly, postmodern: misleadingly, because what we have here is not postmodernism but postmodernization; not an

17. I have discussed this matter in “Soyinka and the Philosophy of Culture,” in *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives*, ed. P. O. Bodunrin (Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 1985), pp. 250–63.

18. Ouologuem, *Bound to Violence*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London, 1968), p. 87; hereafter abbreviated *BV*.

19. Here we have the literary thematization of the Foucauldian theory proposed by V. Y. Mudimbe in his important recent intervention, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988).

aesthetics but a politics, in the most literal sense of the term. After colonialism, the modernizers said, comes rationality; that is the possibility the novel rules out. Ouologuem's novel is typical of novels of this second stage in that it is not written by someone who is comfortable with and accepted by the new elite, the national bourgeoisie. Far from being a celebration of the nation, then, the novels of the second, postcolonial, stage are novels of delegitimation: they reject not only the Western *imperium* but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. And, so it seems to me, the basis for that project of delegitimation cannot be the postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal. Indeed it is based, as intellectual responses to oppression in Africa largely are based, in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years. Ouologuem is hardly likely to make common cause with a relativism that might allow that the horrifying new-old Africa of exploitation is to be understood, legitimated, in its own local terms.

Africa's postcolonial novelists, novelists anxious to escape neocolonialism, are no longer committed to the nation; in this they will seem, as I have suggested, misleadingly postmodern. But what they have chosen instead of the nation is not an older traditionalism but Africa—the continent and its people. This is clear enough, I think, in *Le Devoir de violence*. At the end of the novel Ouologuem writes:

Souvent il est vrai, l'âme veut rêver l'écho sans passé du bonheur. Mais, jeté dans le monde, l'on peut s'empêcher de songer que Saïf, pleuré trois millions de fois, renaît sans cesse a l'Histoire, sous les cendres chaudes de plus de trente Républiques africaines. [D, p. 207]

Often, it is true, the soul desires to dream the echo of happiness, an echo that has no past. But projected into the world, one cannot help recalling that Saif, mourned three million times, is forever reborn to history beneath the hot ashes of more than thirty African republics. [BV, pp. 181–82]

If we are to identify with anyone, it is with the “la négraille,” the niggertrash, who have no nationality. For them one republic is as good (which is to say as bad) as any other. Postcoloniality has become, I think, a condition of pessimism.

Postrealist writing, postnativist politics, a *transnational* rather than a *national* solidarity—and pessimism: a kind of *post*optimism to balance the earlier enthusiasm for Ahmadou Kourouma's *Suns of Independence*. Postcoloniality is *after* all this: and its *post*-, like that of postmodernism, is also a *post*- that challenges earlier legitimating narratives. And it challenges them in the name of the suffering victims of “more than thirty African republics.”

If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous *echt*-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writing that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without.

In *Le Devoir de violence*, in Ouologuem's withering critique of "Shrobénusologie," there were already the beginnings of this postcolonial critique of what we might call "alteritism," the construction and celebration of oneself as Other: "voilà l'art nègre baptisé 'esthétique' et marchandé—oye!—dans l'univers imaginaire des 'échanges vivifiants'!" (*D*, p. 110) ["henceforth Negro art was baptized 'aesthetic' and hawked in the imaginary universe of 'vitalizing exchanges'" (*BV*, p. 94)]. After describing the fantasmatic elaboration of some interpretative mumbo jumbo "invented by Saïf," Ouologuem then announces that "l'art nègre se forgeait ses lettres de noblesse au folklore de la spiritualité mercantiliste, oye oye oye" (*D*, p. 110) ["Negro art found its patent of nobility in the folklore of mercantile intellectualism, oye, oye, oye" (*BV*, p. 94)]. Shrobenius, the anthropologist, as apologist for "his" people; a European audience that laps up this exoticized Other; African traders and producers of African art, who understand the necessity to maintain the "mysteries" that construct their product as "exotic"; traditional and contemporary elites, who require a sentimentalized past to authorize their present power: all are exposed in their complex and multiple mutual complicities.

"témoin: la splendeur de son art—, la grandeur des empires du Moyen Age constituait le visage vrai de l'Afrique, sage, belle, riche, ordonnée, non violente et puissante tout autant qu'humaniste—berceau même de la civilisation égyptienne."

Salivant ainsi, Shrobénus, de retour au bercail, en tira un double profit: d'une part, il mystifia son pays, qui, enchanté, le jucha sur une haute chair sorbonicale, et, d'autre part, il exploita la sentimentalité négrillarde—par trop heureuse de s'entendre dire par un Blanc que "l'Afrique était ventre du monde et berceau de civilisation".

La négraille offrit par tonnes, conséquemment et gratis, masques et trésors artistiques aux acolytes de la "shrobénusologie". [*D*, p. 111]

"witness the splendor of its art—the true face of Africa is the grandiose empires of the Middle Ages, a society marked by wisdom, beauty, prosperity, order, nonviolence, and humanism, and it is here that we must seek the true cradle of Egyptian civilization."

Thus drooling, Shrobenius derived a twofold benefit on his return home: on the one hand, he mystified the people of his own country who in their enthusiasm raised him to a lofty Sorbonnal chair, while on the other hand he exploited the sentimentality of the coons, only too pleased to hear from the mouth of a white man that Africa was “the womb of the world and the cradle of civilization.”

In consequence the niggertrash donated masks and art treasures by the ton to the acolytes of “Shrobeniusology.” [BV, pp. 94–95]

A little later, Ouologuem articulates more precisely the interconnections of Africanist mystifications with tourism and the production, packaging, and marketing of African artworks.

Une école africaniste ainsi accrochée aux nues du symbolisme magico-religieux, cosmologique et mythique, était née: tant et si bien que durant trois ans, des hommes—et quels hommes!: des fantoches, des aventuriers, des apprentis banquiers, des politiciens, des voyageurs, des conspirateurs, des chercheurs—“scientifiques”, dit-on, en vérité sentinelles asservies, montant la garde devant le monument “shrobénusologique” du pseudo-symbolisme nègre, accoururent au Nakem.

Déjà, l’acquisition des masques anciens était devenue problématique depuis que Shrobénus et les missionnaires connurent le bonheur d’en acquérir en quantité. Saïf donc—et la pratique est courante de nos jours encore—fit enterrer des quintaux de masques hâtivement exécutés à la ressemblance des originaux, les engloutissant dans des mares, marais, étangs, marécages, lacs, limons—quitte à les exhumer quelque temps après, les vendant aux curieux et profanes à prix d’or. Ils étaient, ces masques, vieux de trois ans, *chargés*, disait-on, *du poids de quatre siècles de civilisation*. [D, p. 112]

An Africanist school harnessed to the vapors of magico-religious, cosmological, and mythical symbolism had been born: with the result that for three years men flocked to Nakem—and what men!—middlemen, adventurers, apprentice bankers, politicians, salesmen, conspirators—supposedly “scientists,” but in reality enslaved sentries mounting guard before the “Shrobeniusological” monument of Negro pseudosymbolism.

Already it had become more than difficult to procure old masks, for Shrobenius and the missionaries had had the good fortune to snap them all up. And so Saïf—and the practice is still current—had slapdash copies buried by the hundredweight, or sunk into ponds, lakes, marshes, and mud holes, to be exhumed later on and sold at exorbitant prices to unsuspecting curio hunters. These three-year-old masks were said to be *charged with the weight of four centuries of civilization*. [BV, pp. 95–96]

Ouologuem here forcefully exposes the connections we saw earlier in some of Rockefeller's insights into the international system of art exchange, the international art world: we see the way in which an ideology of disinterested aesthetic value—the "baptism" of "Negro art" as "aesthetic"—meshes with the international commodification of African expressive culture, a commodification that requires, by the logic of the space-clearing gesture, the manufacture of Otherness. (It is a significant bonus that it also harmonizes with the interior decor of contemporary apartments.) Shrobenius, "ce marchand-confectionneur d'idéologie," the ethnographer allied with Saif—image of the "traditional" African ruling caste—has invented an Africa that is a body over against Europe, the juridical institution; and Ouologuem is urging us vigorously to refuse to be thus Other.

Sara Suleri has written recently, in *Meatless Days*, of being treated as an "otherness machine"—and of being heartily sick of it.²⁰ Perhaps the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual is simply that *as* intellectuals—a category instituted in black Africa by colonialism—we are, indeed, always at the risk of becoming otherness machines, with the manufacture of alterity as our principal role. Our only distinction in the world of texts to which we are latecomers is that we can mediate it to our fellows. This is especially true when postcolonial meets postmodern; for what the postmodern reader seems to demand of Africa is all too close to what modernism—in the form of the postimpressionists—demanded of it. The rôle that Africa, like the rest of the Third World, plays for Euro-American postmodernism—like its better-documented significance for modernist art—must be distinguished from the rôle postmodernism might play in the Third World; what that might be it is, I think, too early to tell. What happens will happen not because we pronounce on the matter in theory, but will happen out of the changing everyday practices of African cultural life.

For all the while, in Africa's cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease, and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music, and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies, and the many traditions whose evidences so vigorously remain, is an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist.

20. Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (Chicago, 1989), p. 105.

And I am grateful to James Baldwin for his introduction to the *Man with a Bicycle*, a figure who is, as Baldwin so rightly saw, polyglot—speaking Yoruba and English, probably some Hausa and a little French for his trips to Cotonou or Cameroon, someone whose “clothes do not fit him too well.” He and the other men and women among whom he mostly lives suggest to me that the place to look for hope is not just to the postcolonial novel, which has struggled to achieve the insights of Ouologuem or Mudimbe, but to the all-consuming vision of this less-anxious creativity. It matters little whom the work was made *for*; what we should learn from is the imagination that produced it. *Man with a Bicycle* is produced by someone who does not care that the bicycle is the white man’s invention: it is not there to be Other to the Yoruba Self; it is there because someone cared for its solidity; it is there because it will take us further than our feet will take us; it is there because machines are now as African as novelists . . . and as fabricated as the kingdom of Nakem.²¹

21. I learned a good deal from trying out earlier versions of these ideas at an NEH Summer Institute on “The Future of the Avant-Garde in Postmodern Culture,” under the direction of Susan Suleiman and Alice Jardine at Harvard in July 1989; at the African Studies Association (under the sponsorship of the Society for African Philosophy in North America) in November 1989, where Jonathan Ngate’s response was particularly helpful; and, as the guest of Ali Mazrui, at the Braudel Center at SUNY-Binghamton in May 1990. As usual, I wish I knew how to incorporate more of the ideas of the discussants on those occasions.