

Modernist art

Tam-tam in the urban jungle

The Parisian avant-garde view of Blacks in the 1920s and 30s

Reading Petrine Archer-Straw's *Negrophilia: avant-garde Paris and Black culture in the 1920s* makes one realise that nothing much has changed since the interwar Jazz Age she describes: the black image and how the desires it arouses are used to sell.

Negrophilia offers an engaged, while generally empirical, account of 1920s Paris, which involved "packaging the primitive" in all its dimensions: the worlds of advertising, fashion, photography, the collecting and con-

noisseurship of African art and its impact on a Picasso or a Matisse, black American jazz and the highlife world of "other" lovers.

Ms Archer-Straw, a Jamaica-based, Courtauld-trained art historian, writes with "another voice, one that is collective and non-European, the 'we' that has been muted in the past". While asserting the black model "not as something alien and other, but as integral to the European experience of modernity", she attempts to engage imaginatively with the lived experiences of these dou-

bly deracinated Black performers, whose individual, generally urban, American histories and identities, hopes and fantasies confronted on a daily basis totally alien and alienating stereotypes: the grinning cartoon cannibals of a Paul Colin. Any structural analysis of the *nègre* image would indeed reveal a core of belief in white supremacy based on evolutionism and degeneracy theory. The desire of the jazz musician or dancer to be cultural insiders was confounded, however, by "members of the white Avant-garde who were

striving to be outsiders"—a rather sweeping characterisation of the elite circles of a Man Ray or Nancy Cunard. Yet the author's "negrophilia"/"racism" dichotomy is surely not complex enough as a model to account for the modalities and slippages of the emotions of desire for and fear of the dark other—what Sarat Maharaj has recently characterised as the vortex where xenophilia and xenophobia meet.

The focus in *Negrophilia* is exclusive: the African-American influx of the 1920s

is not situated within the context of Paris's continually expanding immigré populations, such as the Russians and Eastern Europeans who, just like the *nègres* and the totality of French womanhood—similarly disenfranchised—were all essential players in the metropolis. And Paris enjoyed short lived passions for alternative exoticisms, the Tutankhamun craze, for example, at the same time as

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Onstage and offstage, it is the dancer, not the dance who fascinates Ms Archer-Straw, whereas Jody Blake's *Le tumulte noir: Modernist art and popular entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-30* has a broader-ranging formal interest in jazz music and the dance itself, and their impact upon the ideologies underlying what by 1925 were already known as *les ismes de l'art*. Dr Blake contextualises Parisian modernism within a detailed reception history of jazz music itself, persuasively suggesting music's priority with regard to the fine-art responses it may have provoked. Her deliberately conventional structure frames a daring rewriting; the richest

repressive behaviour in Indochina—not Algeria or the Moroccan protectorates, let alone black Africa—which precipitated the Surrealists' "anti-show" and manifesto: "Don't visit the colonial exhibition" in

1931. Ms Archer-Straw's analysis of the ephemera of "negrophilic" Paris and its "racism" is not counterpointed by an acknowledgement of

the seriousness of the intellectual project of a Marcel Griaule, a Marcel Mauss, or even the poet Blaise Cendrars who compiled the *Anthologie nègre* in 1919, with its African creation myths so uncomfortably close to the biblical account in Genesis. An uneasy relationship with colonial conquest and competitive imperatives within the discipline must bedevil all anthropologists, and bad faith necessarily afflicts any traveller, including a Georges Bataille or Michel Leiris, whose enterprise goes beyond mere tourism. For example, Ms Archer-Straw's classic chapter in *Negrophilia* on "the darker side of Surrealism", a comprehensive, sensitive, judiciously illustrated résumé, nonethe-

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daring rewriting, the richest possible usage of primary and secondary source material reinvigorates the tired orthodoxies of "high" versus "low", modern art versus "popular culture". Here, Primitivism, Orphism, Dada, Call to Order, Surrealism and Purism involve "Taking the cake", "Tam-tam in the urban jungle", "Ragging the war", "Bamboula in the Temple of Auguste Perret", "Jamming on the rue Fontaine" and "Toeing the line" respectively. The dialectical nature of Blake's argument is always emphasised: World War I survivors "torn between mourning and celebration, guilt and relief, or what Philippe Soupault called the 'euphoria of lust for life and of will for oblivion' which found 'perversely contradictory responses to a jazz which mirrored the relentless rhythms of the artillery or of the modern factory.'"

Polite in its exhaustive acknowledgement of scholarly predecessors (Kenneth Silver, Rosalind Krauss, James Clifford etc), this book nonetheless feels new, emphasising the importance of music and rhythm as sung, danced and lived experience, echoed in the black/white, zig-zag contrapuntal visuals of the art world. The sheer quantity and quality of African-American and African jazz bands, players, dancers, singers in Paris was astonishing.

Neither book gives as background a sufficiently comprehensive overview of France's economic and political relationship with its diverse colonial territories. It was France's

illustrated resume, nonetheless implicitly denounces as "morbid fascination" the interests of Bataille and Leiris in "death, suicide, sado-masochism, ritual sacrifice, cannibalism and raw violence." Matters such as the problem of interracial intersubjectivity, the relationship between the visceral and intellectual, and how witnessing these experiences might impact upon literature, upon the very practice of writing—all equally grave—are not addressed.

"Nous sommes au Louvre" chanted the African sculptures, like so many speaking cartoon characters, on posters for the installation of objects from Africa in that sacred European treasure house at the millennium. Will the French, and specifically Parisian, history of negrophilia, its inversions and its slippages be acknowledged in Jean Nouvel's projected Musée du quai Branly, which is designed to replace the cluster of marquees presently sheltering dubious Salons beneath the Eiffel Tower?

This history, concomitant with the beginnings of French colonial expansion, while nicely contained by reflections upon Baker and the Jazz Age, has a *longue durée* continuing to now. It requires far more than a rebaptising of *arts primitifs* as *arts premiers* if the State Ministry for Culture and *la francophonie* dare a genuine confrontation of chequered past and present in its new museum.

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Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: avant-garde Paris and Black culture in the 1920s* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2000), 200 pp, 123 b/w ills, £14.95 (pb) ISBN 0500281351

Jody Blake, *Le tumulte noir: Modernist art and popular entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-30* (The University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999), 207 pp, 94 b/w ills, 8 col. ills, £19.00 (hb) ISBN 027101753