

The Primitive & Us

Val Salvo (Peter Werbe

1990

a review of

Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives by Marianna Torgovnick, University of Chicago, 1990, 328 pp.

Gone Primitive is about the cliched, figurative concepts (now fashionably called “tropes” in academic, literary deconstructive and critical theory circles) of the primitive which haunt the modern West. However, the actual intricate complexities of the primitive societies not yet physically or culturally obliterated are of no real interest to most Western observers and never have been. According to Torgovnick, the fascination with those who the European invaders conquered and later came to see as discrete objects for inquiry, furnish a disguised way to talk about Western power relationships, particularly the issues of gender and sexuality.

The author surveys literature as diverse as Tarzan, the writings of Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, tracks attitudes towards primitive art, and looks critically at anthropologists Levi-Strauss, Mead, and Malinowski. She even assesses the contents of Freud’s study to suggest that the Western discourse on primitivism discloses a discomfort with modern life, yet has always been utilized to maintain the hierarchies it has fostered.

The tropes embedded in the literature and anthropology Torgovnick surveys express a seeming longing to shed the integuments of civilization, yet ultimately affirm Western, white male dominance over women and minorities. She cites Marxist literary theorist Georg Lukacs’ phrase, “transcendental homelessness,” a yearning for connectedness, community and a sacred sense of the planet and life missing in Western society, as creating this century’s interest in the primitive.

The roots of this “homelessness” originate with the introduction of state society and monotheistic religion. Frederick Turner’s *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* powerfully illustrates that once solidarity with the earth and its creatures is lost, only the will to power remains.

Although Torgovnick states that Western concepts of the primitive are frequently used as a mirror in which modern society examines itself, she mentions only in passing the radical primitivism such as is regularly expressed in these pages. However, I think our primitivism may qualify no less to her as a trope—a reduction of complex cultures with histories of their own to a crystallization of the values we wish to express in our lives.

We cite the primitive as an affirmation of gender equality, sexual expressiveness and egalitarian social relationships—in other words, a world apart from the dominant tropes Torgovnick is critical of, but this might not satisfy her. Her argument in part is that the inherent objectification of the primitive in literature, art and anthropology is self-serving for the West and maintains its cultural arrogance. The presumed superiority contained in the act of one culture studying another (it certainly is not reciprocal activity) may be but another element of the museumizing of disappearing cultures no matter how good the intentions.

I appreciate her warnings and agree that care must be taken when viewing other cultures through Western eyes, but I think the motivation for interest in the primitive is important. I’ll continue to read radical anthropology, if for no other reason, than the solace gained in learning about other cultures whose values and way of life directly contradict the contemporary West’s attempt to universalize its dominance.

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