The New Primitives

Primitivism is back, not that it ever left. Ben Etherington on the historical and contemporary notions of primitivism.

Ben Etherington

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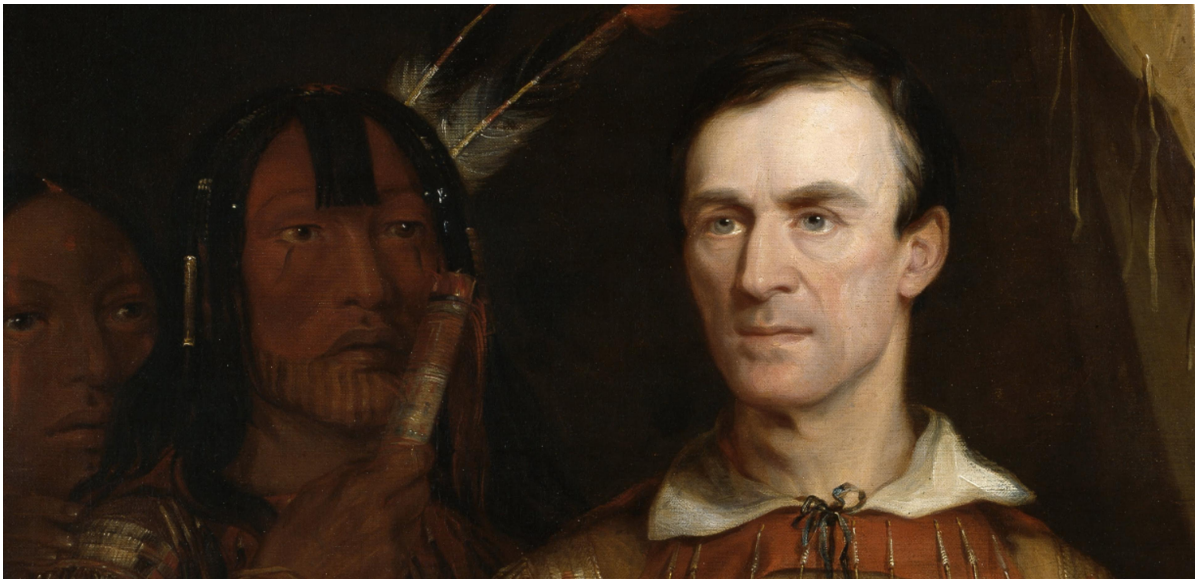

THE IDEA FOR the Na'vi, the made-up humanoid species indigenous to the planet Pandora in James Cameron's 2009 primitivist blockbuster *Avatar*, came to the director via his mother. In the 1970s, she told her son about a dream of a 12-foot blue woman, and this formed the basis for the brief he would deliver to his designers 30 years later. The Na'vi were to be blue, tall, muscular, sleek, and feline. They had to be alien enough to be plausibly otherworldly, but take a form, the concept artist Jordu Schell recalled Cameron stipulating, that "the audience has to want to fuck." Among other things, this meant that the film's female Na'vi lead, Neytiri, had "to have tits" even though, Cameron freely admitted to *Playboy*, the Na'vi are not placental mammals. As he developed prototypes, Schell pinned up pictures of "beautiful ethnic women" to ensure that his feline aliens would reflect the ids of the teenage boys who made up the film's key demographics.

The plot of the film follows the tested formula of primitivist transformation. A man of civilization, in this case the paraplegic US marine Jake Sully, is sent to colonize the primitive lands beyond civilization's perimeter only himself to "go primitive" after learning of their innocent beauty and recognizing the barbarism of his own destructive civilization. It's a structure that underlies other blockbusters like *Dances with Wolves*, its sci-fi equivalents, and numerous journey-into-the-interior classics (especially the work of Joseph Conrad). Eros is built into this formula. Coition marks the point at which the civilized man gives himself over to the primitive tribe and discovers, or recovers, his primitive self. Primitivist utopias, in short, are fuckable utopias.

Avatar played with this formula by having the mind of its primitivist hero transmuted into a Na'vi body — the "avatar" of the title. After he has been initiated into the tribe, consummated his relationship with Neytiri, and successfully defended the Na'vi against the human colonizers, Jake abandons his human form and bonds himself permanently to his avatar. Combined with the film's pioneering use of stereoscopic 3D,

Avatar gave new gloss to an old idea: that humans disaffected by urban civilization will recover their authentic selves by reuniting with nature. The idea is also autoerotic. It suggests that we desire the self from which we have become separated. James Cameron knew this just as well as the Neolithic Middle Eastern mythologizers who enshrined a naked couple living in a garden of untamed abundance at the center of their creation story. Evidently, the formula works: Abrahamic religions dominate the world, and *Avatar* remains the highest-grossing film ever.

The first of four sequels to *Avatar* is in production. Each will break new records for production costs and will appear amid what, a decade later, we can now recognize as a resurgence of primitivism in popular culture and radical politics. This has washed into the general consciousness largely in the form of nutrition fads and life hacks. There is, of course, the ubiquitous paleo diet, which emulates the carnivorous dietary intake of Paleolithic humans on the basis that our DNA evolved to support this form of life. This joins a plethora of other kinds of "nutritional primitivism." There is also the fashion for running without shoes and other shortcuts to attaining the physical advantages attributed to non-sedentary forms of life; and then the frequently reported experiments with psychedelic spiritual remedies, living off the grid, and embedding with societies labeled "hunter-gatherer." Social media, in the meantime, has enabled radicals dedicated to anti-civilizational ideology to band together and disseminate practical advice on returning to nature or even becoming a hermit. Underlying all these trends is the promise of a truer, more natural self — a self that modern life has compromised.

Among utopian ideas, primitivism is distinctive for its reverse teleology. Marx's communist society or the techno-utopias of Silicon Valley are premised on transcendence. When workers own the factories or robots do the menial labor, humans will be free to pursue their inmost desires. For primitivists, humans have previously achieved this state, and our urgent project is to restore it. We are to move forward into our past; or, equally, backward into our future. Primitivists thus spend a lot of time seeking out and heralding the evidence of the societies which they suppose lived (or live) in this state of grace. These might be lodged in religious mythology, the archaeological record beneath our feet, or some notional society beyond the frontier of civilization that hasn't made the same grave errors that we have.

Primitivists are therefore prone to render theory and speculation as fact. This spans the religious dogmatists who insist on the real historical existence of Eden to the hard-core paleo nutritionists who hang their notions of health and vigor on DNA evidence of Paleolithic peoples. Such appeals to fact are a distraction, though, for primitivism is always an imaginative act. In the period when the European empires were expanding, metropolitan radicals imagined that the "savages" from regions that they had yet to colonize were the truly "noble" ones. The images they produced to imagine these societies typically represented them in the guise of a romanticized Greek antiquity. As this European social and economic system reached global saturation, the frontier between civilized and primitive shifted permanently into a chronological

mode; or, as with films like *Avatar*, it was pushed outward to distant galaxies. Like the capitalism that fuels it, the basic law of primitivist idealism is its constant expansion.

In truth, primitivism doesn't tell us anything meaningful about the forms of life that are idealized as being "primitive." Our distant ancestors may have eaten a lot of protein, but it is dissatisfaction with the life centered on a grain-based diet that gives rise to the judgment that paleo diets are more natural. Put another way, primitivism is a manifestation of civilizational self-hatred. It is a creative pathology that makes lurid visions from the evidence of a self that we are convinced that we have lost, but which is nevertheless our inmost essential being. So why is primitivism again gaining traction? How does the hatred of civilization express itself in our time? In a world seemingly saturated by "civilization," who now are the civilized and who the primitives?

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At around the time that the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded in Northern Ukraine in 1986, Christopher Knight pulled his car off to the side of the road in his native Maine, threw the keys away, and walked into the woods. As far as anyone knew, the reserved 20-year-old had either killed himself or started a new life elsewhere. Five years ago, however, Knight was caught stealing provisions from a holiday camp just miles from his family home. In the intervening 27 years, he had lived in utter solitude in a makeshift house of tarpaulin and old magazines constructed in a clearing between boulders.

It was one of those stories that everyone paid attention to for a day and soon forgot about. Not the journalist Michael Finkel. He initiated a correspondence with Knight as the hermit awaited trial. Finkel later visited him, uninvited, in jail. He wrote a lengthy article about Knight for *GQ* magazine, which he later expanded into a best-selling book, *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* (2017). As the title indicates, Finkel is keen to cast Knight's solitude as a world-historical feat. Knight was no less than "the most solitary known person in all of human history," his capture, "the human equivalent of netting a giant squid."

The Stranger in the Woods is as much a morality tale about the civilization that Knight turned his back on as it is a curiosity story; in it, we glimpse the motions of contemporary primitivism. Knight's remarkable act of solitude is set within the narrative casing of Finkel's dogged pursuit of him and determination to turn him into an exemplar. Along with his letter of introduction, Finkel included an article he had published with *National Geographic*. It recounts a fortnight he spent living with a community of Hadza hunter-gatherers in the Rift Valley in Tanzania.

"Our genus," Finkel explains in *The Stranger in the Woods*, "all lived like Onwas, in small bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers." Although this meant living perpetually in the company of others, Finkel nevertheless wants to make the connection to Knight's hermithood. Like hermits, hunter-gatherers "spent significant parts of their lives surrounded by quiet, either alone or with a few others [...] This is who we truly are." In

turning his back on civilization, so the narrative logic goes, Knight was attempting to recover his true humanity. The book ends with a brief account of a 2007 story about the "last survivor of an Amazon tribe." For 20 years this man had been persisting alone in his accustomed form of life. With Knight returned to civilization, Finkel closes, this man now "may be the most isolated person in the world."

The connection between Knight and groups persisting in non-sedentary forms of life in the jungles of South America and deserts of Africa is tenuous to say the least. Knight subsisted almost entirely on take-home meals and junk food that holiday-makers stored in their holiday cabins. (Insofar as he lived by raiding, Knight was more barbarian than hunter-gatherer.) He read books, watched TV, listened to the radio, and tended his home. His camp was just a three-minute walk from the nearest cabin. The thieving aside, there are, no doubt, hundreds of reclusive individuals are living in comparable solitude across North America. Yet Finkel is keen to locate him on the other side of an invisible frontier where he joins the world's hunter-gatherers and hard-core hermits, past and present.

In spite of decades, if not centuries, of sensational claims about "last" tribes and the assumption that the boundary between the civilized and the primitive would melt away as the former subsumed the latter, the belief in that boundary has been remarkably durable. Finkel is just one of many who recently have made the act of crossing this line into a spectacle for mainstream media and trade publishers: Tim Spector has reported on living for three days with the Hadza to test the benefits on his gut health; Paul Willis has tried being a hermit; and Sarah Marquis has discussed her three months on "Aboriginal walkabout" in northwest Australia. There have been stories about a Dutch-New Zealand couple who have lived a self-fashioned hunter-gatherer type of existence, on the back of a trade book recounting the experience. The publisher has no qualms describing the author as "living a primitive, nomadic life."

Such experiments conducted for the sake of a self-help book or a TED talk are not really primitivism, though. They sit in an adjacent tradition of philo-primitivism — a more toe-dipping, holidaying encounter with the primitive. The civilized temporarily recover their natural selves so that they be able to live more truly in civilization. Such philo-primitivist entrepreneurship has a long history. To take one example, the American artist George Catlin spent much of the 1830s "roaming" territory beyond the American colonial frontier where he painted hundreds of portraits of the indigenous people he encountered. He later used these for a traveling road show recounting his time "amongst the wildest tribes." Catlin hoped that the "doomed" Indians might yet be "preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a *magnificent park* [...] [a] thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens." Here is Finkel in 2009: "[the Hadza] made me feel calmer, more attuned to the moment, more self-sufficient, a little braver [...] It made me wish there was some way to prolong the reign of the hunter-gatherers, though I know it's almost certainly too late."

More determinedly primitivist thinkers and actors do not want to improve their civilized selves but destroy them, targeting the institutions and infrastructure of civi-

lization. Fifteen years before Knight wandered into the woods, the young mathematics professor Theodore Kaczynski set up in a cabin off the grid in Western Montana, intent on becoming entirely self-sufficient. A few years later he began the famous letter-bomb campaign that culminated in blackmailing the American press into publishing his primitivist essay "Industrial Society and Its Future." These events have been dramatized in a recent Discovery Channel series. The same actor who played Jake Sully in *Avatar*, the Australian Sam Worthington, plays the FBI profiler James Fitzgerald, who becomes seduced by Kaczynski's anti-civilizational ideas as he investigates him. (Something about Worthington's chiseled yet candid features evidently appeals as having a latent primitivism.)

All the ideas in Kaczynski's essay are grounded in an underlying distinction between "primitive" and "civilized." The language has a distinctly 1960s ring. It pitches "primitive man" against "the system" (a term used 140 times) that compels "obedience" and reduces humans to slaving for "the machines." In one respect, though, it looks forward to contemporary primitivism. The positive ideal motivating his call to revolution is "WILD nature." This refers to "those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control." Years before the notion of the Anthropocene gained wide currency, Kaczynski identified humanity's impact on the globe's ecology as being the Earth's most fundamental problem. And his counter-ideal of the "wild" has become the key notion for hard-core contemporary primitivists. They conceive of primitivism's reverse teleology as being a process of "rewilding." Internet groups with thousands of members compare techniques about how to go wild and get into ideological disputes about what this really means.

For the rewilders, the problems of disease, social inequality, and ecological crisis do not date to the advent of modern industrial capitalism but to agriculture and permanent domicile around 10,000 years ago. There followed the whole apparatus of "civilization" (the system!) and the global process by which humans reshaped the world to support this form of life. For the most extreme of the rewilders, the self-described "anarcho-primitivist" John Zerzan, the "monstrously wrong turn" was made even earlier. He believes the perils of civilization were initiated by "symbolic culture," by which he means the production of abstract systems of representation such as language, art, and mathematics. Accordingly, anarcho-primitivism proposes an end to all religion, all art, all language, all conceptions of chronological time, and all the conditions of production stemming from agriculture.

Not all primitivist arguments are as speculative or tendentious as those of Kaczynski and Zerzan. In his recent *Affluence without Abundance*, the anthropologist James Suzman carefully describes the way of life that empowered the Ju/'hoansi to live sustainably in the Kalahari Desert of Southern Africa for tens of thousands of years. This is an important story to tell, he explains, "because there are so few 'wild' spaces left, and because maybe we can learn from understanding how [Scott's Ju/'hoansi acquaintance's] ancestors had lived." In a similar ideological vein, James C. Scott's *Against*

the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States seeks to demolish the notion that the development of planting and harvesting crops in and of itself led humans to set about creating agricultural civilization. He points to evidence that there was as much as a 6,000-year gap between the time when humans in the Fertile Crescent started integrating planting and harvesting into their cycles of food production and the time when they began organizing themselves solely around agriculture. The villain, Scott concludes, was not agriculture but the development of the state. It was the state's need for a measurable, dividable, storable, and visible crop for effective taxation that kicked off civilization and its associated ills.

Crucial for Suzman, Scott, and especially Zerzan is the conviction that humans practicing hunter-gatherer forms of life *deliberately* refused agricultural civilization. Most of our ancestors, they maintain, looked into the abyss of disease and machines and said, "No thanks." The current state of affairs thus is cast as an aberration foisted on humanity by the few who have benefited from it. The primitivist's task is to recover and reassert the agency that gave us the wisdom to live wild and stay wild.

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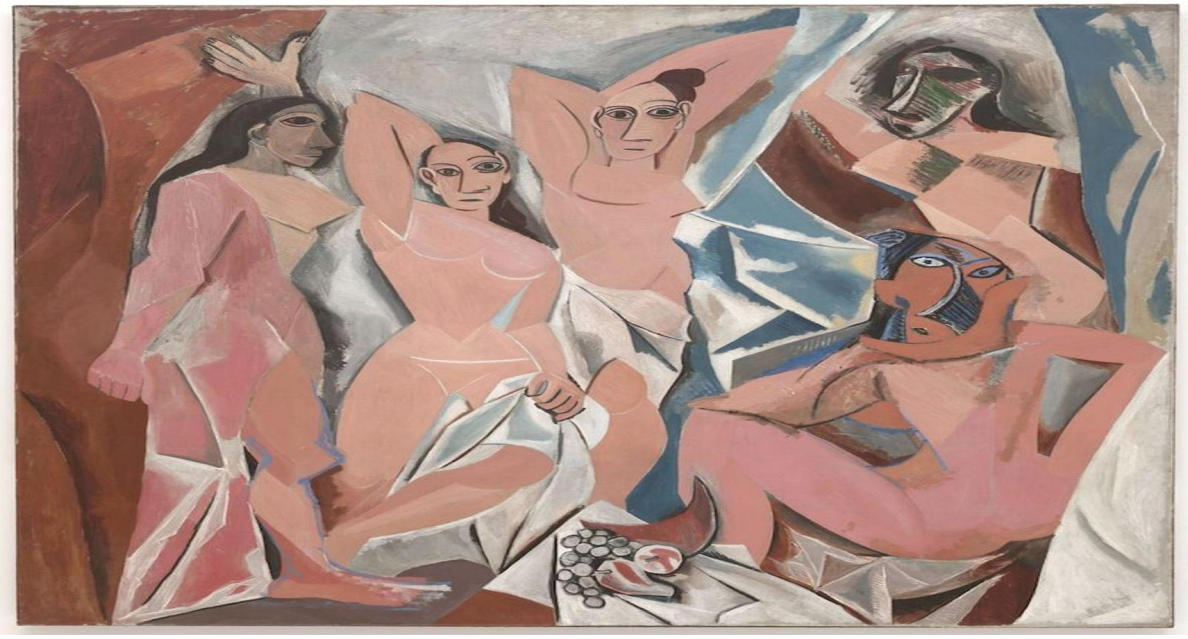
Five naked women strike poses on a platform between large drapes. The two standing frontally have pink faces that are consistent in color and form with their bodies. The head and neck of the woman standing in profile to the left is similarly consistent, but its bluish-brown color gives it a wooden or perhaps stony quality. The jaw of the woman at the rear, however, is elongated in a way that starts to resemble a mask. The face of the fifth woman seated in front of her is entirely mask-like. Her features are rearranged and out of proportion; their form skewed and angular.

Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is among the world's most iconic images and the one most closely associated with the term "primitivism." It has landmark status in Western art on formal and thematic grounds. (Picasso's first title for it was *The Brothel of Avignon*, referring to a real institution in Avignon Street in Barcelona.) If the designation "primitive" attaches to its "uncivilized" techniques and themes, its source undeniably is the African-derived aesthetic of the mask-like faces. Famously, Picasso encountered an exhibit of African masks and sculptures in the Trocadéro ethnographic museum in the same year that he worked intensively on this painting.

There is a continuum in the rendering of the women's heads from the life-like to mask. Look closely at the two central women, however, and you will see that their left eyes are rendered flatly in a gray-white.

It deadens them and suggests a mask-like quality creeping in. Here, again, is primitivism's reverse teleology. Underlying these women's commodified sexuality, it is implied, are the rituals that give rise to what Picasso called "Negro fetishes." It is kept deliberately ambiguous whether the continuum suggests a movement toward or away from the mask-like state. Ultimately this is immaterial, as the logic is the same.



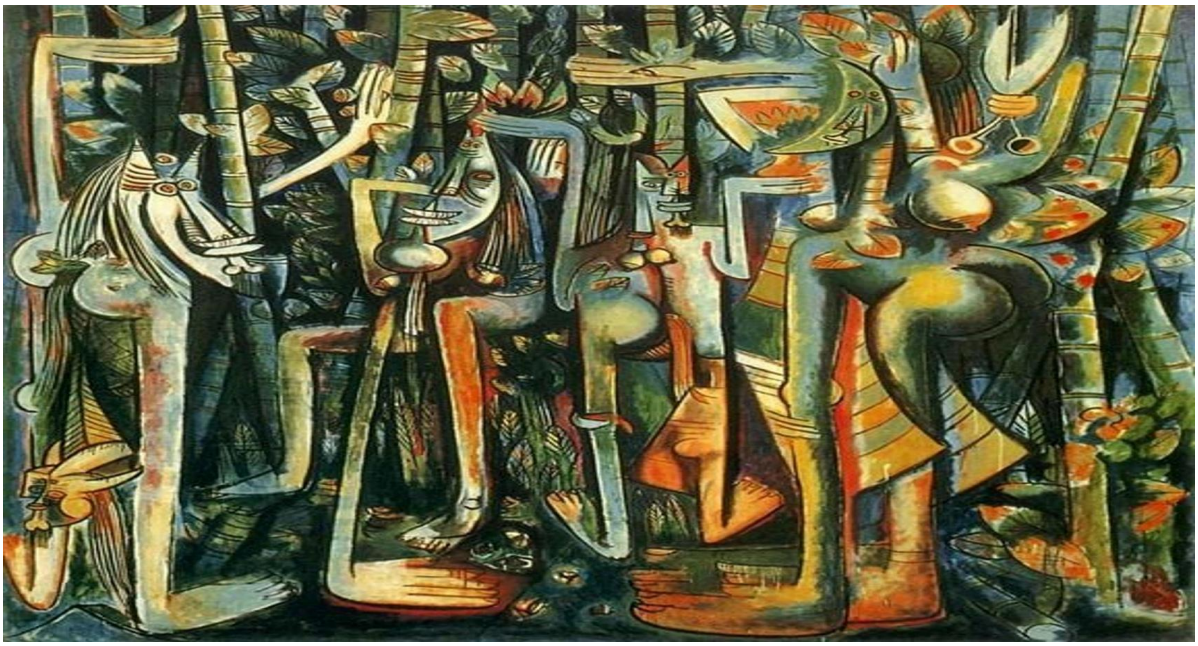
It should be evident by now that primitivism is a deeply racialized form of idealism. From the "beautiful ethnic women" that Cameron's designer pinned up while creating the Na'vi, to the idealized accounts of hunter-gatherers in the wild in "lost world" journalism and anthropology, to the African masks appropriated by modernist artists, the "civilized" perspective is almost invariably that of a white European man who has lost touch with a dark-skinned, usually feminized self. The Na'vi may ostensibly be an alien species, but their features, speech, movements, and culture are quite obviously a mishmash of "tribal" non-Western societies. Whether Na'vi or sex workers, it is white men who want to fuck these utopias.

It should also be evident that whoever or whatever gets designated primitive is highly changeable. In Western contexts, primitivist idealism has tended to follow roughly 50-year cycles. This reflects different phases and configurations of the global capitalism against which it strains. As European colonial expansion came to a violent climax a century ago there was a wave of primitivist art and ideas that were projected onto uncolonized "tribal" societies writ large. These primitivists were seeking out forms of life that they believed had not been disenchanted by "reason." Fifty years later, counter-cultural dissidents responded to looming nuclear apocalypse and rampant postwar consumerism with an ethos of dropping out and experiments in communitarianism. Contemporary primitivism, we can now recognize, is fueled principally by runaway global inequality, unbridled technological development, and the sense that ecological crisis is irreversible. It appeals specifically to hunter-gatherer forms of life for their perceived *sustainability* and *egalitarianism*.

Many therefore argue that primitivism is an inherently racist and usually patriarchal form of idealism. Its primitive/civilized binary replicates the logic that designated non-

Europeans as "primitive" and therefore rightly subject to colonization and assimilation. Primitivism starts to seem more like the knell sounded by civilization for whichever group is unlucky enough to be designated primitive.

But before casting primitivism as only and always racist in this way, we should look at another iconic primitivist image:



A fun exercise is to try to distinguish between the symbolic, human, animal, and vegetative forms in this painting. It quickly becomes clear that it is not possible. The crescent face in the top right seems to hang from a stalk-like neck with a breast at its base that in turn connects to a foreshortened body with three butt cheeks and leaves growing from it. It appears to be a quadruped but, on closer inspection, it might be a weird biped, with one arm and one leg that stretch down, stalk-like, to oversized feet. Everything seems happily to be growing into everything else, and there are no boundaries between human, animal, nature, and myth.

Now take a closer look at those stalks. Each bears the distinctive ring of the sugar cane. And just to the right of the happy crescent face is the inorganic shape of scissors (or shears) brandished by a disembodied pinkish hand. The painting's title may be *The Jungle* (1943) but it evokes a primal agricultural site: the Caribbean cane fields. These were the scene of the most brutal ever agriculture regime, fueled by 350 years of transatlantic slavery. It is not, objectively speaking, a "jungle" but the mythic rebirth of an idealized African jungle in this notorious landscape. It points to a very different basis for primitivist visions of a lost unity with nature. The artist, the Cuban Wifredo Lam, painted the scene two years after returning to his homeland from Paris. He was a friend of Picasso and spent time with the European surrealists. He commented that this painting pays tribute to uprooted Africans "who brought their primitive culture,

their magical religion, with its mystical side in close correspondence with nature." Lam, and other neo-African idealists of his time, annexed the term "primitive" as they shaped anti-colonial utopian visions of a return to nature.

This anti-colonial primitivism took hold across the Caribbean in the 1930s, and similar movements appeared in other colonial contexts. In the Caribbean, it would come to be known as *Négritude* — the movement to reclaim African selfhood from its suppression by European industrial agriculture. Lam's friend and collaborator Aimé Césaire coined the term and struck a similar note of idealism in his landmark 1939 poem, "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land," perhaps the greatest ever primitivist work. In it, Césaire mocks the racist stereotypes underpinning European philo-primitivism ("Or else they simply love us so much! / Gaily obscene, doudou about jazz in their access of boredom") while keeping true to a lyric imagining of a lost natural state:

> I have looked and looked at trees and so I have become a tree and this long tree's
> feet have dug great venom sacs and tall cities of bones in the ground
> with the force of thinking of the Congo
> I have become a Congo rustling with forests and rivers
> where the whip cracks like a great banner
> the banner of the prophet
> where the water goes
> likwala likwala

Primitivism's reverse teleology, in other words, is not just a white thing. It's not even mainly a white thing. The felt loss of a natural condition of society has been experienced deeply by people from a range of cultures, and none more than those who have been forcibly conscripted into the globalizing capitalist system. It is right to call out and critique the racism that so often colors primitivism's reverse teleology. But this doesn't mean that the desires that impel it, nor its wide range of manifestations automatically should be dismissed, as though there never has been, or never could be, a world in which humans did not conceive of themselves in opposition to nature.

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Last September, social media feeds across the world lit up with sad and angry emojis at the news that members of an "uncontacted Amazonian tribe" had been killed by miners in Brazil. While of course outrage and sympathy at such atrocities are natural responses, such stories tend to be pitched so as to elicit awe and self-disgust: awe that such groups still exist; self-disgust that the *very last* tribes are now being killed off. The headlines could just as well have read: "Civilization slaughters the last nature-humans."

Such pitying reactions miss two crucial things. First: just about all societies that get called "indigenous," "tribal," or "hunter-gatherer" (terms that in these contexts tend

to mean "not integrated into industrial capitalism") manage (or used to manage) their natural environments so as to provide for themselves. We, in the midst of capitalism, might crave something we like to call the wild, but indigenous forms of knowledge as well as the historical and anthropological evidence show clearly that we and our genetic forebears have controlled our environments in order to provide for ourselves for hundreds of thousands of years. For the greater part of that time our main tool was fire. Bill Gammage has shown, for instance, that the national parks of modern Australia — those areas that civilization reserves for wilderness — are very different from the pre-colonial landscape. Australia's indigenous people did not live in the "wild," but in an environment that they had deliberately shaped to provide for themselves. It was a continent-wide land management system.

Second, there are myriad peoples across the globe struggling and fighting to maintain forms of social organization that have neither been co-opted into regular capitalist activity nor exist in some always imperiled state "beyond" civilization. The long struggle of the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico is a famous example, as are the recent protests at Standing Rock in South Dakota. But the struggle between capitalist and non-capitalist social forms persists across all continents and in any number of ways. If it is an insult to call these struggles "primitivist," as though these diverse peoples have anything to do with racialized ideas about "primitive"' ways of life, it is because utopianism that rejects outright the capitalist system of production has been associated almost exclusively with the fantasies of hard-core dissidents at that system's heart. When we recognize that this kind of utopianism — what I have been calling primitivism's reverse teleology — often has a greater and more urgent appeal to those who have been forcibly integrated into capitalism, we can also recognize that this utopianism does not call for individual acts of self-abandonment but hard-graft political activity.

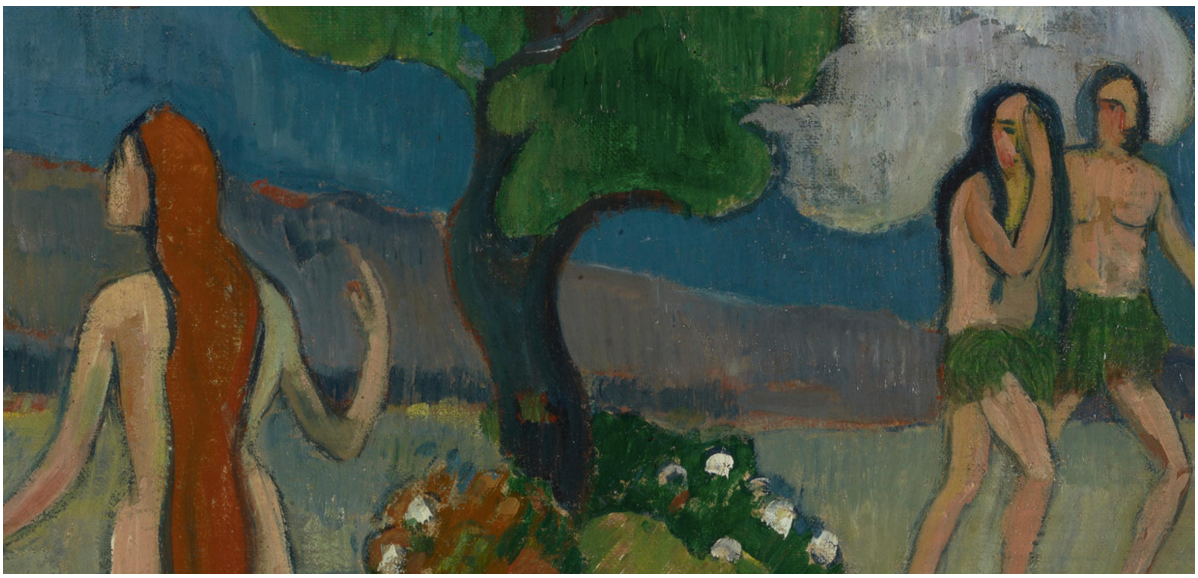
This need not take the form of a pitched battle. Alexis Wright's *Tracker* is an epic tribute to the Central Australian economist Tracker Tilmouth. From dozens of oral accounts, Wright weaves a portrait of man determined to harness hard-won land rights to forge an economic basis on which Aboriginal communities can live on their country and maintain their culture. Sometimes this meant being prepared to conduct sabotage. Other times it meant strategic dealings. None of these struggles, negotiations, and advances creates a world that resembles the primitivist purism of disgruntled first-world suburbanites. They are, nevertheless, impelled by the desire both to hold on to and renew ways of life that are not inherently antagonistic to the nonhuman Earth. These struggles do not need random voluntary acts of "rewilding" or fly-over videos of pristine nature. They need material support and political solidarity.

Letter to the Editor: John Zerzan and Ben Etherington

John Zerzan responds to Ben Etherington's essay "The New Primitives," and Etherington offers a reply.

By Ben Etherington, John Zerzan

June 24, 2018



BEN ETHERINGTON'S "The New Primitives" (*LARB*, May 24, 2018) is an ambitious overview of what he rightly sees as an anti-civilization current that is "gaining traction." This current is in fact based on "the promise of a truer, more natural self," and some of us are indeed "targeting the institutions and infrastructure of civilization."

But it isn't true that primitivism tells us nothing "meaningful" about non-civilized forms of life. In general, it is anchored in basic, orthodox anthropology. Band society/hunter-gatherer modes were egalitarian; sharing was the fundamental ethos — before organized violence, the objectification of women, the systematic ruin of nature, over-population, overwork. Beginning with a slow increase in division of labor or specialization, differentials of authority arose, setting the stage for domestication. The latter is the ethos of control, domination, the inner dynamic of civilization.

Always more control, leading to an ever deeper, broader domination, from nanotechnology to the privacy-free surveillance society. The "pathology" is not primitivism, but civilization. Every civilization heretofore has collapsed, and this now-global one is visibly failing, bringing ruin environmentally, socially, psychically.

It is bizarre to call primitivism racist. To point out the victimization involved in colonialism and civilization itself is in no way racist. It has been fashionable in a globally

postmodern culture to sneer at primitivism's supposed "noble savage" orientation. I'm not sure what noble consists of, but it's very clear what is ignoble.

I have speculated about symbolic dimensions (e.g., time, art), noting that their emergence seems to coincide with the emergence of hierarchy and alienation. But this is not a dogma for me or for anyone else.

Some of us have been inspired by a life-way that was the norm for over a million years. Civilization, a far briefer development, exhibits ever more clearly its calamitous character. Little wonder that primitivist currents have arisen. None too soon!

John Zerzan

June 6, 2018

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I thank John Zerzan for his response and comments. Whatever intellectual and ideological differences we may have, I certainly have been stimulated by reading his work over the years.

To an extent, I think we're writing at cross-purposes. My essay seeks to place the resurgence of primitivism in historical perspective. While I am very skeptical about the "rewilding" strain of contemporary primitivism, I have no interest in the wholesale debunking of primitivist idealism, as was popular among the postmodern critics of the '80s and '90s. I believe that the radical desires impelling primitivism should be redirected toward supporting real and ongoing political struggles faced by groups that have not been wholly co-opted into "civilization." In this respect, I applaud online groups like "Decivilized," whose feed regularly brings to attention the struggles of various indigenous and semi-autonomous societies.

When we look at primitivist idealism over time we find that the forms of life venerated by its proponents have been highly variable (this will not be news to Zerzan, who is a noted anthologist of primitivist and anti-civilizational ideas). The trend of idealizing specifically "hunter-gatherer" modes of life is a relatively recent one, and has emerged as a response to imperatives arising from the current phase of global capitalism. These are, namely, an ever-deepening awareness of humanity's cumulative and combined impact on the Earth's ecology and the global nature of inequality produced by the full geographical expansion of capitalist production. This hunter-gatherer ideal is virtually unrecognizable when set alongside the notions impelling the primitivist idealism associated with the "noble savage" in the 17th and 18th centuries, or the white modernist primitivism made famous by artists like Gauguin, Picasso, and D. H. Lawrence in the early 20th century. The former was associated with a number of forms of social organization including, for instance, the entirely agrarian Incas (see William Davenant's *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* or Voltaire's *Alzire*). The scope of latter was likewise broad, encompassing the diverse peoples of the Pacific, agrarian and otherwise, and Africans from both hunter-gatherer groups like the Khoisan and people living in state formations such as those established by the Bantu peoples. Hence, historically speaking, what white primitivists have regarded as being properly "primitive"

tells us nothing meaningful about the forms of life idealized as such. It *does* tell us a lot about the particular historical shape of the yearning for an originary natural condition that has prompted their idealism.

As for primitivism's racism, here I need to make a conceptual clarification. Insofar as primitivism is regarded as a utopian ideology that posits an originary natural condition as its end, we can find primitivist idealism among an enormous range of societies, *including* among those that white primitivists have idealized as being "primitive." Aimé Césaire's long poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* brilliantly mocks the negrophilia of European primitivists while holding true to a speculative vision of Africa as an idealized lost condition. In other words, not all primitivism is racist (even if much of it racialist), but the history of primitivism among that social group largely responsible for the globalization of capital and industrialization — white Europeans — aligns strongly with racist ideas and tropes about so-called primitive peoples. As the postmodern critics were right to point out, the veneration of yet-to-be-colonized non-Europeans as "innocent," "primitive," "savage," and, above all, "natural" was merely the flip side of the rationalizations used to conquer and rule over them. And, I hate to say it, there's a trace of this when Zerzan casts these groups as the "victims" of civilization. There's a very good reason that the moniker "primitivist" has been adopted almost exclusively by those of a European background.

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Ben Etherington
The New Primitives
Primitivism is back, not that it ever left. Ben Etherington on the historical and contemporary notions of primitivism.
May 24, 2018

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