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Authenticity and Its Discontents: Making Modernist Art Histories “African” and “Middle Eastern”

Sandy Prita Meier

Well into the 1980s, art historians working in European and North American institutions focused almost exclusively on the “traditional” and “pre-modern” arts of the so-called “non-West.” With rare exception, scholars who focused on African or Middle Eastern art did not study artists or artworks shaped by colonization and modernization. “Non-Western” peoples who experienced colonization were understood to be the object and even victim of colonization, but not modern subjects. Paradoxically, the overarching division of art history into “non-Western” and “Western” fields of study still mirrors the colonial-era division of the world into colonizer and colonized.¹ But by the late 1980s new avenues of analyses began to impact the field. Art historians began to engage the perspectives of post-colonial criticism to interrogate the hegemonic assumptions that consigned visual production identified as non-Western as either unchanging or as lagging behind or derivative to Western modernism and avant-garde experimentation. Scholars and critics began considering how to write about cultural production in/from formerly colonized territories without resorting to Eurocentric assumptions about the fundamental “otherness” of Africa or the Middle East. As a result, artists once invisible in art historical narratives are now celebrated as transcultural cosmopolitans who critique the “darker side of modernity.”²

1 Studying cultures via the area studies model and labeling them “African” and “Middle Eastern” also continues to reproduce the geopolitical division of the world cemented by modern colonialism.

2 As formulated by Walter D. Mignolo, the “darker side of modernity” emphasizes constitutive intersection between modernity as a cultural project and modern colonialisms. He foregrounds modernity’s ability to rationalize and universalize western ideologies and agendas. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

This article attends to this important change by considering how researchers forced the foregoing concerns to the forefront of intellectual inquiry. Rather than a comprehensive survey, I trace a specific genealogy of modern identity as it is narrativized for artists who experienced colonialism.³ In particular, I compare the construction of “African” modernism(s) and its relationship to Middle Eastern modernism within the knowledge worlds of North Atlantic art historical institutions. Understood as “non-Western” sites sharing intersecting geographies and histories, Africa and the Middle East have been constituted in relationship (even one of disavowal) to each other. Also, as spaces of inquiry that demand a serious engagement with the legacy of colonialism, both share closely intertwined critical agendas. Yet their historiographies also diverge, since studies of Middle Eastern and African modernism(s) emerged respectively from an engagement with the fields of Islamic and “traditional”/“classical” African art history.

In recent years, exhibitions about the relationship between representation and coloniality have focused on contemporary multi-media artists such as Walid Raad and Yinka Shonibare. Their work certainly interrogates this relationship, but colonialism and the independence struggle is a past these artists did not personally experience. They participate in such prominent art exhibitions as *Dokumenta* and the Venice Biennial and their multi- or post-media work consciously overturns modernist visual vocabularies and concepts. They subvert attempts to define their practice by place or identity markers and therefore they are often characterized as transnational or postnational. But the initial thrust within the discipline of art history focused on artists who did not enjoy such “distance,” as they practiced at the border of colonial subjecthood and post-colonial citizenship. For artists such as Farid Belkahlia, Skunder Boghossian, Munir Canaan, Uzo Egonu, Paul Guiragossian, Rachid Koraichi, Ernest Mancoba, Ibrahim El Salahi, and Jawad Salim, the colonial encounter was not a historical or analytical category, but a specific place of experience and personal memory.

The first critical rebuttal of the paradigm of “otherness” in art history was to claim coevalness for these artists.⁴ Artists and intellectuals based in Africa and the Middle East already considered how their modernist practice was constituted by their location outside the metropole during the colonial period. But major art institutions in the West did not consider Afro-, Arab, Middle Eastern and/or transnational modernism(s) until the early 1990s.⁵ Curators, critics, and scholars spearheading this major shift, such as Salah M. Hassan, Okwui Enwezor, Elizabeth Harney, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Sylvester Ogbachie, Sidney Kasfir,

3 Another important line of inquiry must consider the intersections and differences between the terms and representational frameworks artists and art historians deploy to give meaning to artistic practice. This article emphasizes art historical work.

4 For the implications of coevalness as an intellectual strategy, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

5 Europe and the U.S. did support African and Middle Eastern modernist artists as “cultural ambassadors.” Embassies, civic centers and other governmental institutions organized exhibitions during the colonial and immediate independence period. Also, in the 1970s, *African Arts Magazine* featured modernist artists. But the journal soon focused almost exclusively on “traditional” arts for the next two decades.

John Picton, Kamal Boulatta, Salwa Mikdadi, Venetia Porter, Nada Shabout, and Wijdan Ali, employed a range of intersecting strategies. The intellectual and activist practices enframing their projects led to seeing and analyzing those arts once considered derivative, as constitutive of modernism. Insisting on a modern subject position for artists from/in formerly colonized places inserts them into the universalizing temporal and interpretive zone of modernism. For example, Chika Okeke-Agulu therefore argued that “[African modern art] has been with us from modernism’s inception, and yet... time and time again has seemed to need validation within the study of twentieth century art.”⁶ Similarly, Shiva Balaghi states, “[I]ike artists working in Paris and New York, artists in Tehran lived in ‘the Century of Machinery, Speed and the Atom.’”⁷

This strategic move not only includes African and Middle Eastern artists in an established, and perhaps outworn, canon of twentieth-century high modernism or gives “voice” to the formerly marginalized. Rather, such a shift speaks to and even nurtures, even if unintentionally, a particular relationship between modern cultural production and colonialism. On one level it suggests a revolutionary transgression against the binaries and inequalities of modern Western imperialism. Yet these critiques are launched from within the discourse of modernity. Modernity is positioned as a necessary mode of analysis for understanding those cultures once demarcated as outside of the modern experience by that discourse. As a result, bringing formerly colonized places underneath the analytic umbrella of modernity creates a terrain where the relationship between colonialism, decolonization, and post-independence nationalism constantly demands accounting. Scholars working with Middle Eastern and African modernism(s) as a subject of intellectual inquiry therefore raise central questions about how one can liberate experience and knowledge from Eurocentric norms and values. How can one produce post-colonial intellectual work without losing sight of the specific historical moment and location of the colonial encounter? Why is it particularly effective to employ the category of the modern to counter ethnocentric visions of world culture, when from a historical perspective, modernism as a conceptual apparatus for global engagement is created by an imperial culture, making colonization possible?

Curating Modern Art, or the Problem of Modernity in the Visual Field

From the early 1990s onwards, exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues have served as the primary platform to redress scholarly dismissals of non-Western modernist artistic practice. They also challenged a larger public to reconsider their assumptions regarding the

⁶ Chika Okeke, “Modern African Art,” in *The Short Century, Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2003), 29.

⁷ Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (London: New York; I. B. Tauris, 2002), 25.

cultural production of Africa and the Middle East.⁸ Exhibitions of the early to mid 1990s, such as *Creative Impulses/Modern Expressions: Four African Artists* (USA, 1993), *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (USA, 1994), *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (UK, 1996), presented African and Middle Eastern artists as “modern” because it was understood to insert them into the valorized narrative of avant-garde originality.⁹ These exhibitions largely focused on the “form” of modernism, emphasizing the importance of easel painting and abstraction, for example. They also embraced the general notion that modernism was defined by an embrace of the “new” and by a break with the past.

More recent exhibitions began to make a distinction between contemporary and modern art as categories of practice and analysis, aware that in normative art history “modernism” also has periodizing connotations and demarcates a formalist sensibility in art history. Also, by the late 1990s curators began to move away from focusing on modernist artists who came of age during the independence struggle. Instead the visual “style” of multi-media conceptual practices was championed. Also, exhibitions such as *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (USA and Germany, 2001) and *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (USA, 2002) distanced themselves from questions of form and aesthetic practice. Rather, their organizers think of modernism as “worldly” field of politics, focusing on the liberation struggle and the search for national autonomy. The accompanying publications suggest that understanding modernist artistic practice is not a question of interpreting the appropriation, translation and reframing of Western material form. In *Picturing Iran*, Shiva Balaghi continues to be committed to “mapping the modern,” but argues that art historians focus too much on material form: “Their conceptualization of hybridity divides art into form, which is learned in and borrowed from the West, and content, whose raw material is abstracted from national cultures.”¹⁰ Thus, she observes with some frustration that for forty years the central question in her field continues to be, “Is this art modern and is it Iranian?” She suggests that simply focusing on formal issues elides the central issue of political struggle:

“Iranian artists in the 1960s and 1970s were engaged in the search for a solution to “the problem of culture” under capitalism. In the cultural lexicon of Iran, the “West” did

⁸ Americans and Europeans directing pedagogical programs at the various colonial art schools produced important texts between the 1940s and 1980s that served as “primary research” material for rethinking colonial period artistic production. For example, Ulli Beier (1922-) and Suzanne Wenger (1916-2009) wrote about and supported artists trained at “modern” fine art programs in colonial Nigeria. Their writings and exhibitions are essential for scholars today.

⁹ Other important exhibitions not discussed in the essay are: *New Traditions from Nigeria* (USA, 1997), *Image and Form: Prints, Drawings and Sculpture from Southern Africa and Nigeria* (UK, 1997), *Spielungen der Moderne* (Germany, 2001), *Between Legend and Reality: Modern Art from the Arab World* (Iceland, 2002), *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (UK, 2006), *Moments from 20th Century Iraqi Art* (2007), and *Modernité Plurielle: Art Contemporain Arabe* (France, 2007), *Modernism in Iraq* (USA, 2009).

¹⁰ Balaghi and Gumpert, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*. The struggle for independence is certainly the most important historical context for the analysis of African modern art in the 1995 *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* exhibition. But its essays do not focus on modernism as a political domain.

not simply represent a higher civilizational model to be emulated, but an imposing presence on its national autonomy.¹¹

Similarly, in *The Short Century* Okwui Enwezor seeks to focus on the cultural dimension of decolonization for understanding African modernism. Rather than an account of the appropriation of European forms or ideas by Africans, African modernism is framed as a tactic of subversion and rebellion. *The Short Century* “concerns the African systematization, deployment and usage of modern forms, values, and structure.”¹² Thus, while form is still part of the analysis, he seeks to move beyond it by bringing “values” and “structure” to the equation.

According to Enwezor, the modernism of the Negritude movement “achieved its first synthesis through an act of internal reflexivity on the status and value of African culture.”¹³ As an intellectual project it insisted on the “originality of an African culture in the making of modernity,”¹⁴ Negritude is thus a “*modernist avant-garde*... based on the construction of an ethic, a field of practice, and on the primacy of African subjectivity and subject matter in order to contradict colonial alienation.”¹⁵ Clearly, the exact relationship between modernity and modernism as artistic practice and the claim-making politics of such concepts such as “*avant-garde*” are left unanalyzed. While he insists that this modernism “is not founded on an ideology of the universal,” modernity is exactly such a mode of thinking.¹⁶ He seeks to elide this contradiction by making the universal an “internal” African site, from which modernity’s most celebrated artistic trope can be launched: modernist *avant-garde* originality. This move also begins to illustrate how modernist conceptions of modernity produce a tension between particularism and universalism by naturalizing the notion of cultural difference.¹⁷

Clearly, *The Short Century* and *Picturing Iran* significantly reconsidered the politics of “modern art” for Africa and the Middle East beyond the formal and aesthetic. These exhibitions were first and foremost concerned with emphasizing the neglected context of the colonial encounter for modernist cultural practices. Yet in shifting the focus in such a manner, the unresolved issue of the geopolitics of modernity comes to the fore.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Okwui Enwezor, “An Introduction,” in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2001), 12.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. For a sustained analysis of Senghor’s framing of Negritude philosophy as a search for modern Africanness see Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

15 Emphasis added. Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2001), 12.

16 Enwezor, “An Introduction.”

17 The notion of cultural difference is not the same as the philosophies of difference and “non-commensurability” put forth by theorists Dipesh Chakrabarty and Édouard Glissant. Their work critiques the notion of coevalness as a given and highlights the complicated divergences between culturally variable concepts of being and becoming. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997

As an epistemic framework, modernity is unequivocally Eurocentered, since “the outside is named from the inside in the exercise of the coloniality of power.”¹⁸ The overarching conceptual map of modernity requires two complementary spaces, the “Here and the Elsewhere” or the West and non-West, where each cultural complex occupies a topographic node of either center or periphery on a universal world map. Such a geography of the imagination has a temporal marking as well, since the non-West or periphery is also the site of “being behind.”¹⁹ This way of seeing the world therefore claims a “universal” perspective. Modernity is what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called a “North Atlantic universal,” a concept nurtured within the matrix of coloniality that in its very inception places the West as the center of human enunciation, but naturalizes this locative strategy as a “placeless” universal site. North Atlantic universals so understood are “always seductive, at times even irresistible, exactly because they manage, in that projection, to hide their specific—localized, North Atlantic, and thus parochial—historical location.”²⁰ Its temporal inception is the sixteenth century, when an interconnected world system began to be imagined as a result of the global expansion of the North Atlantic commercial circuit. This was the inception of modernity, when modern individuality and its concomitant societal structures began to “make sense” for the newly forming world of global capitalist production and consumption.

As a civilizational marker, the West claimed modernity for itself, but since it was necessarily a comparative mode of self-perception, it legitimated the imagining of a globally interconnected and interdependent community.²¹ But, as the construction of an African and Middle Eastern modernism clearly indicates, it was also a potentially empowering paradigm to critique other aspects of its discourse. With its bundled concepts (or fantasies) of rationality and the universal rights of man (who can define and declare these was and is contested), colonized intellectuals and cultural workers quickly appropriated modernity as a strategy precisely because it was the potential site from which they could force their recognition as rights-bearing members of global community.

¹⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 62. Timothy Mitchell has similarly argued that the modern always requires its binary “other,” the non-modern, to exist. Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

¹⁹ See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Lot,” in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Bruce M. Knauff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Trouillot, “The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Lot,” 221. This insight draws on Edward Said’s examination of the relationship between aesthetic and political realms: “[E]very cultural form is radically and quintessentially hybrid, and it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them.” Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1994).

²¹ Pratt has argued that modernity was always already unfurling since it needed the Other to sustain various hierarchies and taxonomies. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992).

Authenticity Paradox

A central unresolved issue in the revision of the modern is the role authenticity plays as an evaluative paradigm of artistic practice. This is often explained as a tension between the local and the global and particularism and universalism, but modernity as a representational schema already presupposes the existence of fixed cultural spaces, envisioning any engagement beyond a single location as a disruptive, but often productive, move against a putative norm. While modernism often celebrates such a transgression as a cosmopolitan critique of nativism or nationalism, it still upholds that place based difference is embodied by individuals attached to these places. Thus, even if difference is not reduced to a matter of phenotype or locale in these narratives, the cultured subject is its affect. In its modernist articulation, difference upholds the West as the normative center; but at times difference, which is located outside the modern West, is able to revitalize the center through its deviation from the norm. The inscription of non-Western modernism as a category of analysis often inadvertently reproduces this geography of cultural difference, where the non-Western must be a real place of authenticity. Seemingly paradoxically, the notion of a geographically defined indigeneity, a concept scripted under the crucible of imperialism and much critiqued by postcolonial theory and contemporary artists, was deployed by art historians focusing on historical modernism. Thus, Hassan writes, "...long ago Africans and other Third-World people entered the dialogue on modernism and have challenged it on their own soil."²²

To be "authentic" and "modern," artists are still retroactively expected to prove their ability to break away from colonial culture, while remaining true to a specific place. Artists themselves did deploy such terms as "avant-garde" and argued for the validity of their modernist practice. European primitivism, which inscribed difference onto the colonized in order to critique European nationalism, also enabled a transnational and transcultural articulation of Pan-African creative identity. This notion of cultural difference, while a product of the colonial encounter, was re-imagined as a positive way of being to counter racist degradations of that very difference. For example, work on Nigerian and Egyptian modernism (see below) clearly documents how artists theorized their appropriation of Western media vis-à-vis the nation-building project. Yet scholarship conflates their enunciations and performances of modernist concepts with modernity as a framework of analysis. This conflation will always produce the suggestion of an illogical contradiction, since this framing pushes against the constitutive inside/outside of modernity. Contemporary postcolonial artists and Western modernists are allowed to play with notions of authenticity, in fact it becomes sites of critique, but a lingering disquiet underpins the frameworks employed to make sense of artists working during the colonial period. This is precisely because scholars interpreting their work often de-historize the modern and posit it as simply a marker of positive valuation. Clearly, this scholarship has opened up new spaces of inquiry that are vitally important, yet their work exhibits an unease regarding the implication of their intervention. Employing terms

²² Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics," 223.

such as “avant-garde” and “original” demarcates a space of value within the modernist canon. To understand why “authenticity” remains an unresolved yet vital topic in the writings on African and Middle Eastern artists, one must understand the specific historiography of modern art history.

On Modernism and Modernity in Art History

From the perspective of artistic practice, modernity and modernism signifies a set of interrelated conceptual frameworks, critical positions, and creative performances most often vaguely anchored temporally in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. During the mid-nineteenth century, artists began positioning their work as a new beginning that rejected the conception of art practice as an expression of a period style patronized by such institutions as the French Academy and its official salons. Instead of working within an established style, artists could freely access any repertoire, from any period or place, to create an original work of art. More specifically, Peter Bürger has argued that this maneuver characterized the historical avant-garde, whose

“distinguishing feature is that it did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a dadaist or surrealist style. What did happen is that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principal the availability of the artistic means of past periods.²³”

This rebellion against artistic conventions was ultimately meant to contribute to “real” social and political revolutions. Artists utilized artistic techniques, including montage, performance, found-object assemblage, pictorial abstraction, and the appropriation of vernacular (including non-Western) and mass media forms, to shock the viewer and reject perceived traditions in both art and life. Their techniques not only critiqued nineteenth-century aestheticism and institutions of the status quo, but they also dedicated their practice to rendering the perceived autonomy of the work of art from everyday life—rejecting the very category of “art.” The individualistic self is posited as the source of the work and thus appropriation is not a matter of passive influence, but rather a moment of radical invention and defamiliarization. This discourse continues to uphold the notion of the artist as a genius who creates an irreplaceable and original work of art, a standard trope in art historical scholarship from the sixteenth century onward. The avant-garde therefore propagated what Rosalind Krauss has called a “discourse of originality,” where work must be vanguardist and new to be authentic. As Krauss elaborates, “the theme of originality, encompassing as it does authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the

²³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18. Recently, scholars have expanded upon Bürger’s ideas by focusing on earlier or later “avant-gardists,” such as German expressionists, for example. He also distinguished between modernist and avant-garde artistic practices, arguing that the latter not only sought to critique bourgeois society, but rather attempted (but in the end failed) to reject the very role of art as an institution supported by the establishment.

maker of art.”²⁴ Furthermore, in art historical studies, the “historical avant-garde” designates European artists who practiced around World War I; the appropriation of the term for earlier, later or non-European practitioners seeks to claim these now valorized strategies for politicizing aesthetic practice for artists in different periods or locations.

“Modern” colonialism and “modern” art history are both late Victorian projects predicated on the creation of spatially bounded historical epochs and cultural spheres. While colonialism and imperialism were multifaceted enterprises, their knowledge-production projects participated in policing the imagined divisions between the civilizations of the world. The role of Western social, historical, and cultural scholarship in creating bounded categories for “Western” and “non-Western” cultures has been well-documented. Images and objects in particular were utilized to create a hierarchy of racial and cultural “types” based on evolutionary models, with North Atlantic peoples at the apex and “non-Westerns” occupying various lower rungs.²⁵ In turn, visual schemas became tools for the management of colonial and imperial interventions in such places as Africa and the Middle East. For example, the color illustrations of *Description de l'Égypte* and the many anthropological publications featuring photographs of African peoples produced easily digestible information utilized to understand and manage would-be colonized subjects. These images created an inventory of people’s “character” under the rubric of ethnic and racial taxonomies, assigning physical traits, and specific forms of dress and personal adornment to purportedly different cultural groups. Such taxonomies also proliferated precisely because the potential for “unacceptable intermingling” increased as the interconnectivity engendered by global capitalism brought more and more seemingly separate cultures into physical contact.²⁶

Similarly, nineteenth-century art history was keenly concerned with charting the progression of art through the ages and reworking the concept of style to contribute to the newly emerging understanding of global human history. Art historians such as Johann Winckelmann, Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, and Josef Strzygowski employed racist ideas to delineate the purported visible, material, and symbolic divisions between cultures. For example, according to this model, the difference between German and Italian peoples could be visually differentiated by defining the essential stylistic typologies of German and

²⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 162.

²⁵ See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1994), Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Ivan Karp, *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Ivan Karp, Steven Lavine, and Rockefeller Foundation., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

²⁶ As Robert Young notes, the potential enactment of “racial amalgamation” in colonial spaces was a major fear of Europeans. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 4.

Italian art, which was believed to be the product of climatic and environmental difference.²⁷ Central to mapping style across time and space is the concept of influence, which made the relationship between separate artists and art enclaves (or centers) comprehensible. The analytic framework of stylistic influence hinges on a hierarchical relationship between the borrower and his or her source, always suggesting that the result is an inferior imitation.²⁸ Having “universal” ambitions, scholars categorized the arts of Africa and the Middle East—both geographic designations are also the product of Western cartographic taxonomies— as “tribal,” “African,” “Oriental,” and “Saracenic” (later “Islamic”). Theories of cultural diffusionism also assisted in the development of a hierarchy of world cultures, which might “influence” each other, but since Africa usually occupied the lowest (“primitive”) rung and the “Orient” a middle position, “outside” influence could only create a derivative copy in these cultures. Stylistic taxonomies became particularly dominant in the study of African visual culture, where ethnic styles aligned with the colonial map of African “tribes.”²⁹ Similarly, the formation of Islamic art as a discipline was predicated on ideas that art and architectural typologies embody racial characteristics. Strzygowski, for example, sought to uncover the shared racial roots of German and Iranian culture through an analysis of architectural forms.³⁰

At the same time “modern” also began to be applied to works created by artists living in European imperial metropolises during the late nineteenth century. In this context modernist art was scripted as a critique of modern life, through which the modern self seeks an antidote to the managed routine of industrialization and the commoditization of society by engaging anti-rational and anti-establishment forms of expression. These artists absorbed ideas about cultural difference and became fascinated by the seemingly extreme “otherness” of non-Western cultures. The staging of “exotic” peoples and objects at universal expositions and the public display of newly forming “pre-modern” ethnographic collections was an essential aspect of the colonial project, which artists found particularly titillating and

²⁷ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann discusses the lasting impact of nineteenth-century art historians, such as Alois Riegl, who spearheaded the project of defining art in spatial terms. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 43–83.

²⁸ The concept of stylistic and artistic influence has been much critiqued by art historians. See, for example, Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Partha Mitter aptly calls this the “pathology of influence” in his call for a new art history that would decenter the canon of modernist art. He also points to the fact that in the colonial context the engagement with Western strategies of artistic expression by South Asian artists were even more starkly read as derivative by colonial art historians. Partha Mitter, “Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008).

²⁹ These disciplinary concerns are discussed in: Suzanne Preston Blier, “Art Systems and Semiotics: The Question of Art, Craft, and Colonial Taxonomies in Africa,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 6, no. 1 (1988); Sidney L. Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow,” *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (1992); Sidney L. Kasfir, “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art,” *History in Africa* (1984); Ikem Stanley Okoye, “Tribe and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 78 (1996); Phillips and Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*.

³⁰ Talinn Grigor, “Orient Oder Rom? Qajar “Aryan” Architecture and Strzygowski’s Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 3 (2007): 564–67.

transformative.³¹ Part of the critical agenda of the historical avant-garde was to shock bourgeois culture and transgress Victorian propriety by appropriating non-Western visual culture and performances into “their” Western world.

This reframing of African and Middle Eastern images and objects by such artists as Henri Matisse, Hannah Höch, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso as a platform for such a primitivist critique of modern life has been well documented.³² Their cosmopolitan or international positionality was meant to signal a transnational consciousness, where Africa’s or the Middle East’s cultural difference and exoticness represented a site of counter-identification to the nation-state. In particular, scholars in recent years have considered how the very celebration of the imagined alterity of non-Western art endorsed or at least colluded with the colonial agenda and why the colonial moment made artistic appropriation possible.³³ A more radical position argues that primitivism aestheticized colonial exploitation, making it also a source of pleasure and fantasy and, hence, constructed the colonized as a vital source to revitalize the purported sterility of industrialized Western culture.³⁴ For the purposes of this discussion it is important to recall that the production and celebration of primitivist aesthetics by European artists and intellectuals visualized and therefore made tangible emerging concepts about the essential difference between cultures. The appropriation African and Middle Eastern formal elements endorsed and made productive popular tropes regarding the unfettered expressiveness of these cultures. Objects and material fragments collected in the colonies thus were no longer just imperial trophies but also served a social and cultural purpose, as the catalyst for aesthetic contemplation and the renewal of the modern self. Art historians such as Carl Einstein could therefore contemplate African objects as “art,” but for this operation to be successful such works had to be apprehended as unquestionably counter-modern and anti-Western. Modernist primitivist practices and art history, as projects of modernity each naturalized the idea that ethnic and cultural identities can be demarcated spatially, as self-contained bounded entities defined by a permanent relationship between the people and their land.

As first formulated by the historical avant-garde and imagined by subsequent visual artists with “counter-establishment” agendas, avant-gardist subjectivity must radically

³¹ The most well known of these encounters is of course Picasso’s visit to the Trocadero in Paris, where he “discovered” the geometric power of African sculpture. But German Expressionists in Berlin also regularly visited colonial exhibitions, in particular the staging of African and South Seas peoples, even bringing them to their studios as models.

³² See for example Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*.

³³ See Hal Foster, “The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (1985), Susan Hiller, *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art* (London;New York: Routledge, 1991), Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

³⁴ Frederic Jameson’s influential essay, “Modernism and Imperialism” interrogated how modernist aesthetics instrumentalized the imperialist “axis of otherness,” and also repressed the new “the relationship between a generalized imperial subject...and its various others and objects” from Western consciousness since modernist literature was seemingly apolitical and concerned with formal issues. Frederic Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism,” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 48.

transgress against these perceived norms. It structures the appropriation of art-making forms as an active articulation of a self-conscious reciprocity and the expression of an original, forward-looking worldview. Artistic modes from the past or “the elsewhere” are apprehended as means deployed by an “autonomous” artist to radically defamiliarize the present and normative notions of a linear progression and the purity of artistic style.³⁵ “Art” thus is not an expression of a fixed history or a cultural identity, but of an artist’s self-reflexive contemplation of form. It is a universalizing exercise.

But while artistic originality is allowed to stand as a critique of ethnicity or nationality for European primitivists such as Picasso or contemporary postnational conceptual artists, art historical narratives still demand something “different” for non-Western artists of the colonial and independence era. Artists from colonized places in fact often resisted reductive interpretations by claiming an avant-garde sensibility, but their location in or link to colonized space creates discomfort for scholars. This is because the study of artists defined as African or Middle Eastern must be authentically “local” and “universal” at the same time.

Re/locating Modern Art in the National Project

The first significant scholarly work that consciously sought to disrupt the marginalization of “other modernism(s)” was written by scholars who were at some point artists or cultural workers associated with one of the African or Middle Eastern modernist movements.³⁶ Their work emphasized the vital prominence of such art centers as Zaria, Nsukka, Dakar, Accra, Baghdad, Beirut, Khartoum, and Cairo for the articulation of a self-aware and critical voice for independence and nationhood. It valorized formerly marginalized artists as significant players in a local community shaped by the global experience of modernity. Liliane Karnouk’s 1998 book on Egyptian art represents one of the first English-language studies of artists patronized by state art academies during the age of modern empire. It begins in 1908 with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo by Prince Yusuf Kamal, who employed Western artists as teachers and also sent Egyptian artists to Europe. The work chronicles artists in relationship to efforts by nationalists to construct a national identity through modernist

³⁵ This strategy is often labeled “post-modern,” even when discussing modernist artists. An extensive discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this present essay, but at issue is whether avant-garde practice is a modernist or post-modernist strategy. In this context the emphasis is on “modern” as a relationship between signified and signifier, not a temporal marker.

³⁶ The scholars who contributed in the following publications spearheaded this initial intervention, although their book-length works were published at a later date. Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), Hassan, *Creative Impulses/Modern Expressions: Four African Artists: Skunder Boghossian, Rashid Diab, Mohammed Omer Khalil, Amir Nour, Liliane Karnouk, Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003* (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005 [1988]), Nkiru Nzegwu, *Contemporary Textures: Multidimensionality in Nigerian Art* (Binghamton, N.Y.: International Society for the Study of Africa, Binghamton University, 1999), Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008), Olu Oguibe and Uzo Egonu, *Uzo Egonu: An African Artist in the West* (London: Kala Press, 1995), Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, 1st MIT Press ed. (London; Cambridge: Institute of International Visual Arts; MIT Press, 1999), Chika Okeke-Agulu, “Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960-1968/Commentary,” *African Arts* 39, no. 1 (2006).

painting, sculpture and architecture. Like much of this scholarship, she understands Egyptian modernism as a “fusion between artistic tradition and modern expression,” without articulating the ideological baggage or conceptual assumptions of endorsing the notion of “tradition” and “modern.”³⁷

In the scholarship of the early 1990s, modernist African and Middle artists trained in the Western metropole or in colonial fine art schools are invariably framed as struggling to create a “true,” “national,” and “modern” visual lexicon and language that was an expression of autonomous selfhood and communal anti-colonial struggle.³⁸ One of the most important projects in this vein was the 1995 *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. *Seven Stories* presents Zaria artists associated with the Nigerian College of Arts Sciences and Technology from the 1950s onward as critics of the colonial status quo: “The members of the Zaria Art Society were clearly aware of the continuing elision of the art traditions of their own peoples in the evolution of the new art that was being taught in the academy.”³⁹ In these triumphal narratives artists succeed in a championing a uniquely Iraqi, Nigerian, Syrian or Sudanese art by appropriating populist “indigenous” idioms in their modernist abstract paintings, prints and sculptures.⁴⁰ Such a framework mirrors the interpretation of anti-colonial intellectual work and political movements of the 1930s to the 1960s by post-independence scholarship, which often scripted a history of unifying revolt and revolution for newly forming nation-states. The arts of the colonial and immediate independence period are often still expected to uphold this celebratory narrative. The work of artists practicing within the period of colonial modernity must reflect nationalist narratives of anti-colonial struggle and national authenticity.

The Canon as Strategy

Interestingly, another aspect of the construction of African or Middle Eastern modernism has been the recourse to classical art historical strategies developed for the study of “artistic genius” and the establishment of a hierarchy of national schools from the Italian Renaissance onward. Although on one hand this work has been critical of the ethnocentric paradigms underwriting art history as discipline, scholars often legitimate movements outside the West as worthy of study by seeking to expand the modernist canon to accommodate non-Western artists.

For example, scholars carefully position their work as documenting the “birth” of regional schools and artist collectives in which a particular local subject or formal orientation

³⁷ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003*.

³⁸ *Seven Stories* was the umbrella name for a conference, exhibition, publication and collection of African primary archives about local exhibition histories and artists’ lives. It also brought together the works of north and sub-Saharan artists into a single discussion.

³⁹ Chika Okeke, “The Quest: From Zaria to Nsukka,” in *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clémentine Deliss and Catherine Lampert (Paris;New York: Flammarion, 1995), 41.

⁴⁰ Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, 85-94, Salah M. Hassan, “Khartoum Connections: The Sudanese Story,” in *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clémentine Deliss and Catherine Lampert (Paris; New York: Flammarion, 1995), 113-14, Okeke, “The Quest: From Zaria to Nsukka,” 43.

distinguish their work from other forms of modernism. These artists are defined as “truly” avant-garde and original, their work is celebrated as “surprising,” and the artist’s biography is positioned as giving insight into a given artwork’s startling originality. A series of innovations in form and content spearheaded by the individual visions of pioneering artists are documented to prove the validity of “local” manifestations of modernism.⁴¹ Harney’s analysis also posits Dakar’s performance and multi-media fine arts group, known as Laboratoire Agit-Art, as “an important avant-garde group challenging the beliefs of the past and suggesting alternatives for the future.”⁴² Issa Samb of the Laboratoire therefore “create[s] an aesthetic that speaks directly to the experiences of the artists and audience living in Dakar.”⁴³ At the same time, another Laboratoire artist, El Sy, described as intense and unpredictable, creates work that is “endowed with a personality of its own.”⁴⁴

Writing a chronology of continuities and discontinuities is a long-established art historical maneuver, which makes the apprehension of a new school or art movement possible. It brings a canonical *art history* into existence. Thus, the ordinary role of certain artists as the *first* modern in the national context becomes significant. For example, the project to create an account of modern Nigerian art charts the establishment and various firsts. Whether the Zaria or Nsukka schools are more significant in the original formation of modern Nigerian art or whether Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) and/or Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994) should be credited as the first modern Nigerian artist is debated.⁴⁵ Scholars such as Okeke-Agulu and Oguibe also emphasize that Western individuals and colonial education programs did *not* introduce modernism, but rather that indigenous pioneers such as Aina Onabolu and Prince Yusuf Kamal, began a campaign to bring fine art courses to their respective secondary education curricula.⁴⁶ Onabolu was “not merely mimicking Europe” by painting representational portraits of Nigerian elites in the genre of academic naturalism. Rather, Onabolu “was also beginning to define his idiom as a vehicle for translating and reinstating his own heritage into new forms in the context of changing reality of Africa.”⁴⁷ By placing the accent on Onabolu’s autonomous subjectivity, the pervasive ideology of Euro-centered diffusionism is

⁴¹ See, for example, Ogebeche, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*, Olu Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002).

⁴² Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995*, 141.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁵ See Olu Evelyn Nicodemus, “The Black Atlantic and the Paradigm Shift to Modern Art in Africa,” *Critical Interventions* 3/4 (2009), Sylvester Okwundu Ogebeche, “More on Nationalism and Nigerian Art,” *African Arts* 42, no. 3 (2009), Sylvester Okwunodu Ogebeche, “Revolution and Evolution in Modern Nigerian Art: Myths and Realities,” in *Contemporary Textures: Mutlidimensionality in Nigerian Art*, ed. Nkiru Nzegwu (Binghamton: ISSA, 1999), Okeke, “Modern African Art,” Okeke, “The Quest: From Zaria to Nsukka,” Oguibe Olu, “In the ‘Heart of Darkness,’” *Third Text* 7, no. 23 (1993).

⁴⁶ “[M]odern African art became a reality not so much because of Western-style education as because of a few individuals to whom art as an autonomous practice became a medium for expressing their subjectivity.” Okeke, “Modern African Art,” 29-30. On Onabolu’s careers see Olu Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002)

⁴⁷ Emphasis added. Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” 246.

thus interrupted through modernist tropes. The frequent focus on origins, originality, and artistic individualism also speaks of an unacknowledged ambivalence in the scholarship regarding the artists' relationship to their African and the Middle Eastern identity. Scholars want these artists to be recognized as not derivative, but also not the "same" as their North Atlantic counterparts, since this would simply fold them into modernity's totalizing notion of world culture.

Transcultural Subjectivity and Authenticity?

Accounts of artistic individuality and originality also inadvertently produce anxieties regarding the *quality* of the work created in "other" spaces, since formally the work could be read as derivative and too similar to the work of their European counterparts. The art historical valuation system that valorizes originality also privileges formal innovation in the visual field. Thus, the influenced artist is reduced to a weaker and imitative position. African and Middle Eastern modernists clearly deployed "European" media, such as easel painting and photography, and artistic techniques including pictorial abstraction and the re-imaging of "vernacular" or "folk" forms. To foreclose and deflect any suggestion of mere imitation, similarities are explained as transcultural affinities in sensibility. Yet, the significance of "vernacular" or "indigenous" forms is assigned a different symbolic weight than for Western primitivist artists.

The revitalizing impetus does not come from a spatially distant "other," but from inside the self and therefore is an "authentic" source. As Shabout writes,

"Iraqi artists found approaches that were indigenous to their own culture. They were thus able to absorb and understand modernism epistemologically, intuitively, and intellectually, as opposed to borrowing or learning a European style."⁴⁸

In her analysis a discourse of indigeneity is posited against any implication of imitation. Clearly, much of this scholarship frames the production of modern art as an affirmation of the identitarian politics of liberation movements. Yet the notion that personal and communal identifications are rooted in a single geographical location was an operational mechanism of imperial governance. It made the colonialist discourse of national citizen and colonized subject differentiation possible. For independence agitators, these external categorizations also became the site from which to launch oppositional strategies. A "native" subject position became an empowering collective identity in the context of anti-colonial struggle from which to articulate a demand for citizenship, since the territory of the colony could be transformed into a nation.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Nada M. Shabout, "A Dream We Call Baghdad," in *Modernism and Iraq*, ed. Zainab Bahrani and Nada M. Shabout (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2009), 29.

⁴⁹ Mbembe has interrogated misunderstandings of territoriality and existence of deterritorialized structures of various forms of identity allegiances. He has also highlighted how pre-colonial political and social allegiances corresponded

Cultural workers invested in the liberationist potential of pan-African and pan-Arab ideas posited the pre-colonial past or native populist visualities as the most meaningful location from which to launch a national modern cultural platform. Afif Bahnassi, an Islamicist art historian at the University of Damascus who endorsed modernist art practice in the Arab world to nurture national unity, was one of the first scholars to articulate the discomfort scholars have had about the relationship between modernist practice and local “authenticity.” He warned that “[t]he only legitimate work of art is that which is intimately linked to the soul of the people.”⁵⁰ The existence of the “soul of the people” also necessitated the construction of an autochthonous culture whose unadulterated connection to the native soil naturalizes the nation-state. Thus, Bahnassi praised the projects of Farid Belkahlia (b. 1934), an artist who instituted the teaching of “native” handicrafts, such as carpet-making, calligraphy, and leatherworking, at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts “to forge new links with their cultural, human, and psychological roots.”⁵¹ Yet, significantly, a shared territorialized heritage is posited as the *source*, but not the contemporaneous location for modern artistic practice. The construction of an imagined alterity and difference between vernacular artists, who become the passive source, and modern artistic subjectivity allows Negritude and Arabism to be an active site of a counter-modernity. Arabic and Amharic calligraphic forms and Pharaonic, Sumerian, Assyrian, Kabyle, Yoruba, and Igbo vernacular visual worlds became “traditional” sources to construct a self-reflexive artistic expression. These traditions are positioned as the source to rejuvenate the colonized self, alienated from its roots. This strategy necessarily embraces modernity’s imagined rupture and discontinuity between a pre-modern and modern subjectivity. By arguing Iraqi artists are anchored somewhere in “their own culture,” Shabout also inadvertently naturalizes (as does Enwezor in *The Short Century*) the Enlightenment idea that a radical break with the past is required to be an active subject in modern time and space.

Conclusion

While scholarship on African and Middle Eastern modernism(s) made visible for often the first time the complex struggles, desires, and achievements of artists once evaluated as simply imitative of European practices, it still largely depends on narratives scripted during the independence struggle and standard notions about what “modernity” means. Modernity as a mode of seeing and thinking is never examined. As a result, studies of “African” modernity or modernism continue to be accompanied by a palpable anxiety. Art historians have yet to unpack the fissures and contractions created when modernity is linked to place in their

to a multiplicity of forms of territoriality. Achille Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000). For an analysis of the coercive and liberating force of colonialist categories of identity and the ways that constructivist views fail to take account of their power in everyday experience, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ Afif Bahnassi, “Authenticity in Art—Exposition, Definition, Methodology,” *Cultures* 6, no. 2 (1979): 70.

⁵¹ Ibid.: 80.

attempt to create an intellectual project called the “study of African modernism.” Scholars as well as art critics are concerned that the appropriation of “global” forms and ideas by Africans is not viewed as an unbounded or “universal” cultural practice or even worse, somehow derivative or unoriginal. Rather they argue that the Western form and technologies—such as pictorial abstraction or photography—are “localized” and therefore the resultant artwork remains authentically “African.” The resultant stories about African modernities never take into account that narratives about the localization of a “global” form reproduce a conceptual map that was formulated to make sense of economic globalization and the ‘flows’ between centers and peripheries. Furthermore, the embrace of coevalness erases the possibility that time and space was and is experienced differently. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, the need to make the histories of the periphery look like “modern” stories about individual subjectivity, nation-states, and human emancipation” naturalizes a linear notion of historical time. This universalization of time, the insertion of the histories of different peoples and regions into the same time continuum also created spatial hierarchies that privilege the “center” (Europe and the US). The resultant essentialist notions of time, space and history also create a myth of one nation, one state, one culture— making such categories as “African modernism” or “Senegalese modernism” possible. Clearly such narratives reproduce modernity’s analytic need to reduce temporal and spatial dissonance and incommensurateness comprehensible to itself.

So why are stories about local modernities so compelling? Because modernity claims to be a planetary system. With its bundled concepts (or fantasies) of rationality and the universal rights of man, modernity can be deployed by the marginalized as the potential site from which to force their recognition as rights-bearing members of the planetary community imagined by modernity. For example, it is clear that during the colonial period artists in Africa and the Middle East embraced modernism precisely because it presents art as a “universally” relevant form that can do something about the gap between the promises of modernity and the social realities of modernization, such as colonialism and racism. As practice modernism has been immensely generative for artists connected to places that experienced colonialism. Yet, art historians often deploy modernity as a mode of analysis without acknowledging its full ideological apparatus and limitations. A key problem is that art historians and critics are intent on linking modernism to a bounded place, “Africa,” and that they often de-historize modernity and simply posit it as a marker of positive valuation—i.e. it is “good” to be modern. The geographic marker “Africa” in a story about modernity always creates an illogical narrative because modernity is only capable of naming a site outside itself as “other” or non-modern, while studies of “African” art seek to make modernity do something that goes against its foundational narrative: to create a story about particularity and universality simultaneously. This would be a provocative intellectual project, but modernity as a theoretical apparatus cannot be deployed for such a reading. Or to put it in another way, studies of “African” modernism claim place-based particularity—which instantly relegates Africa to the status of the opposite of the center within modernity. A story about African modernities will always raise the specter of the “derivative” because modernism has to be placeless from the perspective of modernity.

Questioning the logic of modernity for understanding artistic practice would also lead one to question what studies of “Iraqi” or “Senegalese” modernism elide. Such work would explore why the search for an authentic expression that has not been marked by the colonial encounter, loss, and exploitation is in its very articulation the product of the coloniality of power. It would also make a rigorous distinction between the use of such terms as modernism, modernity, and authenticity by artists and the deployment of them as discursive frames. New work must continue to contextualize cultural practice in more precise localities, but also seek to capture how artistic practices are claim-making strategies within a shifting web of new and old forms of territoriality. Modes of questioning can then enter a different terrain. There, the central agenda would not be to position artists as authentically local *and* modern. Rather, one could unfurl the complex contradictions and tensions activated once modernity meets different sites of enunciation. Analysis would then move out of triumphal modes of narration and relish fractious work that “fails” and is not coeval.⁵²

⁵² Theorists like Achille Mbembe, Walter Dignolo, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Édouard Glissant put forth “non-coincidence,” “border thinking,” “de-territoriality,” and “non-commensurability” as discursive practices. Their work critiques the notion of coevalness and highlights the complex relationship between culturally variable spatial and temporal concepts when they meet in the encounter spaces of empire.