

# SCULPTING AFRICAN NOUVEAU

## Primitivism, Ethnography, and Afro-kitsch in the Works of Woodrow Nash

JAMES SMALLS

IN 1927, THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITER COUNTEE CULLEN (1903–1946) posed the question, “What is Africa to me?” as a refrain in his poem *Heritage*.<sup>1</sup> As had been the case with many African Americans during that time, Africa for Cullen was unfamiliar and mysterious. His inquiry was premised on a quest to know and a desire to re-connect with a lost ancestral heritage that would also preoccupy more than a few African American visual artists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The contemporary African American sculptor and ceramicist, Woodrow Nash, can be counted among them. Born in 1948 in Akron, Ohio, Nash grew up in black inner city neighborhoods and went to predominantly black schools. He entered into the field of art early, painting murals for local institutions. He was employed as a technical illustrator at Goodyear Aerospace Corporation then began working as a freelance illustrator for American Greeting Cards before moving to New York City in 1975. There, he designed and illustrated album covers for various jazz musicians while working on an Associate Degree in Commercial Art from Pels School of Art. After 20 years freelancing, he decided to move to Madison, Wisconsin, in 1991 where he set up his studio called Creative Ceramics and worked as a graphic artist. Over the years, Nash’s work has changed and has developed in response to the advent of black social consciousness influences, such as the Black Power movement, of the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the

assassinations of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the focus of Nash’s work shifted to primarily afrocentric themes. As a result, his work became more socially committed to matters of racial awareness. Art became political for Nash. It had to make a statement and “motivate the masses.”<sup>2</sup> He began to take a keen interest in African mythology and African artistic forms of expression while at the same time experimenting with various styles and techniques in clay, such as handbuilding, surface applications, the uses of underglazes, burnishes, corrosives, oxides and stains, utilizing stoneware, earthenware, terracotta, and porcelain. Working in three dimensions, he quickly began to study the contemporary male and female physique, exploring the natural form of the body.

Nash soon developed a style that he has trademarked as “African Nouveau.” As the artist describes it, African Nouveau uses an approach to African physique and physiognomy that “combines 15<sup>th</sup>-century Benin sculptural characteristics with the graceful, slender proportions and long undulating lines associated with 18<sup>th</sup>-century [sic] French Art Nouveau.” Nash considers his style unique, combining African and European influence that comes from his “passion to create realism in sculpting the human form.”<sup>3</sup>

Nash’s works are popular with the general public and have been considered successful in “integrating expression, complex symbolism, and sophisticated aesthetics to yield

striking embodiments of the human soul and sensuality.” They personify regal “African queens, kings, warriors, and regular people,” dignified African men and women who evoke a sense of aristocratic bearing and refined elegance based more on a Western than African aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the popularity of these pieces, there has been no sustained scholarly discussion to-date that critically delves into wrestling with the varied and, as we shall see, problematic aspects of Nash’s work and his popular success. The few available sources about his sculptures never fail to mention that these pieces are commercially successful and are collected internationally by “everyone from working professionals to affluent sports figures and entertainment superstars.”<sup>5</sup> The works are frequently exhibited within commercial contexts and stir up a host of issues and questions related to the historical discourses of primitivism and colonialism, ethnography as literal and symbolic form of racialization, black objectification by way of the decorative and the ethnographic, the marketing and commercial exploitation of

black bodies and black culture, the exoticizing/eroticizing of black bodies, and the cultural and political viability of their function as objects of afro-kitsch.

My assessment of Nash’s work in the pages that follow will be a critical one that may, at times, seem hostile or unsupportive. But this is not my intention. Rather, I seek to understand the underlying operations and complications involved in the use of the ethnographic as part of black diasporic experience and visual practice. By being critical, I hope “to insert a new dialectic into an ongoing discourse, making apparent that which had previously been marginalized, unheard, untouched, unseen.”<sup>6</sup>

The word “Nouveau” means “new” in French and invokes not only a notion of the vanguard, but also suggests a cultural cachet associated with eurocentric conceptions of elegance and sophistication. African Nouveau is an attempt by the artist to combine approximations of African representation and design sensibilities with stylistic elements inspired by Art Nouveau so as to foster in the viewer a sense of cultural sophistication and racial pride. It is a contemporary form of afrocentrism, which is laudable on the one hand, but on the other, culturally and politically questionable. Is African Nouveau really “new” or is it merely another form of contemporary kitsch packaged and marketed for contemporary consumption? Whatever the answer, it should be obvious that these works both challenge and trouble expectations for today’s black diasporic visual art.

Clearly, Nash has studied carefully the visual language of African designs and patterns applied to ornamentation of the body. His works combine a sense of the decorative with ethnographic detailing and intense realism. His Africans often wear heavy beads, expose bare chests, sport expressive faces with hollow eyes, and are titled with symbolic African names. They display stylized scarification patterns and tribal paint on their faces and torsos, wear earrings and other body adornments. *Husani*, for example, is such a figure. The title of the piece derives from an Egyptian boy name that means “handsome.” Here, the artist has used a lot of stylized scarification patterns on the face and body that highlight texture. He has focused on what he refers to as traditional Nubian physiognomic features such as pronounced cheekbones, protruding lips, hunched shoulders, that he finds work well with the color. Another piece, titled *Rhaxma* (an African name meaning “a sweet-tempered woman”), focuses on the harmony of contour lines, stylized scarification patterns contrasting with color and with strong lights and the darks. The hair is made of clay that has been cornrowed so to highlight texture. Similarly, with *Almitra* there is a lot of color as well as texture. Here, the artist has overexaggerated the hunched position of the shoulders intended to convey a sense of regal pride and confident poise. The symbolism associated with the title adds to the meaning of the piece, for according to Nash, *Almitra* was inspired by a personage in Khalil Gibran’s series of poems collectively known as *The Prophet* (1923). *Almitra* was one of the female figures in the poems who posed a lot of the questions about life and death.<sup>7</sup>







Nash has claimed that his African figures are not based on photographs or on any particular African group or region, but rather, spring from his creative imagination. The stylized African markings and motifs, he insists, are invented. His approach is, nevertheless, ethnographic as suggested by the artist's own words about his creative process: "I begin with a vague idea, such as protruding cheekbones, distinctive noses and lips" and start working from there. The work then reveals itself.<sup>8</sup>

Although people like to call what Nash does as part of African art, the artist dismisses this and refers to what he is doing as tribal decorative art because he is not, he claims, dealing with any particular indigenous group or tribal region, but does want

to suggest the influence of Europe. He claims to be looking for "that expression that cuts across a cultural grain." That search, he informs us, led him to the very foundation of mankind — Africa and world tribal culture. Nash sees African unity as fostered through the practice of adornment of the human form. Adornment, the artist insists, was one of the ways that African cultures interacted with each other and many different tribes and groups can be recognized by their jewelry and body art.

*Rhomillia* is one of several striped pieces that evokes a feeling of the tribal decorative. Nash disclaims an interest here and in his other African Nouveau pieces in aiming for ethnographic accuracy. The work is purely decorative and was fashioned primarily for aesthetic purposes. Particularly in *Rhomillia*, Nash uses lines to follow the contours of the body as he contrasts lights and darks. Hues from the turquoise teal fade down into a deep black. Again, the body is adorned with the complementary ceramic beadwork.

Nash's African figures are technically portrait busts even though various measures of the body are sometimes depicted or suggested through simulated clothing or beaded accessories. His figures are rarely completely nude and are in keeping with a certain degree of sexual decorum or modesty maintained by many African American artists.<sup>9</sup> However, many of the works, especially those of women, are highly eroticized.

With Nash's male and female busts, such as seen with *Rukia* and *Antar II*, the conventions of gender and their stereotyped attributes are evident. His male figures dominate with a strong presence and intimidating body language that commands the viewer's attention, while the sensual contours of his females are emphasized and imbued with a passive, yet stoic sense of interiority that shows the artist's conscious crafting of the human figure.<sup>10</sup> *Taumangoluka* is an example of the former, showing a beaded ceremonial dance piece inspired by 15th-century Benin ceremonial costumes and that country's use of beads for adornment and cowry shells.<sup>11</sup> Here, Nash has used ceramic beadwork and clay to make a very imposing figure intended as a welcoming piece in an entryway. As with all



his African Nouveau works, this one incorporates a lot of color as well as texture.

Nash believes that his work is very strong in terms of visual impact. He acknowledges that people sometimes find the works a bit eerie, particularly due to the hollow eyes. Such a response, Nash believes, is due to our Western conditioning to shy away from things African. He acknowledges that with the sculpture of 15th-century Benin, it is the absence of the eyes that actually draws one into the piece. Nash truly believes that his pieces reflect his life experiences, that is, his afrocentrism and sense of racial pride. In this respect, the works are very personal.<sup>12</sup>

As an afrocentrist, Nash does not mind being labeled a black artist and feels that one's blackness, one's life experience as a black person, automatically comes out in the work even if denied or left unacknowledged by the artist. Nash insists that his attraction to and interest in blackness is authentic despite the popular commercial appeal of his work. He is very prolific and tends to work in series format consisting of a grouping of anywhere from eight to ten pieces. To accomplish this, he has a complete working studio with an endless variety of sculpting material, kilns, and several assistants. Although a "factory" of sorts, he claims to always maintain a hand in every piece produced.<sup>13</sup>

For Nash, these African Nouveau objects are meaningful beyond their decorative function and commercial value. As he states, they constitute "the sum total of my political consciousness, my awareness of my heritage lost and rediscovered, my standards of what is beautiful to me, and my love of people and their stories left untold."<sup>14</sup> But what does it mean for an African American artist to claim the ethnographic and all the negative baggage associated with that of colonialism, objectification, institutional and scientific racism, as a means of black diasporic and personal empowerment/identification in the contemporary moment? These are the kinds of critical considerations that I care to expose and consider in this essay.

As had occurred with many of the colonial exhibitions staged in Europe throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it could be argued that Nash's body of African Nouveau works perpetuates "a privileged aesthetic strategy ... [likened to] ... colonial propaganda through exoticization, the synthetic reproduction of pan-African images of black otherness representative of the whole of African culture."<sup>15</sup> Nash's art taps into the mystery and mythology of Africa that came out of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonialist and imperialist way of thinking and seeing. As with past colonialist works of ethnography, his sculptural pieces could be viewed as only superficially valorizing Africa while perpetuating the ideologies of appropriation and ethnocentric insensitivity (via exoticizing and exploitation of the decorative) of non-Western peoples. It could also be argued that Nash essentializes the "primitive" by subjugating the endless variety of African cultures under one aesthetic umbrella, a move that essentially flattens the dynamism of each.

In their general conception, Nash's African Nouveau pieces are not as unique as the artist would like us to believe. In fact, his



characterization of the African body through sculpture shares in the aesthetic and discursive dynamics of European and American ethnographic sculpture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, exemplified by the sculptural busts of artists such as Charles-Henri Joseph Cordier (French, 19<sup>th</sup> century), Anna Quinquaud (French, 20<sup>th</sup> century), Herbert Ward (British, 19<sup>th</sup> century), and Malvina Hoffman (American, 20<sup>th</sup> century), and others.<sup>16</sup> The works of these artists are typically discussed within the context of their respective national, cultural, and colonial circumstances. What is noteworthy is that all these ethnographic sculptors were white Europeans and Americans who produced their works within the contexts of European colonialism and American imperialism. Nash is unique as a sculptor of the ethnographic genre not so much because of the subject matter he has selected, but because he is, as an African American, deeply implicated and curiously vested in the objectifying visual and discursive strategies inherent in the pursuit of ethnographic sculpture.

Nash's figures constitute a carefully conceived and well thought-out marketing ploy that riff on the combining of aspects of the ethnographic (even though the artist denies it) with the decorative and the sensual. His work must be positioned in the contemporary context of the commodification of race and late capitalist materialism. Both words in his coined term "African Nouveau" have aesthetic, cultural, as well as politically-charged significance that can not be readily dismissed.

## Why Sculpture?

Sculpture has always been an intricate part of the history of both African and African American artistic practice. Sculpture affords interrogation, in three-dimensions, of the operations of not only racial identities but also those of other identities, including gender, sexuality, and class. Not to diminish the impact

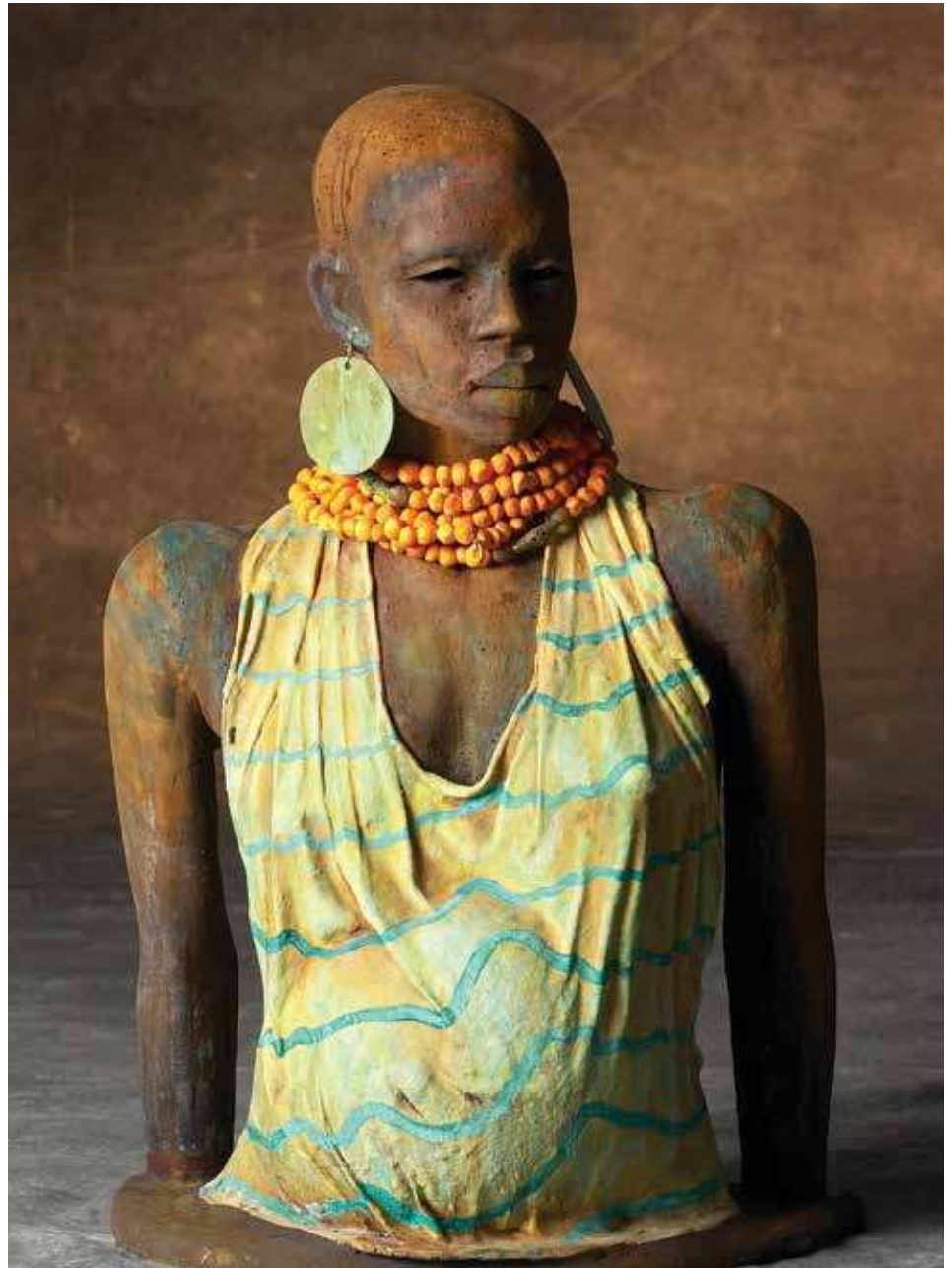


of painting and other art forms, sculpture is a powerful medium of communication that engages more than the desire to see. Because it is three-dimensional, it embraces physical matter that occupies our space and becomes part of our lived experience. Unlike painting, sculpture (be it private or monumental) is intrusive in such a way that we are forced to engage with it. As a cultural form for producing meaning, sculpture is also fundamental to many African and Afro-diasporic cultures.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps the one cultural tradition through which African societies connect with community, ancestors, and spirits.

As the art historian Mary Lenihan has pointed out, sculpture in the West tends to have its own set of politics, especially in its public nature and in its intention to “monumentalize” its subjects. African American sculptors of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a special challenge, “that of ‘remonumentalizing’ the black image.”<sup>18</sup> By doing so, they also recontextualized that image. Figurative expression through focus on the black body and on black physiognomy served to give the African American image a new voice and a new place in American history. Nash’s African Nouveau works attempt to carry that challenge into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Like other artists of the period, black sculptors took on a variety of themes that ranged from the socio-political to exoticism and new interpretations of classicism. No matter the theme, however, due to the complex and difficult nature of racial matters in the United States, the African American artist was inevitably tasked with challenging the political and cultural problems associated with race and cultural heritage, particularly as these had been identified by W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the “burden of representation” for the African American artist was and remains great.<sup>20</sup>

As racialized subjects, African Americans continue to struggle to disavow racial alterity and inferiority as these had been bred within the contexts of colonialism and institutionalized racism, and reflected in the white gaze. Nash’s African Nouveau works should be considered as contemporary instruments of such attempts at disavowal and at valorizing identity formation through figurative sculpture today.



## The Prism of Primitivism

One of the ways in which Nash’s works problematize the history of black diasporic representation is in the way they evoke the history of primitivism. In the context of this discussion, primitivism can be briefly defined as both a popular movement and a discourse that dominated the social and cultural spheres of Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> As a discourse, primitivism is multiple, complex, and



chronologically overlapping. It coincided with the beginnings of European colonial expansion and, indeed, it is colonialism that lies at the heart of ideas about primitivism. As a movement, primitivism refers to a popular art trend in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the formal aspects of African art were appropriated as creative inspiration for the development of modern visual language. In both the American and European contexts, primitivism developed under the aegis of modernism and avant-gardism and was supported by a cultural “rediscovery” of Africans, African Americans, and things African. Within modernist primitivism, “the colonial signifier is the African subject, ‘born again’ in an ancestral spiral of reclamation and renewal.”<sup>22</sup> The Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement of the mid-1920s in New York City fostered this vogue for blackness. Because of their ancestral linkage with Africa, African Americans and their culture became grist for both the primitivist and modernist imagination. Of course, modernist primitivism was not limited to the visual arts, but also pervaded other areas of knowledge, including, fiction, psychology, popular culture, and ethnography.<sup>23</sup>

Although alluring for whites, primitivism was a double-edged sword in that it attracted many African Americans as well. Very early on, even Alain Locke embraced it as an affirming and empowering modern trend and encouraged African American artists to adopt its forms and sensibilities.

Nash’s African Nouveau pieces are contemporary visual descendants of primitivism’s uneasy history, a history that did not stop with the end of modernism. On this score, Marianna Torgovnick has remarked: “The primitive is everywhere present in modernity and postmodernity, as impetus or subtext, just as modernity or postmodernity forms the subtext of much ethnological writing and thinking.”<sup>24</sup>

Nash’s works constitute postmodern primitivism. His works construct “Africa” as a category that has supposedly sprung from the artist’s imagination. His African Nouveau pieces simultaneously confirm and obscure the fact that Africa is a very big place with many arts and many histories that make it nearly impossible to define as a single locale for art.<sup>25</sup> The question of what constitutes Africa and what it means confronts the discipline of art history and African art’s inscription within the construct



of primitivism. Indeed, most people of the modern past and postmodern present know about Africa and things African only through the prism of primitivism.

As objects of a contemporary primitivism, Nash's African Nouveau works highlight an ironic analogy noted by the art historian John Picton between a Eurocentric distancing of Africa through primitivism and exoticism, and "the Afrocentric quest for an essential unity of African culture that occupies the attention of certain American and African American scholars [and artists]."<sup>26</sup> The African Nouveau works highlight this irony in their attempt to underscore the idea of the unity and spiritual value of Africa cast through primitivism, ethnography, and the visual language of exoticism.<sup>27</sup>

Based on Nash's own claims, his African Nouveau pieces are consciously afrocentric and his motivation in creating them is both cultural and spiritual: "I think and create from the rhythms, color, and spiritual life style of Black Folk . . . with the dynamics of the Benin spiritual awakening. It's the black powerful force of our people, which comes through me that I hope to give back to perpetuate our ever present force."<sup>28</sup> Nash's pieces are idealized, utopic creations of an aesthetically appealing notion of Africa. They both constitute and conjure an allegorical vision of a unified and utopic place and community peopled with aesthetically adorned beings.

Primitivism, ethnography, and the decorative arts are related interests and all three evolved in tandem during the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century formation of American modernism. It was during this period that Locke enthusiastically supported the work of African American sculptors, most of whom were in the vanguard of inflecting racialized portraiture with novel approaches.<sup>29</sup> Prior to Locke's appearance on the art scene, many African Americans had shunned their African ancestry and frowned at any notion of black nationalism.<sup>30</sup> Locke was an expert in African art, especially African sculpture. In the early 1930s, he wrote two important essays, "The African Legacy and the Negro Artist" (1931) and "The Negro Takes His Place in American Art" (1933), in which he reiterated the importance of African art "as conceptually modernist" in its "intelligently significant form, abstractly balanced design, formal simplicity, restrained dignity and unsentimental emotion [sic] appeal." In the 1931 essay, Locke argued that since black artists in the U.S. lack a mature tradition, rather than imitate white artists, they should use their ancestral arts of Africa to develop a native African American art: "The Negro physiognomy must be freshly and objectively conceived on its own patterns if it is ever to be seriously and importantly interpreted . . . We ought and must have a local school of Negro art, a local and racially representative tradition..."<sup>31</sup> Locke sought to stimulate African Americans' awareness of what he called "our ancestral arts," urging development of "a school of racial art." Although he never clearly defined what he meant by racial art, he certainly did want African American artists to portray the life, personality, and character of their people through Africa and modernity. So, black subject matter (African and African

American) and a modernist visual language were deemed necessary. Many African American artists responded to Locke's call and made creative use of ethnography, stylized modernist forms, formal and spiritual correlates gleaned from African art. Of the group, Sargent Johnson became the first black sculptor to utilize the formal properties of African art consistently in a significant phase of his artistic development.

Johnson's work demonstrates a clear interest in exoticism and racial typing of Africans and African Americans. It is in this respect that he is relevant to Nash's African Nouveau works. By 1930, Johnson was experimenting with the tribal mask form in conjunction with portraiture. Some of his best known works in this genre, such as *Mask* (1933) and *Mask* (1930–35), are fashioned out of copper and make expressive use of incised lines that emphasize the African features of the subject's physiognomy in a clear statement of racial difference. All of Johnson's figurative sculptures focus on the sense of pride conveyed by African Americans and yet capture the essence of West African sculptural aesthetics.<sup>32</sup> The art critic Verna Arvey, writing for *Opportunity*, notes of Johnson's copper masks that "the simple, beautifully proportioned, perfectly balanced and symmetrical and modeled [African heads] — were not from genuine African subjects — but from the various Afro-American faces he saw in his daily round in Northern California."<sup>33</sup> These masks illustrate an interest in what the artist has referred to as a "primitive slave type" as well as the articulation of an Africanized technique in mask making. By way of highlighting black facial features, as Nash would do more than half a century later, Johnson set out to confirm the beauty and dignity of black physiognomy and bearing through decorative sculpture.

Johnson was highly interested in racial hierarchies and in African art applied to African American identity. His interest in African art links him with the pan-Africanism and cultural nationalism of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, respectively. His 1930 portrait of an African American boy called *Chester*, supposedly represents the artist's interest in depicting "the pure American Negro." *Chester* is more Africanist than African, "evoking a romanticized, idealized, and distant culture in order to reflect critically upon the contemporary moment." The forms used are "a multicultural amalgamation of hybrid sculptural forms."<sup>34</sup> Locke supported this kind of work and saw clear "African analogies" in Johnson's piece, describing the bust as "captivatingly naïve" and claiming that it "has the qualities of the African antique and recalls an old Baoulé mask."<sup>35</sup> Locke wrote of Johnson that already by 1928 the artist was committed to a strongly "simplified style" and that "he has come to reflect more than any other contemporary Negro sculptor the modernist mode and the African influence."<sup>36</sup> However, despite Locke's praise and recognition, Johnson held some rather questionable ideas about racial purity vis-à-vis Africans and African Americans. Many of his sculptures were undertaken in search of what he referred to as a "pure" Negro type with "that characteristic lip, that characteristic hair." As has been pointed out, his interest in physiognomically



delineating blackness is closely tied to stereotypical representations of blacks that so often contextualize African Americans in “a monolithic physical frame.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite his noteworthy contribution to black representation as racial uplift during this period, Johnson was unable to sustain his ethnographic pursuits in sculpture because, as the art historian Lefalle-Collins has observed, “[t]he complexity of identifying and adhering to a specific racialized art became too problematic and limiting for Johnson and, in the end, had to be abandoned.”<sup>38</sup> Of course, in the 1930s the language of racial purity was soon to become the ideology behind Adolf Hitler’s genocidal machine. It is unclear, however, if this historical truth factored into Johnson’s decision to abandon his pursuit of a racial art idiom. It has been suggested that it was the rise of abstraction as a popular stylistic choice and a perceived limitation of racialized imagery on his creativity, more so than politics, that most likely determined Johnson’s move away from ethnographic imagery.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the reason, it is clear that ethnography became a dead-end for the artist.

Johnson was not the only African American artist to exploit black physiognomy through African types. There were other African American sculptors who periodically focused on racialized physiognomy in their work. For example, some of the works of Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (*Congolais*, 1931) and Richmond Barthé (*Mangbetou Woman*; *Shilluk* or *Maasai Warrior*) celebrated African



facial features, but both were interested in highlighting the inner lives of their subjects. Both artists focus on ethnographic features imbued with an elusive, sometimes otherworldly, spirituality.

As with Johnson's ethnographic pieces, Nash's African Nouveau works exploit black physiognomy as the primary visual means of affirming a positive and culturally-linked black representation. Each figure displays particularized ethnographic features that operate to showcase the uniqueness and aesthetic appreciation of "that characteristic lip and that noble bearing." Both artists, in their unique way, focus on the splendor of black physiognomy while highlighting stylized and decorative forms.

The decorative elegance of Nash's African Nouveau figures have their conceptual and aesthetic genesis in the *coloniale moderne* — an approach to the human form that contained "pro-colonial signifiers" and that "subsumed the exotic 'Other' into a popular decorative style..." prevalent in France during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>40</sup> The *coloniale moderne* was inspired by a fusion of neoclassicism, Art Nouveau, and *haute couture* (high fashion).<sup>41</sup> The style was implicated in French colonialist goals in that it "reflected a deliberate campaign by the French government to justify their colonizing activities at a time when the rationale behind territorial and cultural expansion was increasingly being questioned."<sup>42</sup> The style itself, however, has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is exemplified by the sculptural busts of Cordier that combined ethnographic realism with a decorative Romantic exuberance (*Negro of the Sudan in Algerian Costume*, 1856; *Câpresse des Colonies*, 1861).<sup>43</sup>

In the United States, it was Locke's aesthetic program that promoted a variant of the *coloniale moderne* through *art colonial* with the intersection of anthropology and colonial art that informed the discourse on black aesthetic difference and its iconography during the Harlem Renaissance. For black America, *art colonial* had a two-fold cultural function. First, it served as a model for a racialized aesthetic ideal that could counter racist depictions of "blackness" and its history of (mis-)representation. Second, as an ethnographic genre, *art colonial* was perceived as a medium for obtaining "objective" knowledge on African culture.<sup>44</sup>



Cordier  
*Câpresse des Colonies*, 1861

In the American context, it was the racial art of Sargent Johnson that best evoked *art colonial's* early 20<sup>th</sup>-century impact on African American art. Nash's African Nouveau pieces carry on the spirit of the *coloniale moderne* into the postmodern context.

## The Conundrum of Ethnography

The term "ethnographic portrait" refers to the portrayal of exotic non-Westerners by Western artists for Western



audiences, in which case the exoticism of the person portrayed is intentionally represented as the principal subject, and that exoticism is manifested through careful attention to details of costume, personal appearance, and “race.” Ethnographic portraiture is both anthropologically defined and culturally biased.<sup>45</sup> The notion of “ethnography” or the “ethnographic” has different connotations related to race and otherness in different national contexts and at different historical moments.

In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sense of the term, “ethnography,” as a part of anthropology, and therefore science, had the mandate of displaying “truth” and authenticity. Subjective elements, such as aesthetics and even politics, were by definition, disqualifying factors. Nevertheless, in addition to their focus on ethnography-as-science, European sculptors also brought to their works a Western notion of beauty. In pursuit of the ethnographic desire to study and know the Other through a joining of science and aesthetics, their works incurred the negative fallouts of colonialism, imperialism, and racist institutional systems. All of these sculptors worked within highly politicized colonial contexts, as well as alongside the development and growing popularity of primitivism, orientalism, and africanism. Moreover, their works dovetailed with the promotion of science as a sign of social and cultural progress. Lastly, their works typically reflected the negative effects of commercial capitalism.

Despite what the artist has said about them, Nash’s Africans are classifiable as objectified specimens of ethnographic scrutiny. They bring into play and into question the discourse of ethnography and its relationship to the appropriation of Africa and things African in the forging of African American identity through (post)modernist expression. As a discourse, ethnography has been critically engaged by the theorist James Clifford who has noted that it is: “...actively situated between powerful systems of meaning... [Posing] questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography codes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes...”<sup>46</sup>

Although, as one scholar has pointed out, Clifford’s critical foray into ethnography in the West “disregards the role of black modernists and their appropriation of African art and primitivist aesthetic ideas in their work — a dynamic that complicates an already difficult matter,” his ideas on ethnographic discourse are of noteworthy importance to the discussion at hand.<sup>47</sup> For one thing, his description complicates the negative connotation attached to ethnographic pursuit as a clear-cut hierarchical arrangement of (white) colonizer exercising the power to describe or “know” the (dark-skinned) colonized ‘other.’ Both Clifford’s definition and Nash’s art confront the problem of who has control over the construction and naming of otherness and difference. Clearly, such exertion of control is not restricted solely to whites.

According to Clifford, all “ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode

of textualization.”<sup>48</sup> In the context of this essay, I consider ethnographic visualization as a kind of writing where the content is “Africa” in its broadest sense and the form used is the language of sculpture. Clifford argues that “the very activity of ethnographic writing — seen as inscription or textualization — enacts a redemptive Western allegory.” Ethnographic allegory, like ethnographic ideology, has political dimensions that are always present. So, despite their ethnographic veneer, the possible meanings attached to Nash’s Africans become open-ended because his figures have not been historicized. They are portrayed as exotic specimens in an “ethnographic present,” which, according to Clifford, “is always, in fact, a past.” Such representations “invite allegorical appropriations in the mythologizing mode...”<sup>49</sup> In other words, Nash’s African Nouveau figures emphasize the fact that “realistic portraits, to the extent that they are ‘convincing’ or ‘rich’, are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to ... additional meanings,” thereby calling to mind “the poetic, traditional, cosmological nature” of the processes of ethnographic writing/visualization.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Nash’s avowed afrocentrist project is vested in the “mythologizing mode” of what Africa looks like and what Africa means.

The theme of the “vanishing primitive” and the salvation of that which is disappearing, is a pervasive characteristic in a lot of ethnographic writing and visualizing practices.<sup>51</sup> For Clifford, this aspect of ethnographic practice is questionable in that it assumes a position of moral authority and superiority by the ethnographer vis-à-vis the “primitive.” Nash’s African Nouveau works attempt to salvage a lost or forgotten civilization whose members are not “real” people but who constitute a symbolically embodied idea(l) of a mythic place and time. They are constructed as ethnographic types used as vehicles for an afrocentric spiritual journey, tapping into a sense of African essence and pride. His ethnographic [re]vision is, for all intents and purposes, redemptive and highly romanticized.

## Afrocentrism to Afro-kitsch

Nash is one of many past and contemporary African American artists who have taken pride in mining the signs and symbols of Africa as the wellspring for creative inspiration. The artist has publicly stated that his work “is inspired by the colors, patterns, textures, symbols and faces of Africa.”<sup>52</sup> With his African Nouveau works, “Africa” is an idealized concept embodied in the depiction of invented personages who are simplified into glamorized and aestheticized racial types through patterning and decorative forms applied to the surface of the body. Although perhaps considered by some as a race-affirming move, Nash’s approach to his works is, in fact, reductive in that each piece does much to underscore the historical and aesthetic process of appropriation and inscription of the racialized, exoticized African, but here used to exult and justify sentiments of racial pride and black consciousness.

As an artist whose afrocentrism was rooted in his experiences of the 1960s and 1970s in America, Nash exemplifies the concerted interest by African Americans, Africans, and others

after WWII to spread “cultural pan-Africanism.” Indeed, African American sculptural practice and pan-African politics cannot be separated, for it is difficult in the production of art to deny cultural survivals and linkages between Africa and Afro-America.

Cultural pan-Africanism is a debate that signifies “a specific construction of black otherness and black cultural expression — whether perceived as a matter of race or history..., identity or identification — cross-culturally engaged in by blacks and whites alike.”<sup>53</sup> It is a debate that, throughout the last century, evolved alongside other contemporaneous phenomena such as *negrophilia*, primitivism, black modernism and *négritude*.<sup>54</sup> Particularly from the 1930s until the end of WWII, there was “a cultural identity politics attached to traditional African art by black diasporic artists and intellectuals who often added an alternate dimension of signification to the familiar ethnographic-aesthetic dualism detected in the agenda of most white negrophiles and modernist primitivists.”<sup>55</sup> Pan-Africanism is political in that it is intended as an “oppositional ideology” against the white man’s ideological dominance in the areas of “culture, politics, and historiography.”<sup>56</sup> It is also an intellectual pursuit associated with Black Nationalism in its “concern with ... establishing the existence of a racial-cultural bond between continental Africans and diasporan Africans.”<sup>57</sup> It is this pan-African line of thinking that provides the cultural and ideological contexts for thinking about Nash’s African Nouveau works.

Earlier in this essay, I questioned whether or not Nash’s African Nouveau sculptures were actually “new (nouveau)” or simply a form of commodified racial kitsch. It seems that when afrocentrism turns popular and commercial, the result is what is referred to as “afro-kitsch.” The art critic Clement Greenberg has described kitsch as failed seriousness.<sup>58</sup> There are two subgenres of kitsch that are relevant to Nash and the topic at hand: racial kitsch and afro-kitsch.<sup>59</sup> The former, a subgenre of kitsch proper, is racially stereotyped and distorted imagery that “attempts to say something profound, but can utter only clichés.”<sup>60</sup> This imagery is banal, but is in fact laden with meaning and often captivates us. “Afro-kitsch” is the more appropriate term for the kind of work Nash does.

The critical linking of Greenbergian kitsch to matters of blackness is credited to the Malian writer, scholar, and filmmaker, Manthia Diawara, who has used the term “afro-kitsch” in specific reference to African American art and its connection to the discourses of kitsch, afrocentricity, and blackness. Diawara recognizes that kitsch proper is a complicated and murky notion that “connotes the banal, the inauthentic, the cheap imitation.”<sup>61</sup> He refers to afro-kitsch as the ‘kitsch of blackness’ and he designates racial essentialism as its main culprit. For Diawara, afro-kitsch is “nothing but an imitation of a discourse of liberation.”<sup>62</sup> It is especially problematic in reference to black art production, where it can “embody and generate new discourses that may or may not be cutting edge or grounded in the material conditions of black people. Kitsch may or may not combine politics and culture in order to liberate.”<sup>63</sup> Because kitsch art functions to reinforce identification of the object put

forth and promotes consumption of it, it seems to be part and parcel of our postmodern situation and therefore designates Nash and his art as truly contemporary. For many a postmodern critic, kitsch, as easily marketable forms, speaks to a “kitschification” of contemporary culture, which has come to define the postmodern condition. One of the characteristics of kitsch is that it has tremendous popular appeal and, in this respect, Nash is definitely an artist of his time who, in the process, reminds us that kitsch can be aesthetically pleasing if not problematic for black cultural production whose formulation cannot avoid the creation of archetypes, prototypes, and stereotypes.<sup>64</sup>

It makes sense that Nash’s African Nouveau works are part of afro-kitsch insofar as afro-kitsch is a form of afrocentrism that simplifies or reduces the cultural complications of black identity. His works exemplify the “kitschification” of black culture in that they attempt to invoke, through colorful and romanticized ethnographic description, strategies of instilling notions of black(ness) is/as a beautiful as a form of cathartic transcendental identification with race and culture. Although these works do not directly question the *bête-noir* of black art — that is, notions of “authenticity” — they do complicate the matter. Afro-kitsch, like afrocentrism, is reductive and simplistic. Both exemplify “a retreat from ambiguity” and refuge from cultural complications associated with race.<sup>65</sup>

A meditation on afro-kitsch forces a rethinking of what blackness means and how blackness operates in and against Nash’s work. Indeed, Nash’s busts do elicit some very important and vexing questions about the intersectionality of blackness, gender, class, erotic desire, and the contemporary commodification and objectification of these by way of the ethnographically-marked body. These considerations ignite intense political, cultural, and as well as aesthetic tensions over affirmation of black identity formation and black consumerism.

So, taking into account afro-kitsch and all of its attendant complications, how might we define blackness in this instance? To do so, I return to Diawara, who defines blackness as “a modernist metadiscourse on the condition of black peoples in the West and in areas under Western domination. It is a modernist metadiscourse imbued with revolutionary potential. Blackness is a compelling performance against the logic of slavery and colonialism by those people whose destinies have been inextricably linked to the advancement of the West, and who, therefore, have to learn the expressive techniques of [post]modernity ... in order to become uncolonizable. Blackness ... always seeks to liberate spaces, to subvert orthodoxies, to give voice to the oppressed.”<sup>66</sup> Blackness is a term and concept that is “challenged in the hands of its postcolonial and postmodern subjects through such zones of ambivalence as identity formation, sexual politics, and hybridization, the postmodern subjects of blackness attempt to prevent it from falling into an essentialist trap.”<sup>67</sup> Can Nash’s African Nouveau works claim to accomplish any of this? Is there a redeeming or redeemable blackness in African Nouveau?

Germane to Afro-kitsch and to Nash’s “blackness” is the notion that the emergence and growth of Eurocentrism demands

a disavowal of Afrocentrism. In this regard, the full embrace of Afrocentrism would seem to provide the African American artist with an antidote against the onslaught of Eurocentric racist thinking (brainwashing?) in the West. The scholar Molefi Kete Asante defines Afrocentrism as “African genius and African values created, recreated, reconstructed, and derived from our history and experiences in our best interests ... It is an uncovering of one’s true self, it is the pinpointing of one’s center, and it is the clarity and focus through which black people *must* see the world in order to escalate.”<sup>68</sup> Asante’s conception of the African self as coherent, stable, pure, and therapeutic in its rediscovery is highly problematic. The African American literary scholar, Paul Gilroy, has expressed his trouble with Afrocentric thinking, lamenting that it “attempts to construct a sense of black particularity outside of a notion of a national identity,” promoting “sameness across national boundaries and between nation-states.”<sup>69</sup> As well, the concept is overly masculinist in its notion of a recaptured male mastery/command and female subservience in the context of the family and the nation. Afrocentrism also privileges the homogeneous group over the unique individual and is highly conservative in its promotion of a monolithic notion of family and community “values.” According to Gilroy, Afrocentrism has an absolute and perverse reliance on a model of the thinking and knowing of the racial subject, which differs from the double consciousness that preoccupied Du Bois and other black modernists.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

I would like to end this essay by reflecting on a striking promotional photograph of Woodrow Nash surrounded by several of his colorful African Nouveau pieces (Fig. 16). In a curious way, this image strikes me as reminiscent of an updated version of one of those many photographs from the not-too-distant colonial past in which the bewildered and camera-shy African “natives” are typically assembled for a group or “family” photograph and shown

surrounding the confident and proud patriarchal colonizer figure who was often positioned in the center of the photograph. This image reflects an altered version of the colonizer/colonized paradigm by showing an African American, who, with his dark skin and dreadlocks, is now in the colonizer’s central position of power. As a diasporic African, Nash has become the proud agent as well as the deferential subject of his own creation. He has refashioned blackness and his relation to it on his terms by embracing and exploiting past and present discourses of race. In some respects, the photograph is a self-portrait. By conjuring his own version of Africa and blackness, and then proudly situating himself amongst the assembled members of this elegant ancestral tribe that he has created, Nash has not only fashioned a community for himself, but has exemplified the extent to which the African American artist and the African American art world have taken on as their task “the rediscovery, reconstitution, reproduction, replication and delivery of black visual iconographic histories to their audiences, local and global.”<sup>71</sup>

Nash’s African Nouveau enterprise has evolved out of a marked European and American history of ethnographic sculptural practice that has endeavored to place race in a positive humanistic light. As a singular body of works, African Nouveau exemplifies the tensions and challenges that remain today for black cultural production, particularly when linked with commercial capitalism, consumerism, and attempts at fostering racial pride and cultural uplift. The burden of representation for the contemporary African American artist remains onerous.

---

James Smalls is Professor of Art History and Design History in the Department of Visual Arts and Affiliate Professor in the Department of Gender and Women Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His research interests and publications focus on the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in the art of 19th-century Europe and in the visual culture of the black diaspora. He is the author of *Homosexuality in Art* (Parkstone Press, 2003) and *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten: Public Face, Private Thoughts* (Temple University Press, 2006). He is completing a book-length manuscript entitled *Féral Benga: African Muse of Modernism*.



## Works Frequently Cited

- Bowles, John P. "New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures," in Cynthia Mills and Lee Clazer, *A Long and Tumultuous Relationship: East-West Interchanges in American Art* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum 2012), 143–157.
- Chandler, Robin M. "Xenophobes, Visual Terrorism and the African Subject," *Third Text*, vol. 35 (Summer, 1996), 15–28.
- Clifford, James and Marcus, George E. eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).
- Diawara, Manthia. "Afro-Kitsch," in Gina Dent, ed. *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1992), 285–291.
- Finamore, Michelle Tolini. "Fashioning the Colonial at the Paris Expositions, 1925 and 1931," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 7, issue 3–4 (2003), 345–360.
- LeFalle-Collins, Lizzetta. "Sargent Claude Johnson and Modernism: An Investigation of Context, Representation, and Identity," in Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Judith Wilson, *Sargent Johnson: African American Modernist* (San Francisco Museum of Art, 1998), 9–25.
- Lenihan, Mary L. et al. *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity* (Los Angeles, CA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995), exhibition catalog, 140–157.
- Mitchell, Rosalyn. "Phenomenal Sculptures: The Artistry of Woodrow Nash," *Homes of Color* (<http://www.homesofcolor.net/art-style/phenomenal-sculptures/>).
- Mutunhu, Sekai. "Introduction," *Woodrow Nash, African Nouveau: a Collection of Sculptures and Vases* (Madison, WI: Creative Ceramics, 1997), 1–4.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 371–391.
- Picton, John. "Desperately Seeking Africa (review)," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1992), 104–112.
- Schmeisser, Iris. *Transatlantic Crossings Between Paris and New York: Pan-Africanism, Cultural Difference and the Arts in the Interwar Years* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2006).

## Endnotes

1. See Geneva Smitherman, "'What Is Africa to Me?': Language, Ideology, and African American," *American Speech*, vol. 66, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 115–132.
2. Sekai Mutunhu, "Introduction," *Woodrow Nash, African Nouveau: a Collection of Sculptures and Vases* (Madison, WI: Creative Ceramics, 1997), 2; also see Rosalyn Mitchell, "Phenomenal Sculptures: The Artistry of Woodrow Nash," *Homes of Color* (<http://www.homesofcolor.net/art-style/phenomenal-sculptures/>).
3. <http://www.webwire.com/ViewPressRel.asp?ald=4903#.VHAPtIfoxgg>.
4. Rosalyn Mitchell, "Phenomenal Sculptures: The Artistry of Woodrow Nash," *Homes of Color* (<http://www.homesofcolor.net/art-style/phenomenal-sculptures/>).
5. The Grand Bohemian Gallery owns and has exhibited many of Nash's works. The gallery is located within luxury hotels and resorts of The Kessler Collection. Gallery locations can be found in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina. See <http://www.grandbohemiangallery.com/locations/>.
6. James Haywood Rolling, Jr., "Visual Culture Archaeology: A Criti/Politi/cal Methodology of Image and Identity," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2007), 3–25; 3.
7. From YouTube interview dated December 10, 2012. Found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-hl9wum\\_xM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-hl9wum_xM).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1997, 146–147.
10. Rosalyn Mitchell, "Phenomenal Sculptures: The Artistry of Woodrow Nash," *Homes of Color* (<http://www.homesofcolor.net/art-style/phenomenal-sculptures/>). The Kaleri were a fearsome African tribe in Nigeria known for their cannibalism and their distinctive scarifications.
11. On the historical and cultural significance of beads and cowry shells in 15th-century Benin society, see Akinwumi Ogundiran, "Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations of the Atlantic Experience in Yorubaland," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2/3 (2002), 427–457.
12. From YouTube interview on Woodrow Nash@HFAS-Harlem Fine Arts Show@EricLJones Show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GXLscZ2q2Q>. Posted February 14, 2013.
13. All of Nash's sculptures are handled exclusively through Higgins Harte International ([www.higginsharte.com](http://www.higginsharte.com)). From YouTube interview titled "Higgins Harte International presents the Sculptures of Woodrow Nash" posted on November 3, 2009. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzV\\_WaHQ6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzV_WaHQ6A).
14. Rosalyn Mitchell, "Phenomenal Sculptures: The Artistry of Woodrow Nash," *Homes of Color* (<http://www.homesofcolor.net/art-style/phenomenal-sculptures/>).
15. Iris Schmeisser, *Transatlantic Crossings Between Paris and New York: Pan-Africanism, Cultural Difference and the Arts in the Interwar Years* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2006), 24. On European and American colonial exhibitions and the treatment of ethnographic "others" as part of "human zoos," see Blanchard, Pascal et al., *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2008).
16. On Herbert Ward's ethnographic sculptures, see Kirsty Breedon, "Herbert Ward: Sculpture in the Circum-Atlantic World," *Visual Culture in Britain*, 265–283; Hugh Marles, "Arrested Development: Race and Evolution in the Sculpture of Herbert Ward," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1996), 16–28.
17. As of yet, there is no comprehensive critical study of African American sculpture and sculptural practice from its beginnings to the present. There are, however, a couple of excellent studies on the history and significance of sculpture in African American art during the Harlem Renaissance. See Mary L. Lenihan et al. *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity* (Los Angeles, CA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995), exhibition catalog, 140–157; Kirsten Pai Buick, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Sculptures of the Harlem Renaissance," in Cherene Sherrad-Johnson, ed., *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 317–335.
18. Lenihan, 140–41.
19. *Ibid.*, 146.
20. On the burden of representation in black diasporic visual culture, see Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text*, vol. 4, issue 10 (1990), 61–78.
21. On primitivism, see Sieglind Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Hal Foster, "Primitive Scenes," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), 69–102.
22. Robin M. Chandler, "Xenophobes, Visual Terrorism and the African Subject," *Third Text*, vol. 35 (Summer, 1996), 22.
23. See W. Jackson Rushing, "Primitivism" (Review), *Art Journal* 49, no. 4 (Winter 1990), 432.
24. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 246. On primitivism and its adoption by African-Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, see Robert A. Coles and Diane Isaacs, "Primitivism as a Therapeutic Pursuit: Notes Toward a Reassessment of Harlem Renaissance Literature," in Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin, eds., *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 3–12; Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

25. John Picton, "Desperately Seeking Africa (review)," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1992), 104.
26. *Ibid.*, 105.
27. Nash himself has confirmed the reception of his works less for their cultural significance and more for their exotic appeal. See Mutunhu, 2–3.
28. *Ibid.*, 5.
29. On African American figurative sculpture, see Mary L. Lenihan et al. *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity* (Los Angeles, CA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995), exhibition catalog, 140–157; 150.
30. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 243.
31. See Alain LeRoy Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925; reprint, New York: Maxwell MacMillan International, 1992), 264–266.
32. Lenihan, 149.
33. Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Sargent Claude Johnson and Modernism: An Investigation of Context, Representation, and Identity," in Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Judith Wilson, *Sargent Johnson: African American Modernist* (San Francisco Museum of Art, 1998), 17. Quoted from Verna Arvey, "Sargent Johnson," *Opportunity Journal of Negro Life* 17 (July 1939), 213.
34. John P. Bowles, "New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures," in Cynthia Mills and Lee Clazer, *A Long and Tumultuous Relationship: East-West Interchanges in American Art* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum 2012), 147.
35. Locke, "The African Legacy," 10, 11; "The American Negro As Artist," 218.
36. Lefalle-Collins, 15.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 18.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Michelle Tolini Finamore, "Fashioning the Colonial at the Paris Expositions, 1925 and 1931," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 7, issue 3–4 (2003), 345.
41. *Ibid.*, 347.
42. *Ibid.*, 346.
43. On Cordier's ethnographic sculptures, see Laure de Margerie, Edouard Papet et al., *Facing the Other, Charles Cordier (1827–1905) Ethnographic Sculptor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004). For an analysis of Cordier's works within the context of colonial politics and ethnographic sculpture, see my "Exquisite Empty Shells: Sculpted Slave Portraits and the French Ethnographic Turn," in Angela H. Rosenthal and Agnes Ortiz, eds., *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 283–312.
44. Schmeisser, 26–27.
45. Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 107.
46. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 2–3.
47. Schmeisser, 8.
48. Clifford and Marcus, 98.
49. *Ibid.*, 111.
50. *Ibid.*, 100.
51. *Ibid.*, 112.
52. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kindredspiritstudios/galleries/72>.
53. Schmeisser, 6.
54. *Ibid.*, 7.
55. *Ibid.*, 18–19.
56. See Bernard M. Magubane, *The Ties That Bind: African-American Consciousness of Africa* (Trenton, New Jersey, 1987), 230. Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 2.
57. Lemelle and Kelley, 3.
58. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 3–21.
59. On racial kitsch, see Tavia Nyong'o, "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 371–391, and Michael D. Harris, "Memories and Memorabilia, Art and Identity," *Third Text*, vol. 12, no. 44 (1998), 25–42. For a different take on kitsch and racism in visual culture, see Alexis Boylan, "Stop Using Kitsch as a Weapon: Kitsch and Racism," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, vol. 22, issue 1 (2010), 42–55.
60. Nyong'o, 371.
61. Manthia Diawara, "Afro-Kitsch," in Gina Dent, ed. *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1992), 285.
62. *Ibid.*, 287.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Chandler, 27.
65. Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 20.
66. Diawara, 290.
67. *Ibid.*, 291.
68. Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 14.
69. Paul Gilroy, "It's A Family Affair," in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 303–316; 305–306.
70. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 188.
71. Chandler, 23–24.