“a mean and pervers creature, black by her appearance and in her soul, surrounded by amulets and sorcery” (Loti [1992], 199).

It is significant that at this very moment when we hear Jean’s most appalling thoughts concerning his lover, the narrator intervenes by showing us Fatou’s point of view. We hear that Fatou is indeed capable of feeling remorse and that she knows that she has done something wrong by stealing Jean’s treasured possessions: “She understood that, being pushed by the evil spirits and her great desire for adornment, she had been bad” (Loti [1992], 200). Jean might have pardoned her once more, claims the narrator, had he known what was going on in her mind. On other occasions as well, it is revealed that Jean does not always make the right judgment with regard to Fatou. For instance, when Jean refers to her as the little monkey girl, Fatou dislikes the comparison and refuses it since, as she says, she knows language but the monkeys do not. Jean does not really stand corrected by this but continues to tease. The narrator, however, shows that Jean acts childishly: “smiling the great smile of a child who is having fun” (Loti [1992], 146). Jean does not really represent a position of clear authority in the novel. In this he is different from the hero “Loti” of Loti’s two first novels.

Loti’s novel systematizes for the first time a colonialist adventurer’s vantage point vis-à-vis the colonial setting. In its descriptive scenes the text accentuates not just the “madness” of all things African but also the protagonist’s growing disorientation. The overall effect is that—in lieu of portraying Africa truthfully—the text concentrates on the foreign culture’s effect on the protagonist. What is emphasized are the observer’s impressions, his reflections on his own transformation, including his conception of his own acculturation and relationship with the foreign woman, and his melancholic rapport with the old world (his parents, the loved one in France).

This opens up the possibility of a critical perspective—the rethinking of the whole experience of “contact”—that is perhaps latent in the novel. If the description of the other and of the encounter—how things are seen—cannot be separated from what is described—the ethnological content—and the narrator is also defined in and through his description, then what is a contact with another culture? For some modernist artists like Gauguin the desired effect of the intercultural encounter was the fantasy of being seen by the other in a scene of two-way gazing or, romantically, to become the other of one’s self (to become a real Maori). For others like Michaux, Segalen and Raymond Roussel, to return to Nicholls’s statement with which I started, the question posed by the encounter, whether real or imagined, concerned the very limits in the poet’s self-conception and the meaning in recognizing identity in others.

However, even if Loti’s novel may reflect the colonialist interests of his times it is not simple to pin down the exact ideological emphasis of Jean’s or the narrator’s changing perceptions. The narrator projects elaborate masks of the self onto the protagonist as Jean is gradually immersed in the foreign culture. Therefore, while Loti’s aesthetic reproduces stereotypical knowledge of the Africans in terms of the mentalité primitive, as far as Jean Peyral’s character is concerned, it is in no way based in a direct or unambivalent objectification of the other—a situation that, as Nicholls suggests, might constitute a recurring problem for the later modernisms. Instead of simply dichotomizing the human continuum into we/they contrasts and essentializing the resultant “other,” the novel also suggests an ambivalent and sometimes anxious relation to its own authority with regard to the depiction of the colonial country. Loti’s Africa and Africans are experienced both as objects to be controlled because of their inferior, “primitive” nature and as subjects of difference that enable the Western
traveler to forge his self anew. The latter possibility also comprises the revelation of a kind of critical limit to the application of standard criteria of evaluation. In this regard, Loti’s Africa suggests a sense of radical difference that may not simply pose a threat to the main character, but whose difference may be worth preserving (for the narrator, for the sake of description).

Several aspects in Jean and his life in Senegal reject the possibility or the very idea of objectifying the native people. Jean’s long-lasting friendship with an African Spahi Nyaor and Jean’s alternating feelings towards Fatou—even though he never admits that she is truly equivalent to him—speak to the contrary. The narrator’s ambivalent descriptions of certain African features like the desert also complicate the reading of Loti’s novel in terms of who or what is the true object of its knowledge and subjection. In effect, even though one may find many features of the novel simplifying and confused—and the association between the Africans and monkeys is certainly racist—or rather pathetic, like Jean’s relationship with his parents for instance, the depiction of Jean’s emotional involvement with “Africa” is multifaceted in a way that in itself makes the novel a challenging read.

Primitive Abstraction, Absolute Difference

*Le roman d’un spahi* both contributes to and questions the creation of absolute otherness that could protect a closed model of the self. The chapter-long “ethnographic” description of the griots, entitled “digression pédantesque sur la musique et sur une catégorie de gens appelés griots” (“A pedantic digression concerning the music and the people called the griots,” part II, chapter IV), is a case in point. The griots, it is said, are a special caste of men from Sudan, traveling musicians and composers of heroic songs who inherit the task from their fathers. The griots are also an outcast group, being excluded, for instance, from certain religious ceremonies and thus comparable to courtiers or gypsies in the West. What is significant is that in the narrator’s description of the *griots* the text nearly surpasses the sentiment of alterity between cultural forms and practices to an understanding that anticipates the (modernist) discovery of “negro art” at the beginning of the twentieth century. The inferiority of this art is rather a question than a certainty:

The persistent counter rhythm of the accompanists, and the unexpected syncopation, perfectly understood and observed by all the participants, were the most distinct characteristics of this art—inferior, perhaps, but assuredly very different from ours—that our European arrangements do not allow us fully comprehend. (Loti [1992], 135–6, my translation)⁹

The narrator does see the music of the griots as “inferior” to ours. Further, it may also add to exoticism and racism to point out that some things are “indescribable” because they are so different from ours. At the same time, however, a potentially disconcerting sense of pure difference enters the discourse in the same passage. The description of the griot offers a sense of disparity that could not be comprehended with regard to any criteria that the novel’s Western narrator is familiar with. Furthermore, the treatment of the griots and their art points to an assumption that all cultures can only be evaluated on their own terms.

The same passage thus foregrounds a type of primitivism in the novel that makes a critique of the Western perspective and the sense of its moral authority possible. Such self-criticism, however,
always remains within the same realm of authority that it questions. As Rhodes argues, the Modernist primitivists questioned the validity of the assumption that the Western viewpoint is superior to the primitive:

This emphasizes the profoundly equivocal issue that lies at the heart of Primitivism — although artists might entreat the primitive as support and justification for projected cultural or social change, this alteration is always expected to come from within the West. (Rhodes [1994], 13)

The interest in the primitive, Rhodes argues, was to reinvigorate Western society by confronting it with its deepest memories — seeking for the creativity and pleasure in the simplicity of life and expression. This included the intuitive and procreative urge, or a kind of sensibility that was obliterated by education, mechanical work, the modern living environment, and the like. It did not, however, necessarily mean that African works of art, like the music or the storytelling of the griots, functioned as a direct source of sensation. The “primitive” art that was a model for so many modernist artists from Gaugain and Picasso to André Breton became rather a kind of psycho-cultural aide-mémoire of the things repressed in the West (see Rhodes [1994], 14).

As James Clifford has so well argued in his study The Predicament of Culture (1988), the very aestheticisation of “primitive” artifacts in Modernism from cubism to surrealism meant removing them from their original context including functional, ritual, and other use, and appreciating them in their abstract form. In Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), for instance, the mask-like faces of the two women are almost entirely dehumanized. In Man Ray’s photograph Kiki (1926), Kiki and the African mask that she holds in her hand share the same oval shape. In Loti, the beauty of the black and the music of the griots take on an abstract aesthetic quality. This is inseparable from the threat which the foreign culture may pose to the observer and the form of debased sexuality that abstracted beauty, as in Picasso’s painting, insinuate to the Western spectator.

A similar sense of an absolute frontier, of a difference that cannot be surpassed, can also be found in the novel’s description of the African desert. There is a powerful fascination in the text with a sensation of a void for which the desert is the utmost symbol. For instance, the description of the rich multitude of things being sold at the market ends with a remark on the “platitude” of the desert as the final horizon for the multitude: “And always, always, the desert as the horizon, the infinite platitude of the desert” (Loti [1992], 198). This is not very different from Loti’s later text Le Désert (1895), where the desert is seen as the void that is too full of things. Here, as in Le Roman d’un spahi, the desert stands for a space that has been erased: a space in between “two mirrors that reflect each other without end” (Loti [1992], 174). The void of the desert is a locus of various motivations and emotions in conflict; it is a source of inspiration and a limit of experience against which a person can come into one’s own. While suggesting a horizon behind everything — for things to be seen — the desert also means the state of being in a void or in a place without a horizon.

In the griots’ tableau and the symbolic force of the desert, the other culture attains a form of absolute impenetrability. Such a situation creates an object at the limit of objectification, a kind of faux bond between the observer and the observed that can be related to the Derridean notion of the “wholly other” (someone who is literally unnamable and unimaginable). The confrontation with the “wholly other” mystifies the object but also prompts questions about the self’s position vis-à-vis the other and the limits of his knowledge.
Jean Peyral’s Predicament: Tourist, Resident, and Ethnologist

The aesthetic distance between the narrator and the protagonist in *Le roman d’un spahi* reiterates the problem of how one perceives the other. In this respect the novel is an example in self-transgression, to borrow a notion from Shoshana Felman ([1993], 6), since the text can be read as a challenge to the conscious ideologies of colonialism and orientalism that inform it. Such a reading, however, was clearly not easily available at the time of the novel’s publication. For most of his readers, Loti’s work functioned, as most of today’s critics would agree, as a sort of manual of how to embark on colonial service (Hughes [2001], 11) and as an encouragement to entertain “illusions of power and adulation in overseas lands” (Hargreaves [1981], 82).

Furthermore, the possibility of self-transgressive reading does not stem from a modernist unreliable observer or a self-ironic tonal play. Yet, contradictions arise. Jean’s perspective becomes a challenge to the text’s ideology because he lacks will power and because the narrator, on various occasions, stresses Jean’s changing attitudes, miscalculation and misjudgment, or shows pity for him. Jean cannot “prevent himself from succumbing to temptation”, as Clive Wake puts it ([1974], 82); he cannot control his most base desires. The narrator frequently depicts Jean’s weaknesses and evaluates him in ways that make the reader share the protagonist’s uncertainty vis-à-vis the foreign culture, without systematically downplaying Jean’s character. The desired effect of this dynamic may be to raise a sense of sympathy, pity, wonder or horror (or all of these together) in the reader. In any case, the effect is also, as some postcolonial theories have it, that Loti’s novel manifests the idea that cultural otherness is produced by a continual discursive process of “repetition and displacement” that instigates an ambivalence at the very site of imperial authority (see, for instance, Bhabha [1994], 97, 110). In its dynamic between the narrator and the main character, *Le roman d’un spahi* dramatises the fragility of the seam between ethnographic authority and the emotional response to the primitive.

The protagonist’s contradictory attitude towards the colonized land and people reflects the conflicts in his predicament. In *Le roman d’un spahi* there are at least five different kinds of roles that Jean approximates in his rapport with Africa—in which the African people and the African environment are to a large degree mutually interchangeable—but none of which he truly fulfils. He is 1) the implied ethnologist; 2) what Todorov calls the impressionist or the highly perfected tourist; 3) he actualises and dramatises the coloniser’s disintegrating self (thus anticipating characters like Conrad’s Kurz or Céline’s Robinson who refashion themselves in the heart of Africa); 4) he is a man performing a rite of passage; and finally 5) he is like the other of the other: he is like a griot, or the griots are Jean in a kind of distorting mirror. All of these roles anticipate and make way for later processes of characterization in modernist fiction.

An important notion to be explored in this respect is that Jean’s identity seems to be defined by the other’s gaze and judgment. Jean is not just the narrator’s focaliser or an object of his observation. Jean does not just want the other (Cora, Fatou) to desire him, but he would like to desire like the other. At one point, he eavesdrops on Cora and her new lover who talk about him. In the scene Jean is “seen through” by the other characters. He is devastated by what he hears, since it becomes obvious that for Cora Jean is merely an (exchangeable) object of desire—Cora says she loves “both