Paris and Havana: A Century of Mutual Influence

Laila Pedro

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, Latin American Languages and Societies Commons, and the Latin American Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/264

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Works by Year: Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
Paris and Havana:
A Century of Mutual Influence

by

LAILA PEDRO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Mary Ann Caws

04/22/2014
Date
Chair of Examining Committee

Francesca Canadé Sautman

04/22/2014
Date
Executive Officer

Mary Ann Caws

Oscar Montero

Julia Przybos

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

PARIS AND HAVANA: A CENTURY OF MUTUAL INFLUENCE

by

Laila Pedro

Adviser: Mary Ann Caws

This dissertation employs an interdisciplinary approach to trace the history of exchange and influence between Cuban, French, and Francophone Caribbean artists in the twentieth century. I argue, first, that there is a unique and largely unexplored tradition of dialogue, collaboration, and mutual admiration between Cuban, French and Francophone artists; second, that a recurring and essential theme in these artworks is the representation of the human body; and third, that this relationship ought not to be understood within the confines of a single genre, but must be read as a series of dialogues that are both ekphrastic (that is, they rely on one art-form to describe another, as in paintings of poems), and multi-lingual. Finally, I contend that these translational relationships must be examined within the greater context of twentieth-century modernisms, particularly Surrealism. I apply critical, theoretical and philosophical frameworks articulated by Édouard Glissant, Antonio Benítez Rojo, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to four case studies of inter-genre, inter-national, multilingual dialogues unfolding over the course of the century to reveal dynamic figurations of bodies that are at once visual, poetic and performative.
Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to many individuals for their support, insight, criticism and encouragement in this process.

My dissertation Director, Mary Ann Caws, has been an incomparable and indefatigable source of inspiration and guidance. It has been a profound privilege to work with her. The faculty of the Graduate Center’s French Program are peerless in their dedication and rigor. I have been extremely fortunate to work with Professors Julia Przybos, Francesca Canadé Sautman, Peter Consenstein, Oscar Montero, Distinguished Professor Domna Stanton, visiting Professor Sylvie Kandé, and the late and inimitable Édouard Glissant, and I am forever grateful to each of them. In my undergraduate work at Connecticut College, Rhonda Garelick inspired me to continue studying literature and art with a careful, critical, and questing eye.

This project would not have been possible without the unique collaborative energy of the Graduate Center. I am grateful to my cohort and fellow French Program students for their humor and perseverance. In particular, I am thankful to Phillip Griffith, whose insight and finely calibrated sensibility continually challenge and inform me.

Finally, I am thankful to my family for their unstinting support, and to my partner, Jethro Rebollar, for his loving patience and forceful encouragement. Most of all, I thank my mother, Esther Mosak, without whom this effort would have been impossible. This is dedicated to her.
A Note on Language

In the *The Task of the Translator*, the 1923 introduction to his translation of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin writes: “Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as a mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability. The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it? ”¹

All of the works I investigate in this study are notable for an essential, and subtle, translateability. They are in dialogue and interrelated, operating at the interstices and junctures of image, and text, language and culture, space and place.

Translation as a mode, therefore, underlies, and often defines, the critical approach I have taken to engaging these artists and their works. In some cases, as in the diaristic oeuvre of Anais Nin, translation is explored and deployed explicitly as a poetic device. In others, it is an inherent dynamic in the dialogue or exchange between artists and words (the correspondence between Casal and Moreau, for instance, comprises both linguistic translation and translation between artistic genres, or ekphrastic adaptaion).

In the process of analyzing these works, I relied upon texts in several languages (French, English, Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Portuguese), and on numerous editions and translations of written works. Because translation, translatability, and multi-lingual dialogue play an essential role in my analysis, I have had to make some complex strategic and structural decisions with regard to translation, adaptation, and sourcing. In some cases, for instance in the work of Édouard Glissant, there are substantial variations in some editions of texts. In others, I have

¹ Walter Benjamin. *The Task of The Translator*
furnished my own translation where I found it necessary to highlight aspects that previous translators had not chosen to focus on. For many of these works, the existing translations were more than sufficient, so I relied on them. My own translations, or places where I have relied on multiple editions or different translation sources, are noted in the text. I have striven to be, to use Benjamin’s phrase, an adequate translator of these images and words.
# Table of Contents

A Note on Language ........................................................................................................ viii

**Chapter 1: Space and the Critical Imagination: Aesthetic Affinity and the Antilles** .................. 12

II: Benítez Rojo: Rupture and Repitition ........................................................................ 39

**Chapter 2: Inscribed Surface and Tattooed Verse: Julián del Casal and Gustave Moreau** ...... 46

**Chapter 3: Of Nerve-Meters and Nervous Conditions: Antonin Artaud and Anaïs Nin Translate the Speaking Body** ........................................................................................................ 82

I: The Vessel .................................................................................................................. 84

III: Errant Exile; Madman ............................................................................................... 96

III: La belle infidèle ........................................................................................................ 111

**Chapter 4: Lyric and Look: Wifredo Lam and Aimé Césaire** ........................................ 133

I: Seeing the Seers ......................................................................................................... 133

II: “Des os qu’explosent grand champs” ......................................................................... 143

III: The Cane Field: Line and Limit in Wifredo Lam ....................................................... 153

IV: “À la limite de la terre et de la mer” ......................................................................... 177

**Chapter 5: The Body and The Blood: Severo Sarduy Unexiled** ..................................... 189

**Conclusion** ............................................................................................................... 223

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 234
List of Illustrations


Figure 7, p. 156. Lam, Wifredo, Fata morgana. Print in Breton, André. Signe ascendant. Paris : Gallimard, 1999.

Figure 8, p. 158. Lam, Wifredo, Fata morgana. Print in Breton, André. Signe ascendant. Paris : Gallimard, 1999.


Introduction: Reading the Image

This work began as an investigatory exercise into seemingly disparate subject matters: aesthetic representations of the body and intercultural dialogues, Cuban painting and French poetry, Surrealism and conceptual art. These widely ranging topics, however, are all touched, altered, and inflected by modalities of reading and seeing. In the twentieth century, in the wake of tremendous political, social, and cultural upheavals, the reworking and reconceptualizing of the modern world in artistic terms produced a dizzying array of aesthetic modes of production, with an almost endless capacity for variation and experimentation. The increased ease and speed of transportation, along with the massive human movements triggered by the two World Wars, created richer grounds for intercultural dialogue and connection than had previously existed, and generated an extensive series of cosmopolitan dialogues, yielding new spaces for aesthetic affinity, influence, and collaboration.

Unquestionably, the Surrealist movement played a central role in transforming what art meant and how it could be expressed. The enacted practices of collage, multi-media production, sound experimentation, and highly randomized, subjective techniques like automatic writing, cadavre exquis, and hypnotism exploded the framework of what art could be and how it could be produced. Additionally, Surrealism’s relationship to desire and fascination with exotic forms placed the human body at the center of new artistic philosophies: color, shape, and sex become increasingly crucial and explicit frontiers for exploration and expression. This, combined with the aforementioned geographical and societal upheavals, yielded an unparalleled blend of cultural and artistic exchanges.

These exchanges were further complicated by the politics of crumbling empires and the legacies of various colonial projects. As national identities and boundaries shifted and
transformed, so, too, did traditional notions of who or what was a valid subject for art, and how these should be addressed.

These massive currents and transformations in twentieth century artistic production raise a host of important questions. It is my intention, with this study, to explore some of these questions—particularly those linked to the representation of the body and who it operates within and between established genres of art and literature—within the specific cultural modality of Cuban and French and Francophone artists in the interwar period. As two cultures famed for their artistic production, but divided by language, the surprisingly lengthy and evolving correspondence between the two is a fascinating trend in the evolution of global modern art and the aesthetics of diaspora and exile.

This dissertation employs an interdisciplinary approach to trace the history of exchange and influence between Cuban, French, and Francophone Caribbean artists in the twentieth century. I argue, first, that there is a unique and largely unexplored tradition of dialogue, collaboration, and mutual admiration between Cuban, French and Francophone artists; second, that a recurring and essential theme in these artworks is the representation of the human body; and third, that this relationship ought not to be understood within the confines of a single genre, but must be read as a series of dialogues that are both ekphrastic (that is, they rely on one art-form to describe another, as in paintings of poems), and multi-lingual. Finally, I contend that these translational relationships must be examined within the greater context of twentieth-century modernisms, particularly Surrealism. I apply critical, theoretical and philosophical frameworks articulated by Édouard Glissant (1928-2011), Antonio Benítez Rojo (1931-2005), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) to four case studies of inter-genre, inter-national,
multilingual dialogues unfolding over the course of the century to reveal dynamic figurations of bodies that are at the same time visual, poetic and performative.

The Caribbean is an unparalleled cultural and artistic blend, uniting, unmaking, and refashioning elements from different countries, languages and expressive practices. Within this context, the Cuban diaspora, with its significant number of artists and writers working across the Americas and Europe, embodies not only the particular heritage of the Antilles but also reflects the consequences and implications of modernist movements in the twentieth century. It is this intersection of imagination, geography, affect and art produced by artists of the Cuban diaspora that I propose to explore as it comes into contact with French and Francophone modes of artistic production.

Édouard Glissant’s notion of a *poétique de la relation* (poetics of relation), especially in its conceptualization of exile and displacement, is indispensable to understand the artistic production of the Cuban diaspora and its long cultural and artistic relationship to France and the Francophone world.

My research is also informed by what Edward Soja has called a “spatialization of the critical imagination”\(^2\)—a theoretical approach that posits a close rapport of affect and expression to geography and geographical context. Of particular interest to my research are ways in which notions of departure and return haunt the work: does the idea of trajectory, as Glissant suggests, no longer apply? Can we find, in the long history of collaboration between exiled Cuban, French, and Francophone artists a poetics of relation that “interweaves and no longer projects, that inscribes itself in a circularity”?\(^3\)

---

Figurations of the body as narrative horizon within the historical and artistic contexts of the twentieth century are an essential and recurring theme in the three cross-cultural case studies that I examine in my dissertation: Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Anais Nin (1903-1977), Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) and Wifredo Lam (1902-1982), and Severo Sarduy (1937-1999), who I approach as two artists in one man and in dialogue with himself, examining him first as writer and then as painter (and always as exile). For both artists in each case study the body is a recurring theme that I propose to analyze in a comparative and dialogic fashion. I will thus discover and analyze the multilingual and multicultural dialogue between a French or Francophone writer or artist and a Cuban counterpart strongly influenced by or directly connected to Surrealism or surrealist tendencies.

In this study, I incorporate various historicizing and conceptual approaches to Cuban and French/Francophone modernism into a cogent critical method that will allow me to examine a particular strain of artistic production within the broader context of twentieth-century Surrealism. Because of its hybrid nature, my research operates at various junctures of existing scholarship. Crucially for my project there are no studies that examine the aesthetic rapport between Cuba and France in the twentieth century. I find that the greatest lacunae in terms of addressing the aesthetic rapport between Cuba and France in the twentieth century amount to systematic practices of reading in Latin American and French studies. With some notable exceptions, these leave significant currents of dialogue unexplored and create some rather flat geographical and affective topographies, limiting our reading of artworks that are rich in nuance and signification. In examining the particular strain of Cuba’s relation to France and the Francophone world from the perspective of relation, we see a narrative often lumped in with the rest of Latin America (a

---

recent article on “modernism from the periphery” referred to the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam as a “Mexican primitivist”)⁵, even obscured by other events, and rarely accorded an investigation of its own. The particular tenor of Cuba’s relationship to France and “la Francophonie” remains in large part unexplored. The interpretive possibilities afforded by the Caribbean generally and by modernism in particular, demand a specific, historically informed understanding of the rapport between the artistic capital of modernity and the largest of the Antilles.

My analysis is theoretically informed by both Francophone and Cuban critical traditions. To trace the legacies of modernist avant gardes we must acknowledge a cultural context in which, as Antonio Eligio Fernandez and Kenya Dworkin write, “The islands (of art, of the poem, and the actual one that floats in the Caribbean) now exist as stereotypes”⁶ In fact Fernandez and Dworkin articulate a problem that manifests itself again and again: the unsatisfactory and ultimately perhaps impossible task, of labeling the island, or The Islands, in any definitive way. As the two write, “They are empty spaces, cracks in the landscape, placed there to welcome expectations, to satisfy the desires of those who label, who name, who perceive.” ⁷

This perception of the island(s) as an empty, waiting space is in fact not part of some binary relationship of oppression and imposition, but rather an element in the broader multidimensional construction articulated both philosophically and artistically by Glissant. Indeed, what Fernandez sees as a passive waiting-to-be-named is part of the broader process of becoming that defines the Antilles. When Glissant writes “Indes! Ce fut ainsi, par votre nom cloué sur la folie, que commença la mer!” [“Indies! It was thus, by your name nailed upon

⁶ Antonio Eligio Fernández and Kenya Dworkin "The Island, the Map, the Travelers: Notes on Recent Developments in Cuban Art"in boundary 2 Vol. 29, No. 3, From Cuba (Autumn, 2002), pp. 77-89.
⁷ Fernandez and Dworkin
madness, that the sea began!” he is establishing a much more nuanced reading of the Indies, one founded not on geography, not on a passive land waiting, in a pre-Columbian stupor, waiting to be named, but on madness, that is, on unreliable subjectivities defined by and embodied in the constantly-fluctuating oceans. Les Indes, along with other of Glissant’s works, is a keystone in reading the artistic production of the Caribbean, as it mimics the expressive ordering of the Caribbean both thematically and structurally. The organization of the poem makes it difficult to address any one section independently, reflecting the impossibility of dealing with a single island in the Caribbean outside of its relationship to all the rest. This polyphonic chaos gives birth to new expressive worlds.

Glissant provides philosophical, theoretical and artistic touchstones from the Francophone world; for the Cuban perspective I turn to Benítez Rojo, for whom the construction of the Caribbean is not merely the product of a European traversal of the Atlantic but is rather the linchpin that enables the rest of the world to conceive spatially of itself. As he writes in The Repeating Island,

Let us be realistic: Today the Atlantic is the Atlantic (with all its port cities) because once it was the product of Europe—that insatiable solar bull—copulating with the coasts of the Caribbean; Today the Atlantic is the Atlantic—the navel of capitalism—because Europe, in its mercantile laboratory—conceived the plan of inseminating the Caribbean with the blood of Africa…because it was the birth pangs of the Caribbean…After the flow of blood and saltwater, the immediate stitching of the flaps, the application of history’s antiseptics, the gauze and tape of positivie ideologies; then the fertile wait for the scar; suppuration, always suppuration.

In some ways, then, Benítez Rojo has gone further than Glissant, for the European world becomes not simply an actor in the process of créolisation, but is a direct product of the invention of the Caribbean. The Atlantic, he tells us, is only the Atlantic because we have conceived it in relation to the Caribbean. As a jumping off point for my research, I identify here

---

an important train of thought, which is one that constantly shifts the relationships between margins and centers and grants the historical development of language the power to (quite literally) shape the world.

Benítez Rojo and Glissant both evince in their writing next thematic constant in my analysis: the marked tendency to conceptualize the Caribbean in distinctly corporeal terms. For Glissant, the impossible, wrong ships of the middle passage become the wombs of the new world; for Benítez Rojo, the Caribbean gives birth to our modern understanding of it. In Benítez Rojo, in Glissant, and in the work of the artists with whom I engage, modernistic discursive practices constantly circle back to the body. In these explicitly physical writings and paintings, two things become clear. First, that they are frequently influenced by a particular aesthetic tendency, a taste for transgression directly inspired by the Surrealist movement; and second, that this particular tendency has tended to have a strong emphasis on the body and its transgressive and expressive potential. In the following chapters I present a series of four international, inter-genre artistic dialogues over the course of the twentieth century that refashion and reimagine the represented body in a distinctly modernist poétique de la relation.

Antonin Artaud’s *Le pèse-nerfs* is a hybrid work that consists of a seemingly-random amalgam of genres: it is in parts a work of prose, a series of poems, and a tiny play (its last word is “Curtain”, emphasizing its quality of performativity). The text, partly legible as the artists’ description of his existence and process, floats through the themes of creation, gestation, interdependency, and dismemberment. The body Artaud envisions is not limited by the assemblage of categories to which it can be reduced, rather, it is a mode of imagining that posits existence as deriving from the body. Philosophy and ontology are expressed in terms of material existence, everything is ruled by what could be called a metaphorics of the body. For Artaud “…
le ventre, les seins, sont comme les preuves attestatoires de la réalité.” (“The belly, the breasts, are the evidence of reality.”) 10 Artaud's complex concept of the body finds its interlocutor in the hyper-sexual, feverishly Freudian, always heteroglot prose of his onetime lover, the French-Cuban émigrée Anais Nin's, and the dialogue between the two artists sheds a fascinating light on the polyphonic body. The indelible imprint of modernism broadly and of Surrealism in particular is clearly recognizable in this shifting, fluctuating existence—Nin’s trajectory took her from Cuba to France and Spain, Artaud found exile in asylums and, paradoxically, at home. Refusing geographical permanence or linguistic stasis, Nin instead developed what Glissant might call a “creolized” voice. Her project of art, language and memory cannot be situated within a particular history or language tradition; it exists at the confluence of several. Her literary language, in fact, is translated before even being written: while she chooses to write in English, it is an English pervaded by the rhythms and formulations of French. Nin began her diaries at the age of eleven; already, her writing was defined by an intersection of genres, for her early diary could be considered as a kind of epistolary catharsis, since its entries were made up mostly of letters written to her absent father after he abandoned the family.

The body central to the surrealist project also appears at its margins, with those who opposed mainstream Surrealism and whose dissent is a kind of aesthetics of transgression. The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's particular aesthetic rapport was with music. Apart from his modernist crónicas and essays on music in Cuba, music is everywhere in his texts, most notably in El Acoso, where the climax of the novel coincides with the apogee of a performance of Beethoven's Apassionata. This musicality would prove problematic when Carpentier began collaborating with Surrealists after his friend Robert Desnos helped him flee the Machado

régime, for as Anke Birkenmaier has written, "Breton made his distaste for music and sound known." Carpentier’s was also an ongoing mental voyage between the European continent and the Caribbean archipelago. His position as a foreigner was echoed by Desnos's position as alienated from Breton's Surrealism. Between the Carpentier and Desnos developed a great affinity, characterized by a distinctly modern flexibility of genre at odds with Breton's more limited idea as to what was allowed to penetrate the Surrealist corpus. Together, they undertook a series of multi-genre projects, including a radio broadcast on Radio-Paris about Cuban music, which also included Antonin Artaud and other disillusioned Surrealists, using the modern medium of the airwaves to question the limits of the text.

If the bodies of Carpentier and Desnos rely on sound, performativity, and poetic musicality, the bodies “flowing” between Wifredo Lam and Aimé Césaire (friends, collaborators, and giants of Caribbean modernism) exist at the intersection of paint and lyric poetry. An evaluation of the painted bodies in the work of Wifredo Lam reveals their unique style, their grand narrative and their uncanny ability to unmake and refashion accepted notions of looking and seeing, in much the same way Césaire undoes received notions of poetic structure and harmony. The two come together in Césaire's poem Wifredo Lam. The transformation and absorption of the painter and the painting into the poetic work illustrate the confusion of subjectivities, for Césaire is broadening not only the limits of the poem, but also that of the artist. *Wifredo Lam...* is not only a poem, but rather the celebration, the lyrical approximation, or the performative articulation of a poetic relation and an aesthetic *rapprochement*. In his paintings, Lam undoes visual limits, investing them with a fleeting quality; in Césaire’s writing, we see how by an original use of ekphrasis, the painter and painting are captured in poetic form: "rien

---

Césaire’s poem is propelled by a forceful engagement with the world, reinventing its frames and its narrative horizons. Césaire announces, with his poetry, that "le cycle de genèses vient sans préavis/d'exploser (‘the cycle of geneses has just without warning exploded’)." Césaire’s writing and Lam’s painting become intermingled in Césaire’s poem, and together they illustrate an undoing of the category of genre that is not limited to poetry. Wifredo Lam, could in fact considered is a kind of passage between various artistic categories and subjectivities. Lam’s painting, and its transformation in Césaire’s poetry, articulate an artistic practice founded in multiplicity, fragmentation, and the aesthetic construction of a new world. This practice evokes a Glissantian tout-monde, an artistic concept that is beyond the limits of genre and qualification.

The final chapter of my dissertation takes on a somewhat unusual dialogue, in that it will deal with one artist’s relation to himself. Sarduy, Castro-era exile to Paris, is best known as a writer of plays, novels, criticism, and essays that bear the unmistakable impress of the Sade-Lautréamont-Bataille lineage, its concern with démesure, rejection of limits, and transgressive representation of the human body and its sexuality. This is evident in works such as Escrito sobre un cuerpo, which draws on a rich set of influences unfettered by nationality to create a new kind of conceptual corpus.

Sarduy was also deeply concerned, as were the others I will have dealt with, with the transformations and aesthetic potential of the human body; his is among the most deeply carnal aesthetic engagements I address. The great dénouement of Sarduy’s story, however, is his existence as two artists. After his death from AIDS, the Museo Reina Sofia held a major

---

retrospective of his works on canvas, paper, tree bark and other surfaces, on which he used acrylic, ink, coffee and his own blood, to translate his bodily subjectivity beyond medium and frame.

There are three main themes that become clear in the dialogic study of these Franco-Cuban encounters. First, the thread of Francophone/French/Cuban dialogue is a unique one, with particular complexities and tonalities, within the broader scope of Franco-Caribbean modernist discourse. Within this thread, the body plays a highly charged role as signifier and medium. This is due to on the one hand, the relationship to Surrealism and its Sadean heritage, and, on the other, to the constantly fluctuating, exiled, geographically flexible experience many of these artists lived. Through the transformation of art works and genres that colored modernism more broadly, these dialogues in French and Cuban incarnated a particular mode of being over the course of the long twentieth century.
Chapter 1

Space and The Critical Imagination: Aesthetic Affinity and the Antilles

I: “J’écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde.”¹³

The Caribbean is a unique, mutable, and dynamic network of spaces and symbols that generates a particular kind of artistic and philosophical production. Much has been written about its artistic and cultural complexities; its very nature, as variously addressed by the artists and theorists with whom I engage here, is such that it is constantly fluctuating and reinventing itself (or being reinvented). It is therefore a space that is always in need of new, flexible, and overlapping approaches for historical and aesthetic analysis.

In this first chapter I establish the framework for one such new analysis: an examination of the particular rapport between Cuba, the French Caribbean, and France in the context of twentieth-century modernism. In parsing the relationship of aesthetic affinity between Cuban, French, and Franco-Caribbean artists, writers, poets, and scholars it is my intention, first, to bring focus and attention to a particularly rich, but understudied history of creative exchange, and, secondly, to create and employ an appropriate theoretical praxis to that history, whose special development in the context of cosmopolitan twentieth-century modernism is deeply complex and requires a highly specific approach. Because it concerns multiple cultures, two different but parallel and intertwined colonial histories, and two major European literary traditions in addition to the multiple poetic histories of the Caribbean itself, this history should be addressed in multi-

¹³Edouard Glissant
faceted, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual way, so that the various elements are accorded the attention they merit in vocabularies appropriate to their context. It is necessary, for example, to rely on theoretical and literary approaches from both Francophone and Hispanophone traditions that grapple with the specific complexities of the Franco-Cuban legacy.

One essential component of this is the particularly geographical, spatially informed reading of history the Caribbean requires. In recent scholarship, especially since the 1990’s, we have seen theorists such as Edward Soja arguing to (re)validate a “spatialization of the critical imagination”. In other words, geography and affect are illuminating, perhaps even essential players for a full view of modernistic practices, and especially crucial in evaluating the Caribbean’s polymorphous blend of cultures, languages, and literatures. Not only do such geographically-informed readings have particular relevance to the fast-paced, hyper-mobile avant-gardes of the twentieth century, which, as a consequence of improving technologies for transport and communication, much more cosmopolitan and international than anything that preceeded them, they also suggest, even demand, a critical and theoretical praxis whose traces are evident in the theoretical and applied philosophies of the two major theoretical framers of my work. Édouard Glissant (and some of his pupils) inform my historical and theoretical context from the Francophone perspective, and Antonio Benítez Rojo, from the Cuban. Dominique Chancé writes that “Parler d’une poétique baroque du Nouveau Monde ou de la Caraïbe, c’est donc s’interroger sur ce qui rapproche, dans l’écriture et la vision, des auteurs de langues et de nationalités différentes, réunis par une même situation historique et géographique.”

As I will make clear in the following chapters, an ekphrastic, dialogic reading within geographic sites of feeling (spaces/places that, additionally, are constantly transformed by the political and technological upheavals of the twentieth century) yields a fuller, richer picture of

---

14 Chancé, *Poétique baroque de la Caraïbe*, p. 7
the cosmopolitan and heteroglot nature of twentieth century modernism’s international transmutations than has thus far been explored. The necessarily interdisciplinary, multi-genre nature of this work consequently requires a similarly multi-faceted critical approach. This chapter, then, will demonstrate how a dialogic reading of Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation*, *Les Indes*, and *Le sel noir*, in dialogue with Benítez Rojo’s *La isla que se repite: el caribe y la perspectiva postmoderna* allow us to parse the complex questions raised by Franco-Cuban dialogues over the course of the twentieth century, revealing new networks of affinity and signification. Furthermore, I examine these works through the lens of a particular set of philosophical, critical and artistic practices: those influenced by, responding to, and in relation with the Surrealist movement that framed so much of artistic discourse and production in the twentieth century, and whose relationship to the Africanized, Creolized other yields both revealing problematics and spaces of tremendous potential.

A comprehensive, critical reading of some of the major thinkers in recent Caribbean scholarship, reveals two major themes. One, they are often influenced by, or come to rely upon a particular aesthetic strain, a surrealist strain that is both directly inspired by the surrealist movement, and part of a broadly historical expressive tendency. In his classic anthology of modern art, Herschel B. Chipp articulated the distinction, in using the terms Surreal/Surrealism/Surrealistic, etc. between “one of the important poles to which art has always been drawn,” [that is, a common tendency or taste for *démésure* evidenced by Sade, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, etc.] and the way it was codified in “the ideology of an organized group of artists and writers [in Paris in the ‘20’s].” Secondly, that this particular strain has always placed a strong emphasis on the body and on the transgressive and expressive potential it contains; and thirdly, that the implications, practices and representations of this tendency become
even more emphatically and necessarily carnal/corporeal in the Caribbean and in works/artists traveling in and out and through it. The body, with all its various codings and inscriptions, appearing again and again in this work, from the mermaids Wifredo Lam drew for Breton’s *Fata Morgana*, to the hybrid beasts that appear in Césaire’s poem *Wifredo Lam*, becomes a central vehicle, mode, and participant for expressing aesthetics, poetics, and ontologies.

As Gail Weiss has pointed out, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl are the philosophical framers of this particular way of seeing or deploying the body. The philosophical notion of the horizon as she applies it in her essay *The body as narrative horizon*—that is, as a “perceptual field that itself serves as a kind of background against which, and by means of which, the object is perceived” (Weiss, 26)—is particularly useful to our conceptualizing of the body within the contexts of modernism and the Caribbean. “To say the body is a text...means that it is not outside of or opposed to discourse but is itself discursively constructed.” (Weiss, 25). We can then apply the discursive rules governing the body to our interpretation of image and text. Of special importance is her Merleau-Pontian assertion that “To acknowledge the overlapping of horizons, then, involves a recognition that my horizons and your horizons mutually inform one another and therefore mutually inform the way in which we configure our experiences.” (Weiss, 28). This phenomenologically informed approach, privileging and enacting a radically subjective reading of the art experience, is a common, if multifaceted and mutable, trait, of the works I address here. Because of its strong aesthetic and experiential affinities with surrealistic and Antillian modes of creative production, it is eminently suited to an evaluation of various artistic Franco-Cuban artistic rapports and practices (though as we saw previously, such an endeavor becomes by necessity globally inclusive at least in some measure of the Caribbean as a socio-historical and artistic context). In Glissant’s writing and poetry, for example, the body of the slave appears
constantly; in fact, one verse of *Les indes* is dedicated almost entirely to descriptions of the Middle Passage with language that is linked explicitly and repeatedly to the body. Furthermore, as Cilas Kemedjio points out in his essay *Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Édouard Glissant*, “Antillean society did not exist prior to the slave trade…The slave trade produced slave bodies.” We are faced with a society founded specifically upon the practice of slavery, which, in turn, depends upon a specific coding of the physical human body. This body-dependent construction repeats and transforms throughout Antillean history and is a common feature of the Antillean writers I address in the following chapters. Sarduy and Benítez Rojo both deal with physical displacement and constantly use bodily metaphors to address their subjective experience and the broader experience of the Caribbean, and both are also deeply influenced by French. Sarduy, though he consciously, and crucially, rejected the identity of exile, lived in France for a major part of his adult life and most of his productive critical and artistic career; he died in Paris in 1992.

In investigating the question posed by Kemedjio (and distilled from Glissant), of “Just who are actors and what are the methods that contribute to the production and re-production of slave bodies…?” two important things arise for me. One, that all bodies, enslaved or not, within the Antillean cosmology are slave bodies in the sense that they are coded as part of or in relation to the plantation system and its historical implications. Two, that over the course of the twentieth century the question of what, precisely, the body means, and of its role in artistic production, becomes extremely important, as evidenced in the work of major philosophers in the Husserlian lineage (such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *L’oeil et l’esprit*: “...on ne voit pas comment un Esprit pourrait peindre. C’est en prêtant son corps au
monde que le peintre change le monde en peinture. Pour comprendre ces transsubstantiations, il faut retrouver le corps opérant et actuel, celui qui n'est pas un morceau d'espace, un faisceau de fonctions, qui est un entrelacs de vision et de mouvements.”

The body’s operation in the generation of the artwork is thus revealed, in this philosophic tradition, to be essential, and the artistic product inseparable from the body that created it.

To parse these philosophies, and to clarify the role they play in my approach, it is necessary to link them explicitly to some of the work I’m engaging historically. Many of the figures associated with Chipp’s “organized group of artists and writers”, those officially self-identified with André Breton’s Surrealist movement, deal with the Glissantian démésure as well as with the particular importance of the body. Much has been written about the Surrealist fascination with “other” bodies (Bataille’s black bondage photos, Brancusi’s blonde negresses, the general fascination with African bodies and forms inherited from Cubism and logically tied to the obsession with the desired other). The tension articulated between Josephine Baker as an icon and a victim of racist domination points to what has been serious concern in reading the Surrealist relationship to the body of the other. This tension, however, is also, and crucially, part of a productive, generative dialogue that bears strong affinities to Glissant’s poetics of encounter. As Mary Ann Caws has written,“Breton considers the surreal as a dialogue with the other (with what is encountered by way of dreams, coincidences, correspondences, the marvelous, the uncanny; a reciprocal exchange, connecting conscious and unconscious thought….the ultimate truth resides in the interchange itself, as well as in its very possibility.”

Through the use of these dialogic encounters, pregnant opacities, “reciprocal exchanges,” “Breton’s voice [the official voice of the Surrealist movement]…prepares us for the inclusion of the other voices necessary for us to hear.”

A major question that arises is what I see as an opposition of praxis: at one end the perception of the body as a metaphorical model and inspiration for artistic production, at the other a mode of thought that conceives of the body as an assemblage of categories (race, sex, gender, nationality) which it is impossible to transcend. One work in this model is Martine Antle’s *Cultures du surréalisme: les représentations de l’Autre*. While dealing with nominally underrepresented categories of Surrealistic artistic production, she places artists in categories like “women” and “primitivist”. Some of her assertions, such as the oft-repeated and important maxim that “le surréalisme placé dans ses rapports avec la pluralité culturelle, se dérobe à nouveau à toute interpretation facile et globalisante” are highly relevant for my work, although I disagree with some readings I find reductive, such as the notion that the only Surrealist artist to be influenced by travel and multiple backgrounds was Remedios Varos. Similarly she asserts that Breton accorded limited voice to the Haitian artists he encountered, while neglecting his longstanding relationship with Wifredo Lam, many of whose works he titled and who illustrated his book *Fata Morgana*. Such works make clear both the potential raised by Surrealism in dealing with differently coded or categorized bodies, and the multiple problems and disagreements these bodies can raise.

Some readings of bodies as they relate to these categories provide useful models that can be applied beyond their explicit intentions. Anne Anlin Cheng’s work on Josephine Baker, for instance, is not of interest to me solely for its historical analyses of Baker’s performances, but because in fact it presents a mode of reading bodies that can be applied to broader readings of bodies in the Surrealist, interwar and postwar periods. When Cheng writes that “Baker’s “dream of a second skin, a desire that is shared by both modernists seeking to be outside their own skin and by racialized subjects looking to free themselves from the burden of racial legibility….To
lose oneself in these images is to surrender to a drama about the immanent possibilities of personhood and its frightening-yet-seductive affinity for objectness, ” she is raising some of the complex and illuminating possibilities that arise when we read these artworks from a perspective that takes the body as a central and essential metaphor,. This perspective has particular implications in the twentieth century and for artistic exchange between visual artists and writers, as well as for artistic communication across social and cultural borders. Likewise, Petrine Archer-Straw’s historical situation of “la négrophilie” establishes historical context for the way these categories operated within Surrealism and other movements of modernity, giving necessary nuance and complexity to our readings.

It is in this sense that the particularly hybrid bodies of the Caribbean are interesting to me, for they have the potential to transcend reductive racially-coded readings and reflect the much more promising, Deleuzian polyvalency of the body in surrealist artistic practice. Because binaries of master and slave, black and white (and in-between), European, Créole, and other so often become intermingled or confused, they have the potential to suggest other qualities. In much the way that hybrid religions like voodoo and santería emerge as products of the trans-Atlantic encounter, new artistic vocabularies emerge to suit the needs of the bodies in question, which are no longer purely Black, or purely White, but part of a new and dynamic system, pieces in a process.

Across the Atlantic, the Surrealists (who, in the new cosmopolitan world, would often come into contact with and influence Caribbean thinkers), were likewise engaged by questions of corporeal representation and transforming bodies. The body central to the surrealist project also appears at its margins, with those who opposed mainstream Surrealism and used it as a key weapon in an aesthetics of transgression. It is in this sense that Bataille’s concepts of eroticism
and bassesse play a particular role. In transgressing its own horizons, as it were, this conceptualizing of the body enables it to transgress, as we shall see, boundaries of genre and representation.

These Surrealistic modes of reading have a particular rapport with Caribbean modes of production. As Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé write in the seminal, if problematic, *Éloge de la créolité*:

>Avec Césaire et la Négritude nous primes pied dans le Surréalisme….En effet le Surréalisme fait exploser les cocons ethnocentristes, et a constitué en ses fondements mêmes une des premières réévaluations de l’Afrique opérées par la conscience occidentale. Mais, que le regard de l’Europe dut en définitive server d’intermédiaire à la remontée du continent d’Afrique enseveli, c’est cela qui pouvait faire craindre que le risqué d’une aliénation renforcée, à laquelle il y avait peu de chances de réchapper sauf à être un miraculé: Césaire, en raison précisément de son génie immense, trempé au feu d’un langage volcanique, ne paya jamais tribute au Surréalisme. De ce mouvement, il devint, au contraire, l’une des figures les plus incandescentes, de celles qu’on ne saurait comprendre en dehors de toute référence au substrat africain ressuscité par la puissance opératoire du verbe. Mais le tropisme africain n’a nullement empêché Césaire de s’inscrire très profondément dans l’écologie et le champ référentiel antillais.”

By acknowledging the relationship between Césaire and négritude, on the one hand, and the Continental Surrealism writ large, on the other, the authors of the *Éloge* establish the conceptual and structural connections between the concerns of Surrealism and twentieth-century literary and artistic production in the twentieth century. In articulating some key points, such as the undoing of a blinkered Eurocentric gaze and the consequent beginnings of a serious re-evaluation of Africa and African forms, the authors illuminate the important new ways of seeing that Surrealism initiated. Crucially, they highlight how the process of passing through Césaire’s consciousness, and being reworked in his literary framework, translated these influences into a Caribbean context. In this way, they illustrate the necessity of localized appropriation and interpretation of European themes. By giving primacy to Césaire as one of the “figures

---

incandescentes” of the Surrealist movement, they demonstrate precisely the interminglings, absorptions, and adaptations that make Caribbean modernist cultural production so rich and evocative.

The influence of Surrealism, with its interminglings, its dialogues, and its embodied poetics, is indelible in a geographical and cultural context in which bodies of text, image, or matter, and the bodies that those bodies in turn represent, become, in the Caribbean context, intermingled with the bodies of the islands themselves—that is, the affective and physical effects produced by geographical bodies in space. Antonio Eligio Fernandez writes, of the problems of praxis in reading Cuba art-historically, “The islands (of art, of the poem, and the actual one that floats in the Caribbean) now exist as stereotypes.”17 In fact Fernandez is articulating a problem that manifests again and again: the unsatisfactory, and ultimately perhaps impossible task, of labeling the island, or The Islands, in any definitive way. As Fernandez writes, “They are empty spaces, cracks in the landscape, placed there to welcome expectations, to satisfy the desires of those who label, who name, who perceive.”18).

This perception of the island(s) as a valent, inscribable, non-agentic space, paralleling the slave bodies, female bodies, and broadly, represented objectified figures that result in, for instance, the Cubist fascination with African forms, may in fact not be part of some binarily constructed relationship of oppression and imposition, but rather an element in the broader construction that yields complex and satisfying results. A nuanced, theoretical and practical manifestation of what can be sensed visually in modernist works like Brancusi’s sculptures or Picasso’s Oceanic perspectives articulated both philosophically and artistically by Édouard

---

17 The Island, the Map, the Travelers: Notes on Recent Developments in Cuban Art Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel) and Kenya Dworkin boundary 2, Vol. 29, No. 3, From Cuba (Autumn, 2002), pp. 77-89
18 Fernández and Dworkin
Glissant. The philosophical and poetic works of Glissant embody a particular poiesis that is specific to the writer and uniquely performative as a textual body.

Glissant’s theories of the tout-monde and the chaos-monde are structured by a philosophical and critical approach that is by choice, definition, and linguistic gesture fluid and dynamic enough to address and engage with image as well as text, and to produce from this a third space - the space of textually constituting and reflecting the philosophical impact of images. In a short section of his fifth volume of poetics, *La cohé du lamentin*, allusively and minimally titled “Genèse et digenèse de W.L.”, Glissant applies his theory to the person and work of Wifredo Lam. By paying as much attention to the physical visage of the man, and to his social and historical context, as he does to his formal engagement with the painting itself, Glissant demonstrates the phenomenological, flexible paradigm these works necessitate. I shall return to this in more detail in the chapter on Wifredo Lam. My intention here is to provide some insight into how the way Glissant engages with Lam models and informs the approach I attempt to take throughout. As Glissant writes, “Nous comprenons aussi que tout ce travail est accompagné de sa propre critique interne.” This is an essential element of a contextually appropriate critique, and a central concern of my work here - to operate a critique that is in dialogue with, rather than prescriptive of - the work’s own internal logic.

In addition to providing an indispensible conceptual framework for approaching these works, Glissant performs an important task in diversifying modernist aesthetics. This is a major part of Glissant’s project, as well as a necessary insight into understanding Caribbean cultural production in the twentieth century. One of Glissant’s most comprehensive and eloquent scholarly interpreters, Michael Dash calls our attention to Glissant’s project as “an attempt to reinsert the ideas of Victor Segalen and the surrealists into a postcolonial hemespheric discourse
[so that...] Alterity then becomes a mode of resistance that continually upsets bland synthesis, that resists being absorbed into a hegemonic hybridity.” By adding this postcolonial perspective, this Caribbean voice, into the broader discussion of modernism, Glissant creates appropriate words and methods for understanding Caribbean works within a broader artistic and cultural context. Linking this legacy to the Surrealist project has the double effect of internalizing into his critique the deeply relevant Surrealist dedication to delirium, desire, and instability, and of putting it into discourse with Surrealism as one of the major movements in twentieth century artistic production.

In so doing, Glissant’s work proves an essential voice in diversifying the spaces included in what we think of as modernist art. Dash conveys the tensions inherent in such a gesture, as well as the necessity of one, when he writes of hoping to “revisit the idea of the crossroads of the Americas in terms of a rehabilitation of the concepts of resistance, difference, exoticism, and primitivism.” Glissant’s work revalorizes this concept, finding difference, primitivism, exoticism—the “irreducible opacity” that was historically a source of marginalization—as openings of communicative and symbolic power. By putting front and center in his critiques the works that had been long confined to the margins of modernism and of modern art history (too often, as in Picasso, they are absorbed into European works as objects of fetishization or alterity, rather than taken for their own value), Glissant offers a decentered, differentiated approach to the modern canon. This, in turn, makes possible new theoretical, philosophical, aesthetic, and historical critiques that allow us to engage Caribbean images and text on their own terms, in a dialogic network of referentiality and exchange. A Glissantian reading of twentieth century art expands the meanings, range, and possible interpretations of what modernity signifies.
The internal coherence and applicability of Glissant’s reading of art is also highlighted by a central concern of this project: the notion of ekphrasis. The idea of representing one art using another dates to antiquity; the refinement and sophistication that Glissant adds is in applying the critical language of legibility of one discipline to another. In *La cohée du lamentin* he writes, “Lam a rempli la toile: poétique non pas de l’arbre mais de la végétation de ce qui surgit de la mémoire explose en jungle dans l’espace insulaire. Réhabilitation des formes africaines, saisies non dans une convention mais dans leur mouvement essentiel…” Glissant’s use of language is deep and dense- his choice of words is calculated to provide structural consistency and richness to his argument. We have, therefore, the notion of a poétique- a poetics not of the text, but of the lyrical structure guiding the visual images of Lam’s canvas. The word rempli echoed later by the rehabilitation of African formes plays with the duality of both words. Something can be rempli in three dimensions, such as a vase, or in two, such as a registration form. In this way, Glissant linguistically constructs a method of analysis- a poetics- that is simultaneously lyrical, visual, sculptural, and self-referential. The ekphrastic process, as we shall see, moves between genres. A Glissantian perspective is relevant-- even necessary-- because it is textually relevant- the form of the critique is appropriate to, and doubles, the form of the text and the image it engages.

This multifaceted approach is particularly useful for engaging the unique and subtle space that considering text and image in relation to each other opens. Of special interest is his engagement with the operational mechanics of ekphrasis, of representing or writing about, and the consequent implications for the works in question. Because this perspective is ineluctably grounded in a Caribbean affect or situation, it is both thematically, historically, and critically appropriate to the paintings and poems of I engage with in the subsequent chapters. Glissant writes, “Les Antillais n’avaient pas seulement gardé la trace de la parole, ils portaient en eux la
fulguration du trait, l’éminence ocre de tant d’espaces recomposés.” By putting the work of Lam, the original starting point for his essay, in the context of Caribbean cultural production broadly (the same essay references Aimé Césaire and Nicolás Guillén), Glissant provides an overarching perspective, which, rooted in the specific, spirals out to leave its rhizomatic traces on a much broader cosmology. In this way, the themes and tendencies of modern Caribbean cultural production can be seen to affect and transform, in turn, the world that framed them, leaving always their historical and aesthetic traces. As Glissant writes, “Les données du réel cubain, les formes réhabilitées de l’univers négro-africain, les figures obtenues à partir de tant de rencontres, s’élancent dans toutes les directions et s’achèvent, c’est à dire se réalisent, dans l’inattendu de l’énorme Relation mondiale.”

The various genres in which Glissant works (essay, critique, epic poem) are all, within the broad scope of his oeuvre, in a kind of heteroglot, polyphonic dialogue with each other. The total corpus, then, can be read as a series of poetic encounters that structurally double its thematic content. Here, I examine the points of encounter between two of his major works, and what they reveal practically and poetically of his lyrical structuring of the Antilles.

Les Indes, a literary re-imagining of history and an aestheticizing of philosophy; Le sel noir, a work of radical, image-driven abstraction that is among the best representations of what has been called Glissant's "prophetic vision of the past"; and Poétique de la relation, a theory of poetics whose meter, structure and lyricism enact and echo the text's claims, each represent a differently performed aestheticization of Glissant's examinations and re-imaginations of notions of créolisation. Furthermore, these texts function as embodiments of his theories of relation, tout-monde, and a literary chaos-monde. Their operations, both in the internal structure of each text and in the themes that overflow and are re-interpreted from one to the next, reveal a poetics
that is not only unfettered by conventions of genre, but must in fact be located at generic interstices, in spaces where meaning is mutable and opaque without sacrificing expressivity. Indeed, what Fernandez sees as a passive waiting-to-be-named is part of the broader process of becoming that defines the Antilles. Glissant’s *Les Indes*, with its shifting identities and textual instability, is a keystone in reading the artistic production of the Caribbean, as it poetically enacts what it historically describes.

To begin with, it quickly becomes clear that the organization of the poem makes it difficult to address any one section independently, mimicking the impossibility of dealing with a single island in the Caribbean outside of its relationship to all the rest. The six sections of the poem all exist in a kind of permanent dynamic tension and in a situation of dialogue with each other. This manifests not only in the evolution of the verse structure from the beginning to the end of the poem, as it becomes increasingly more complex and recursive, but in the overall structure of the poem itself, which like constructions of the Antilles, is always mutable, metamorphosing. Each canto is not so much a free-standing section as it is part of an interdependent series of iterations or variations on an ongoing exchange, dialogue, *relation*. We do not see the conquest strictly from the viewpoint of either slaves or conquereors, but from every perspective. Glissant’s multivocal cacophony gives voice to the New World.

The notion of the canto itself is important—as a structural device, it is related to the forbears of Surrealism, like the Comte de Lautréamont—and appears again in the work of Sarduy, which relationship I examine more closely in the concluding chapter of this study. This is one of many formal structures in Glissant’s poetic that operate on multiple levels: within the poetics of the text itself, and within broader historical implications of poetic forms. The formal structure of *Les Indes* sheds light on the particular questions it raises both as a stand-alone work
and as a poetic model for interpreting other works moving through the Caribbean in the twentieth century. It is a poiesis of extreme structural complexity and formal sophistication. Divided into six cantos, it represents an aestheticized re-performing of the Atlantic crossing and the invention of the Caribbean—a kind of origin myth for an invented, multifaceted space of affective experience. Because the world it creates is inherently unstable, multi-vocal, and characterized by a plurality of expression, the work must resist generic stasis if it is to reflect its thematics in its structure. It incorporates, then, various poetic structures within the broader structure of a historico-poetic poem.

It is important to note, from the beginning, that Les Indes is not a work that exists in a fixed state. In fact, key elements such as the names of the major cantos into which it is divided, as well as the titles of the introductory sections to these cantos (to whose importance I return shortly) are completely different in the earlier, 1965 edition from Éditions du Seuil, and the more broadly used and referenced Gallimard edition of the complete poems from 1994. The changes are significant for the ways in which they affect the structure of the work itself, the relation between the cantos, and the poetic emphasis of each section. The cantos that in the Gallimard edition are titled L’Appel, Le Voyage, La Conquête, La Traite, Les Héros, and Relation are, in the earlier edition, titled simply Chant premier, Chant dixième, and so forth. Interestingly, the generically indeterminate introductions to each of the cantos are, in the earlier editions, titled Péripaties. While this last point will have some significance later on, as we engage with questions of genre, such as prose within the poem and poetic historiography, I work here primarily with the Gallimard edition, as it is the most recent to have met with the author’s approval. As I mentioned in the introductory Note on Language to this study, where there is a
significant change in terms of poetics I will indicate it; otherwise the latest edition is taken as the standard.

*Les Indes*, then, is a poem that itself exists in a state of flux, and transformation, internally as well as in its published, public form. The most striking instance of this formal fluidity is the italicized synopsis or introduction that precedes each canto. Each describes, in more or less explicit terms, the historical occurrence or experiential moment with which its corresponding canto will be concerned. *L’Appel*, for example, begins with an unmistakable, defining moment: “1492. Les Grands Découvreurs s’élancent sur l’Atlantique, à la recherche des Indes.”19 This introductory sentence could almost have been taken from a history textbook: it is explicative, clear, and direct. It situates us at a specific moment in time, as a “factual” narrative would. Quickly, though, the work moves beyond this reportage style—facts become tools; historical moments (or more precisely, what those historical moments evoke) are poetic tools setting the scene for their own aesthetic (re)presentation. In the very next sentence, Glissant, still using a lucid, direct narrative style, locates us in relation to the work itself: “Avec eux le poème commence.”20 Already genres are conflated, poem and history becoming one—the history of the Caribbean begins here, in 1492, with its invention in the Conquerors’ eyes. But this is not a monolithic model of history, it is a poem, a dialogue, an aesthetics of affect and experience. *Glissant’s* poem, *Les Indes*, is indeed beginning as we read these works, but so, performatively, is a new reading of history. (It is notable, too, that in the earlier, 1961 edition, these sections were titled *Péripéties*, episodes or situations, undermining their own fixed place in relation to the texts they proceed with their atemporal situation and vagueness of intent. They are moments, rather than events, narrative elements, rather than material situations.)

---

19 *Les indes, L’Appel*
20 *Les Indes, L’Appel*
It is no coincidence that this first canto is called *L’Appel*. While others may refer to more concrete subjects (*La traite*, for instance), Glissant uses the first Canto to firmly establish this work as a performative poetics of history. In other words, while there was, historically, a quantifiable *Traite*, the poem begins with history’s invention by the poet, his vocation, his call to write. By using a HomERICally lyrical device (this *Appel*, call to poetry, recalls the opening of the Odyssey, “Sing in me, muse, and through me tell the story…”21), Glissant creates a lyrical representation of history, as opposed to a straightforward essay or narrative poem. Notably, it is not with the voyage that this history itself begins, but rather, a *poem*. In the transition between sentences, Glissant has turned history into poetic epic. And if an epic can be read as an origin story (In the French tradition, we have *La chanson de Roland* as the origin myth of France), this first canto of *Les Indes* announces this intention as well: writing of a “Jour Nouveau”, the poem elucidates a new literary genesis of the New World.

The poetico-epic, Homeric echo continues as the poem transitions into the first formal verse of this canto, with the exclamation “O lyre d’airain et de vent, dans l’air lyrique de depar ts, l’ancre est à jour!” The Greek evocations of the lyre ground the poem in the traditions of myth, while the phonic wordplay of “lyre d’airan” and “l’air lyrique” confounds music, voice, instrument and poem in a performative poetics that transcends the boundaries of genre and medium. Furthermore, the objects of poetic production are conflated, even produced, by nature (“lyre…de vent”), in much the same way that the bodies of slaves, conquerors, and all participants in the Baroque unfurling of Caribbean history will be later on. Poetry, and poetry as history, become indissi verable from space, even as they function to describe, define, and code the space of the poem. The lyre that tells this story is made out of the story’s own geographic element; its strings are plucked by the winds of the history it enacts. We have, then, the

---

21 *The Odyssey*, Fitzgerald translation 1961
beginning of an artistic production that is of a piece with the history and the place it attempts to simultaneously describe and create.

This instability between teller and told, instrument and music, history and poet, is dynamically reinforced in this canto by the way in which Glissant deploys and constructs the notion of time. In verse X, he writes, “Les Indes sont éternité,” establishing the Indies of the poem as mutable and transformative not only in space, but in time. The Indies are not a simple spatial construction, but they are defined by, and define, eternity, a world of constant, ongoing transformation. Were time linear, not eternal, it would undermine the construction of a poetic cosmology that relies on constant change and transformation. Just as there is no true endpoint to the traite, because it results, as we shall see, in a system of ongoing transformation, dialogue, and encounter, so there is no end to their time. By writing “Les Indes sont éternité”, without the use of a definite article (“l’éternité), Glissant removes a sense of fixity from the text, imbuing it instead with a wealth of potentialities and opacities. It is not one, specific, constant eternity here, but rather a kind of conceptual space inhabited by the Indies and by perhaps may other spatial constructions. This is reinforced at the beginning of the second canto, describing the transatlantic voyage: “La Peur. Durant les trois mois (une éternité) qu’ils furent sur l’infini de l’océan, ces marins connurent l’ambiguïté; ils connurent que le Nord, asile de l’aiguille, est double.” First, Glissant situates the experience of the voyage not in a fixed time or place, but in an emotion, fear. This fear sets the stage for one of many potential experiences of time. Unlike the Indies, which are directly correlated with eternity and its attendant, endless evocative possibilities, the three months of the transatlantic crossing are described as an eternity. This is a telling contrast that embodies the radical subjectivity at the heart of the text; because we are dealing with the experience of the marins, the sailors we are not entered into the broader system of relation of the
Indies. We are experiencing one thread of experience: an eternity, as opposed to, quite simply eternity. The geographic parameters are no less unstable, and they are ineluctably intermingled with the notion of time. Just as we have the multiplicity of time represented by multiple iterations of eternity, so the compass itself loses its absoluteness. Not even its needle can find its home, it finds, rather, a dual pole. In Glissant’s cosmologies, we have no fixed point of reference. Even “le Nord…est double.”

This is but the first in a series of seemingly direct assertions of what the Indies are. Seemingly, because in fact they evoke broad, metaphysical concepts that function as lenses through which to view an Indies that may, or may not, actually exist. The next in this series of assertions is “Les Indes sont vérité.” Here we have a seemingly direct philosophical assertion whose potential meanings are endless. The deliberately unwieldy syntax establishes a direct connection between “les indes” and “vérité”. By leaving this claim unexplicated, Glissant highlights it as a statement open to and ripe for interpretation and transformation. This potential multiplicity of meanings grammatically underscores the cosmology of the Caribbean that Les Indes both evokes and creates.

*L’Appel* establishes the major structural, historical, and thematic tropes that are extended and deepened in the succeeding cantos. First, it enacts and embodies a poetics deeply steeped in myth (as Sylvie Kandé has argued, it in fact becomes a kind of epic origin story for the new world, told in its own voice and according to its own cosmology). Second, it transforms history; through an almost alchemical process facts and dates, people and places, are absorbed and reworked so that they may be re-viewed through a poetics and an affective, multiply-subjective lens appropriate to their scope and complexity. Thirdly, it establishes and questions the poem’s own purpose: to ask, answer, and interpret the question “What are the Indies?”.
As I have suggested, the second canto, *Le Voyage*, engages immediately with these polysemantic poetics; in particular, it engages more deeply with the notions of unstable time and space that are so important to this work. The voyage is, by definition, spatially unfixed. Because it cannot be located in space, endless, shifting time becomes its primary metaphorical space, and sounds and scents are called upon to define its world. Throughout the canto, like a kind of spasmodic anaphora, comes the repetition: “passe le temps.” Like a litany, or a metronome, it is the only meter ordering the journey. Still, even this meter is unfixed: it passes, it shifts, it moves. Within its confines, the journey unfolds: sailors go mad, they scream out, they raise their sails and moan with thirst. And time passes, its only constant its fluctuations.

*Le Voyage* not only deepens Glissant’s poetic conception of Antillean time, the time of the voyage, of genesis, and of relation; it also introduces the element of an *embodied poetics*, a network of corporeal metaphors that is central to Glissant’s project and to a broader reading of créolisation and the Caribbean.

The various subjectivities that speak here—the voices of the sailors, but also the many registers of the narrator, who addresses himself to mythological figures (“Déeses vertes”), to natural phenomena (“O Geysers…”), and historical epochs (“O temps d’Auto-da-Fe”), as well as the various nebulous men and women that appear, either speak or are voiced, and as quickly disappear—are defined not only by their subjective nature but by the embodied quality of their experience. Within the unremitting passage of time, there is the invocation to the bodies that inhabit it: “Chantez-lui vos corps”, one of the many narrators urges the goddesses he addresses. Internally and externally, the poem “sings” history through its physical experience; as the new world attempts to invent itself: “Il ne saura si le temps a pris corps dans un royaume neuf…Indes? Il ne saura jamais…Passe le temps. Passe le temps.” Time’s instability is phrased
in bodily terms, for it is in the body that time and experience are joined. By bringing the metaphysical passage of time into an experience of the earthy physical body, Glissant demonstrates a profoundly phenomenological perspective to lived experience: the greater metaphysical questions are interpreted and connected through the vehicle of lived bodily experience.

The first two cantos, with the call and the journey, have established a poetics in which bodies seek and process experience within passing, mutable, transformative time. Time and bodies are violently conflated with the conquest of land and space of the third canto La conquête. Here, a sexual, sensual language of violation, a violently embodied poiesis, enacts a relational, rather than a binary encounter and conquest.

The first line of the canto establishes its metaphoric tone and strategy: “Chaque vaisseau séduitsa baie silencieuse, mystère de sable.” The ships seduce (penetrate) their bays, and so the conquest is poetically enacted as an act of specifically corporeal dominance. The conquest continues to unfold as a series of deeply sensual experiences. An unidentified voice of authority (captain or king, agent of covetous desire), orders: “Débrousaillez la solitude vièrge!”

Addressing itself to the nearly conquered, soon-to-be-ravished land, one of the narrator-like voices intones “Leur langage te sera viril, ô terre, ô femme éblouie, ton sang rouge mêlé à ta glaise rouge.” The language of the conquerors is immediately coded in terms of the body, for his conquering language is virile, sexual, physical. Likewise, the experience of the (conquered, feminine) land is defined by red blood mingling with red clay. The body cannot be divorced from the land. The conquest equates blood with soil, corpus and clay. This introduction to the conquest of the land is concluded with the conflation of time, myth and body. “Il marche, l’oracle l’annonce; il te courtise. Et son amour te crucifie.” The conqueror is situated in moving
space; his arrival is told by the oracle, who deals, by definition with an undoing of time. And the land is crucified by the experience, as myth is enacted on its body.

This third canto of Les Indes is essential because of its establishment of a deeply embodied reading of space. The body is not a symbol for the landscape; rather, the landscape, quite literally, functions as a body: “Moi, dont la sang fut lave”, is its articulation of itself when Glissant personifies it. Lava and blood. Land and body. Both are conflated in time and experience, and the conquered Indies become a personified land, occupying infinite, and infinitely transforming, time and space: “Or la terre pleurait, sachant qu’elle est l’éternité.”

In the broad scope of Glissant’s poetics, Les Indes is perhaps among the most narratively direct, literal works. It engages with direct facts of history and includes scene-setting, episodic narratives that describe, more or less, the factual moments the cantos enact.

Le sel noir is a further radicalization of some of these themes. It is a highly stylized, abstract work, and in it the body, myth, and time, and their status as they interact with and function as vehicles for affective experience stand out intensely if opaque. Like Les Indes, Le sel noir is divided into cantos: Carthage, Gabelles, Afrique, Plaies, and Le Grand Midi, bracketed by a Présentation à la mer and an Acclamation. Here, I deal primarily with the opening Présentation à la mer and with the canto titled Afrique, in which these themes are most pronounced.

Whereas Les Indes begins with a date, Le sel noir begins with a presentation to the sea. Almost elegiac, it grounds the poem not in historial terms but in relation to the signified of the shifting ocean. Darkness, mystery, instability are celebrated, and we are given no fixed time or place in which the poem unfolds. Already, the seemingly incommensurable but mutually dependent contrasts that define the Antillean historical and poetic space emerge; not only black
salt but “Splendeur et amertume”. Furthermore, from the beginning the body is present as a dominant expressive tool. Africa is personified as a pregnant woman awaiting her lover, first a queen and then a servant, and richly evoked with corporeal metaphors. Not only is the body used repeatedly in these lines, with images of striding flanks, skin and bark, beauty and breeding, but the narrator’s voice is aware of its own embodied language: “Crier l’arôme, venter le geste, mesurer l’ire/Ni ponctuer l’éclat de tes cimes n’est mon propos/Ni toucher aux senteurs qui de toi font un lour cortège/Au corps je n’ai cette sentence de tes bois marquee/Ni dans les yeux ton sel (si ce n’est sel que j’ai rêvé).” The narrator, who is at once internal to and separate from the poem, describes his artistic intention in a highly embodied vocabulary colored by smell, gesture, touch, the body itself, and eyes, all ultimately conflated with the salt that, residue of the sea and history, boundary between ocean and land, is the central metaphor of this work. The story is told through, of, and by bodies; their blood pulses and is echoed by the topography of their island, their heartbeats underlie the imagery and meter of the text. When Glissant writes, « Et tu veillais, ô lointaine non belle/Mais ta beauté poussait sous l’écorce pire qu’on cri », he intermingles the abstract (but grammatically substantive) « belle » with the bark of the tree; the distant beauty’s disembodied voice will not be contained but pushes out from an alien skin, « l’écorce. » Furthermore, this practice of intermingling bodies, melting the boundaries between the human and vegetal worlds, is again absorbed through Glissant’s mythological allusion into an epic poetics that creates itself. Where the allusion to Homer was nearly explicit in Les Indes, the more abstract structure of Le sel noir is such that the mythological theme is subtly contained in its metaphors. But the voice of the Antillean body is lyrically framed by allusion to the classical story of Daphne, whose desperate plea to her father, the river god Peneus, (« ta beauté poussait
sous l’écorce pire qu’un cri), resulted in the same transformation (or transmutation), between a human body and a vegetal body.

This mixing of genres and natural taxonomies is particularly revelatory in the inter-lingual questions raised by Le sel noir. Not only are bodies conflated within the poem, but this confusion is doubled by the particularities of Glissant’s lyrical language. Glissant demands translation: to translate him is to encounter previously imperceptible layers of opacity and relation in his work. Translating Le sel noir sheds light on the affective and structural ordering of the poem, as its complex network of internal homophonies, assonances, alliterations and allusions are revealed. One key word here is the oft repeated “dénouer”, as in the key phrase « dénoue ton âme ». The echo between “dénouer”, to unravel, and “dénuder”, to strip or lay bare, has rich implications that are only structurally communicated by that echo. To translate them is to occlude this potential site of aural potential; this is, however, only a problem for the translator in the positive, productive sense, for its counterpoint is that it reveals the very opacities between self and other that Glissant celebrates. Glissant’s multivocal cacophony, his multiple occlusions and opacities, give voice to the New World.

The Éloge de la créolité speaks of different « strains » of créolisation, such that within the multivocal cacophony many different currents can be examined: “…il existe des créolisations plus ou moins intenses suivant que tous le peuples en présence sont exogènes comme aux Antilles ou aux Mascareignes, ou selon que l’un d’entre eux est autochtone comme aux iles du Cap-Vert ou à Hawai.” One such strain is the series of dialogues, creative and philosophical, between Cuba, France, and the Francophone Caribbean. In examining the particular strain of Cuba’s relation to France and the Francophone world from this Glissantian perspective, we see a narrative often lumped in with the rest of Latin America, even obscured by other events, and
rarely accorded an investigation of its own. In his study of Latin American writers in Paris, Jason Weiss touches upon Carpentier and Sarduy, but much more attention is paid to Argentina (Cortazar), Colombia (Garcia Marquez), and Mexico (Paz). The particular tenor of Cuba’s relationship to France/to la Francophonie remains in large part unexplored. This is true historically as well: we tend to read Cuba as part of the broader relationship of Latin America to France (for instance in the legacy of modernismo). It seems to me, however, that within the possibilities afforded by the Caribbean generally and by modernism in particular, there can be much to be said for a specific, historically informed rapport, between the capital of modernity and the largest of the Antilles.

What to make, then, of Cuba? This research was originally conceived of as the study of the rapport between two capitals, and this dialogue may still have much to contribute. It quickly becomes clear, however, that to limit the dialogues to the two cities is doubly problematic: first, and most obviously, because it eliminates many major artists who only passed through or passed near the cities, and secondly because it treats in perfunctory fashion the major divisions between urban and rural thinking and life in the twentieth century. Furthermore, a notable and defining trait of modernism is its internationalism: From Paris to Havana, to Fort-de-France to Port-au-Prince to New York, the currents of modernism and of Surrealism transcended geographical boundaries. This is evident in works such as Severo Sarduy’s *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, which draws on a rich set of influences unfettered by nationality to create a new kind of conceptual corpus. Taking as major influences Sade and Bataille, who along with Lautréamont are part of a particularly carnal current of thought (which I will elaborate upon in the following question on the body), the Cuban philosopher-critic Severo Sarduy moves beyond geographical limits to expound upon a broader philosophy of becoming: “‘El pensamiento de Sade se alimenta de ese
devenir, esa reconversión que no cesa, de ese ciclo en que florecimiento y disolución son como facetas de una franja torcida sobre sí misma; se suceden sin discontinuidad, sin que el recorrido que las sigue tenga que pasar del otro lado, franquear una faceta, conocer el borde” The use of the word devenir is of particular interest here, and hardly an idle choice: straddling Spanish and French, it performs what it describes, the philosophy Sarduy is in the process of revealing is one that necessarily straddles French and Cuban modes of thought. Likewise, we see the tendency to the cacophony and plenitude Glissant frequently points to, as in the opening of Le sel noir. Glissant’s “Détresse des lumières sur l’espace. Profusion. Le thème, pure idée, se nou d’écumes, de salaisons [...] un fleuve où le mot s’amasse” echoes Sarduy’s “Misa y orgías”, ritual and plenitude, constant action, aestheticized, fecund motion. There are these points of contact that enable us to create a philosophy for reading the Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean not only each in its own language (and here, of course we enter into the tensions between imposed and autochthonous languages, though the anihilation of the Tainos and the lack of any analogue to Créole in Cuba eliminates the possibility of strict comparison), both together in a third, meta-language, the language of their relation. This is what Glissant has describes as being “Contra la liaison unilatérale à une métropole, la multi-relation de la diversité antillaise. Contra la contrainte d’une langue, la propagation d’un langage.” What I am attempting to find then, is the propagation of a broadly Antillean language of thinking, one that emerges when the various modes of thought and philosophies, in this case in Spanish and French, encounter each other.
II : Benítez Rojo: Rupture and Repitition

Having established the importance of Glissant, I turn to Benítez Rojo, in order to illustrate how some parallel yet distinctive currents of thought appear in important Cuban literary theory.

Among the most influential and revered Cuban thinkers of his generation, Antonio Benítez Rojo was, like many Cubans, deeply personally affected by the Revolution of 1959, which he and his family initially supported, and which ultimately transformed their lives in grueling ways. Benítez Rojo was a highly respected, lauded member of the Cuban literary establishment, eventually running the Casa las Americas, the state institution dealing with language and literature. His work is essential to forming any complete picture of Cuban literary, philosophical, and critical thought in the twentieth century. It is one of the critical, conceptual, and theoretical lynchpins of this study, for its content as much as for its form. Like all of the work I will address here, Benítez Rojo’s writings, like his philosophy, elide, and often outright reject, received notions of artistic categories or hierarchies. His theoretical and historical writing is lyrical and artful, his plays and essays critically rigorous and philosophically nuanced. Like Édouard Glissant, who plays his interlocutor in the theoretical framing of this study, he worked in a range of genres, elliptically and obliquely addressing a series of interconnected questions, tendencies, affinities, and implications, all aimed at representing, translating, or framing what the Caribbean is and means. I concentrate here on some key features of his work, as articulated in three different but interconnected texts. The first is La isla que se repite, his seminal work from 1989, which addresses the paradigm of the island to present a “post-modern perspective” on the Caribbean. The second is his writing on chaos theory, which aligns in fascinating ways to
Francophone Caribbean thinking of the same time, notably in the case of Glissant. Finally, I examine his interviews and conversations to demonstrate how his thinking evolved and related to other Caribbean discourses of the time.

*La isla que se repite* is a dense and sprawling cultural and critical philosophizing of the Caribbean from historical, anthropological, and literary perspectives. Like Glissant (as we shall see shortly), Benítez Rojo dedicates considerable energy to establishing a coherent, consistent, and appropriate paradigmatic approach, rather than falling into received European critical norms that might be at odds with the particular and complex questions the Caribbean elicits and encompasses. When he asks, “Why pursue a Euclidean coherence that the world—and the Caribbean above all—is very far from having?”, he lays the foundation for a postcolonial counter-narrative that opens new, and appropriate, spaces for investigating the Caribbean. Benítez Rojo’s analysis relies on twinned, entwined strategies of historical observation and documentation, on the one hand, and a series of interconnected literary theorizings, on the other. This complex, localized approach, and its iterations among other groundbreaking thinkers of the Caribbean, plays an essential role in framing this study. In order to grapple honestly and appropriately with the multi-faceted dialogues and modes of artistic production I engage here, it has been necessary to find just such an aesthetically, historically, and philosophical approach. Benítez Rojo, for several reasons, is an essential voice in framing these dialogues.

Among the major components of his self-described “post-modern perspective” is an opening to syncretism (Benítez Rojo coins *supersyncretism* for the particularly intense fecundity of the Caribbean context), plurality, and internationalism that is particularly relevant in the context of the massive geopolitical upheavals of the twentieth century. As Benítez Rojo writes, “[...] in order to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely various
elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed. [...] as soon as we succeed in
establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the sypersyncretic
manifestation that we’re studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers
toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or all these
continents at once. When these points of departure are nonetheless reached, a new chaotic flight
of signifiers will occur, and so on ad infinitum.” By applying this endlessly replicating,
transforming, and proliferating model to the objects, images, and texts of Cuban literary history,
Benítez Rojo provides an alternative strategy for reading culture and culture production that
eschews hegemonic, Enlightenment-derived approaches for a locally logical, historically
contextualized perspective.

In addition to the cultural, historical, and literary approaches he establishes, Benítez Rojo,
in a practice we shall see repeated with Glissant, is deeply concerned with the physical, spatial
reality of the island. This is a major thread in Caribbean cultural studies- more than many places,
the Caribbean’s very physical existence is paradoxical. We speak of the Caribbean as a unified
entity, but far from being united by culture or language, it resists even spatial totality. It is a
collection, a collective of identities, a scattering of islands in a shifting sea that nonetheless goes
by a shared name. For Benítez Rojo, the geographical reality of the Caribbean’s material
existence is inseparable from its cultural identity and collective history. By engaging with the
various aspects of philosophical and historical discussion that have framed what he calls “the old
unity/diversity” debate, he opens new ground for examining the physical events that happened in
the Caribbean as shapers of its multitudinous and united culture. His concern in the text with the
plantation model, the structures for harvesting sugar in the *zafra*, and myriad other elements of
the physical creation of the Caribbean system through the institutions of sugarcane harvesting
and slavery allow us a nuanced critical reading of cultural production. By literally *grounding* his approach in the material history of the agricultural and human industries that shaped and reshaped their land, he enables us to more deeply parse how its history, art, and literature took shape. He finds an interlocutor in Glissant, who developed the idea of the plantation model in the Caribbean and beyond that eschews hegemonic, Enlightenment-derived approaches for a locally logical, historically contextualized perspective.

For Benítez Rojo, thinking in a vein that approximates important elements of *relation*, the construction of the Caribbean is not merely the product of a European crossing of the Atlantic (the middle passage, which in Glissant’s memorable phrase, “a laissé ses traces innenaçables sur la surface de la mer”), but is rather the linchpin that enables the rest of the world to conceive spatially of itself, and to theorize itself literally. As he writes in *La Isla que se repite*:

> “Within the realities of a rereading, *mestizaje* is nothing more than a concentration of differences, a tangle of dynamics obtained by means of a greater density of the Caribbean object…Then, at a given moment in our rereading, the binary oppositions Europe/Indoamerica, Europe/Africa, and Europe/Asia do not resolve themselves into the synthesis of *mestizaje*, but rather they resolve into insoluble differential equations, which repeat their unknowns through the ages of the meta-archipelago. The literature of the Caribbean can be read as a *mestizo* text, but also as a stream of texts in flight, in intense differentiation among themselves and within whose complex coexistence there are vague regularities, usually paradoxical.”

*La isla que se repite* is a paradigmatic text encompassing history, criticism, and philosophy to convey a nuanced world view, ontology, and epistemology of the Caribbean. One of the key themes that emerge from this text is the importance of chaos as an organizing principle for understanding the Caribbean as geographical and artistic entity. In an article published several years after *La isla que se repite*, Benítez Rojo distills this prevalence of a

---

22 *The Repeating Island*, 26-27
“chaotic” structure as philosophical framework for understanding the Caribbean. Especially important for the purposes of this study is his emphasis on the impossibility of using a uniform or totalizing approach to understanding the Caribbean (and by extension its cultural production) systemically. As he writes, “ninguna perspectiva del pensamiento humano...puede por sí sola abarcar la complejidad de lo Caribeño.” By asserting that no singular perspective is sufficient, or paradigmatically appropriate, for assessing or understanding that which is Caribbean (the closest English rendering to capture the semantic implication of “lo Caribeño”), Benítez Rojo provides the conceptual framework for the kind of ekphrastic and interdisciplinary dialogues I engage in the following chapters. His theoretical framework is structurally echoed in the text: by talking about “lo Caribeño” in the singular he evokes the simultaneous potential and impossibility of reading the Caribbean as a unified space. His assertion that, “toda persona Caribeña sabe, al menos intuitivamente, que el Caribe es un mar cultural que desborda con creces los límites de la oposición binaria; esto es, un mar cultural sin fronteras” distills and nuances my concerns with this effort. In the first place, he attributes to Caribbean identity an intuitive understanding of what the Caribbean is and means, using a rhetorical gesture to give primacy to the subjective experience of cultural context. This privileging of the subjective is, like the Caribbean as frame and constant, a common thread uniting the various artists and philosophers discussed here. Additionally, he distills the essential linguistic operation of the Caribbean as space and metaphor, neatly rolling it into both with the phrase “mar cultural”-- the Caribbean is both a literal sea and a metaphorical cultural sea, to be traversed, navigated, negotiated. Finally, this simultaneously literal and metaphorical space has some deeply particular tendencies, chief among which is a resistance, even an effacing, of boundaries and binary oppositions. This is a system not of lines and borders, but of “flujos y reflujos.”
In order to negotiate this sea of ebb and flow, of cultural joinings and driftings, Benítez Rojo finds a model in a physical theory, rather than a purely abstract philosophical one. This gesture highlights a third important feature of the conceptual framing of this study: the relevance of the phenomenological, of physical, subjective experience. By availaing himself of the imagery of chaos theory, derived not from literature, but from physics from the operations of the material world, Benítez Rojo frames an approach for a space defined as much by its physical nature as by its cultural output. As he writes, “estudio el Caribe en tanto sistema turbulento bajo cuyo desorden (la imposibilidad de lo Caribeño) hay regularidades que se repiten (la posibilidad de lo Caribeño).” By addressing the Caribbean as a turbulent system rather than as a static place, Benítez Rojo creates an opening in the critical anxiety that underlies a study of its critical output. The methodologically consistent theory of a chaotic system creates a flexible, coherent, and dynamic framework for understanding Caribbean cultural production on its own terms. The repeating regularities of the Caribbean— the tendencies, affinities and repetitions that emerge through mediums, time, and space, are simultaneously irresistible and harrowing to engage with from a critical viewpoint. By putting them in dialogue with each other, I rely on Benítez Rojo’s conceptual framing to address them in a critically appropriate way.

Benítez Rojo’s poetic theorizing extends and expands some of the themes articulated by Glissant. Crucially, it undoes the pervasive, easily-assumed conception of a pre-existing European world from which identity derives. Rather than a process of hierarchical influence, it becomes a product of exchange, in which the idea of Europe is ineluctably transformed by the refracted gaze of the New World. The Atlantic is not a static body to be crossed en route elsewhere, on the way from a stable, defined Point A to a discoverable, mappable, describable, Point B, but rather a geographical concept that exists as a consequence of the encounter between
A and B. The Atlantic, he tells us, is only the Atlantic because we have conceived it in relation to the Caribbean. This is a seminally important reading of the Caribbean, one that reshapes the assumed power hierarchies and received ideologies that shape our symbolic ordering of the world. I have chosen this particular statement of Benítez Rojo because it leads directly into the second question we will be addressing, by establishing the marked tendency to conceptualize the Caribbean in distinctly corporeal forms. For Glissant, the baffling ships of the middle passage, closed and confining where they should be open and ambitious in gaze in scope, become the wombs of the new world; for Benítez Rojo, the Caribbean gives birth to our modern understanding of it. Furthermore, reading Glissant and Benítez Rojo together shows some of the divergences and concurrences in conceptualizing the new world, as in their approaches to the central model of the plantation. This brings us back to the different strains of créolisation.

Havana and Cuban society, throughout their history, have functioned as spaces of ambiguity—a reading premised on ambiguous iconographies and international identities. This is the case in terms of gender and physicality but also in terms of physical situation. Carpentier’s exiles in Paris during the Machado régime are later echoed by Sarduy’s and Manet’s, a constant theme in which exile, as Sarduy theorizes it, is not solely determined by place, but is rather something carried within a body. It is a space in which, as Gerardo Mosquera writes, “the dual conception so dear to the West is completely foreign” (Mosquera, 27). It is from this space of relation, and its ensuing relations, that my research proceeds.
Chapter 2

Inscribed Surface and Tattooed Verse: Julián del Casal and Gustave Moreau

« D’un geste d’épouvante, Salomé repousse la terrifiante vision qui la cloue, immobile, sur les pointes; ses yeux se dilatent, sa main étreint convulsivement sa gorge.

Elle est presque nue, dans l’ardeur de la danse, les voiles se sont défaits, les brocarts ont croulé; elle n’est plus vêtue que des matières orfèvrés et de minéraux lucides; un gorgerin lui serre de même qu’un corselet la taille, et, ainsi qu’une agrafe superbe, un merveilleux joyau darde des éclairs dans la rainure de ses deux seins; plus bas, aux hanches, une ceinture l’entoure, cache le haut de ses cuisses que bat un gigantesque pendeloque où coule une rivière d’escarboucles et d’émeraudes; enfin, sur le corps resté nu, entre le gorgerin et la ceinture, le ventre bombe, creusé d’un nombril dont le trou semble un cachet gravé d’onyx, aux tons laiteux, aux teintes de rose d’ongle. »

As I wrote in the opening chapter, space and spatiality—sometimes in conjunction with, sometimes in opposition to, place and placement—play an essential role in the development of these dialogues and interchanges between Cuba and France, and between Cuban and French artists. In the case of Casal, a particular relationship to subjectivity, movement, and space, inherited in part from the Parnassians across the Atlantic and absorbed and reinterpreted in a Cuban vein, becomes critical to understanding the work. It is essential to point out that this is not merely—or not only—a question of Casal’s realtionships to Cuba and France, but a deeply formal concern of his work.

The particular interest that Casal holds for this study is that the relationship to France (it would be a mistake to read this as an influence rather than a relation; given Paris’s cultural status in the nineteenth century as well as the colonial artist’s tendency to valorize hte mother land at the expense of their own status, it would be an easy trap to slip into) is internalized and a priori.

It inflects the work at every level. There is, for me, a crucial interpretive step that must be taken after the factual, historical, and thematical understanding of this influence, which is that in re-interpreting and absorbing the text, Casl modifies it—or at least offers an additional experience of it. Before returning to the aesthetic mechanics of Casal’s textual rapport with Moreau’s visual system, we must first examine some central concerns: first, Moreau’s own place and context; secondly, Casal’s situation as a Cuban writer fascinated by Paris; and thirdly some key aspects of 19-century aesthetic production, particularly as they were influenced by major currents like Decadence and Symbolism.

The Salomé series of sonnets represents a particular point of convergence, affinity, and shared practice. Their interest lies in a multitude of factors: aesthetic, social, cultural, and narrative. In order to arrive at a clear picture of just why the Salomé series, in particular, is important, two important considerations arise. The first is to understand the implications of desire, shifting power, and aesthetic mystery that the story elicits. I will return to this in greater depth in the minute examination of the poetics of the sonnets and paintings that forms the bulk of this chapter. The other important consideration is the cultural and social phenomenon of “Salomania” which gripped Paris at the time in question and is necessary to creating a full portrait of the art historical and thematic backgrounds which Moreau helped to instigate even as they formed him.

While the image and myth of Salomé appear repeatedly as meme, motif, and muse in the history of European art, the most extreme concentration and exaltation of the story appear in the phenomenon called Salomania by critical readers of the period. As Garelick wrote in the context of a study of one of the most significant interpretations, that of modern dancer Loie Fuller, “In 1892, when [Fuller] arrived in Paris, Europe was already well in the grip of ‘Salomania,’ fueled
by the vast imperialist expansions of the nineteenth century, and the concomitant fascination with all things Oriental, particularly with those women perceived as living Salomes, the seductive, often veiled ‘danseuses du ventre’ imported from the colonies...Countless artists and writers were moved to depict, often with dense ornamentalism, the fatal charms of this biblical princess.” The story of Salomé, then, is representative of some key driving currents in the fin-de-siècle world-- a world in which dynamics of power, representation, sex, and race, were operating at increasingly cosmopolitan levels, with a greater magnitude of international scope and replication than ever before.

The multi-faceted, internationalist nature of artistic production booming alongside the Industrial Revolution is echoed, in the artistic dialogues of the time, by an ekphrastic practice. Not only was everyone working on, talking about, or representing Salome, but artists from Moreau, to Huysmans, to Proust, and Casal, were artistically re-presenting how others artistically represented her.

When so many people were concerned with Salome, why does Moreau stand out? And why, more specifically, did he stand out in such a compelling way for the young Casal? Moreau is, without question, a giant in his world, and received extensive praise, even adulation, in his own time—so much so that well before his death he and his assistants began working to transform his house into a museum, which was donated to the French nation and today remains a part of France’s cultural patrimony. Beyond the plain magnitude of his stature, however, are structural and aesthetic concerns that reveal a strong affinity to the aesthetic and thematic themes that compelled Casal and appeared in his own work. This artistic affinity was compounded by similarly complex engagements with notions of space and time that a close reading of both Moreau and Casal’s work reveal.
Moreau’s Salome tableaux are not merely beautiful, ornate, and compelling work. They are, for want of a better word, highly bizarre art objects that represent many of the orientalist, decadent themes of the time. They truly stand out, however, for reflecting a deep anxiety, and ambivalence towards, totalizing narratives of place and time. As Peter Cooke writes, “Moreau, in opposition to what he saw as the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic impoverishment of the art of his time, has created an extra-geographical, extra-temporal [emphasis added] world through the multiplication of detail, through an unprecedented superabundance of signs.” By creating an elaborate network of visual semantics, Moreau sought to transcend his spatial and cultural context, even as he was firmly grounded in it. The story of Salome, the murky and mysterious legend of a young girl, with one foot firmly in the orientalized world of Herod’s court and the other in the long history of Catholic iconography; a moment of sensualized movement with endlessly repeating consequences, is blown up to tremendous, static scale. It is one of the stillest representations possible of one of the most important episodes of movement in Western narrative.

This anxiety with regard to the artist’s surroundings extends beyond the content of the painting to become a questioning of the painting as object. One of the most striking features of the Salome paintings is the ornate “tattooing” effect Moreau painted on. The tattoos appear, at first glance, to be decorating Salome’s body, for the thin, inky lines appear most markedly contrasting with her pale skin. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that even the darkest corners of the layered, intricate work are covered with the markings. In this way Moreau confuses the boundaries between the painted body he depicts and the physical body of the work itself, an intensely phenomenological gesture that returns to the carnality of the original story. This gesture simultaneously confuses and enriches (or enriches by confusing) the functions of
the text: it is at once formally beautiful and narratively straightforward, even as its details call itself—its own boundaries, its own nature—into question. Cooke explains that, “By both emphasising the material beauty of colour and texture and multiplying allegorical and ornamental motifs, Moreau has exacerbated the problematic dichotomy in his art between the aestheticism of art pur and the abstruse, ‘literary’ signification of art philosophique. In place of a clearly legible narrative scene, he offers aesthetic enthralment, teasing semantic difficulty, poetic evocation and a powerful sense of quasi-religious mystery.”

It is important to note that, among the many great figures of 19th-century French painting, Moreau is both iconic and nearly impossible to categorize. His work treads an more ambiguous path that meanders through pre-Symbolism, Decadence, and hints of Neoclassical vocabulary. Recent scholarship has highlighted Moreau as primarily a history painter, and it is in this guide that his connection to the broader networks of reference, identity, and affinity that frame this study become clear.

As we shall see, all of the characters here are concerned with writing new histories of themselves and their contexts: new origin myths, legends, and foundational iconographies that enable them to explain and express their new worlds on their own terms and with their own vocabularies. The historical, myth-making, and reinventing aspects of Moreau’s work are what bring him into closer contact with cosmopolitan modernism at large: by rewriting history, Moreau’s paintings enter the discourse at surprising and revealing junctures. As Richard Thomson wrote when reviewing a series of international exhibitions marking the centenary of Moreau’s death in 1999, “The Moreau that emerges from this retrospective is neither the proto-abstractionist of the 1960’s nor the pre-Symbolist of more recent construction. The Grand Palais unashamedly presents us with Gustave Moreau the history painter, exclusive and exceptional.”
Thomson’s reading, along with Peter Cooke’s, is important for highlighting the importance of Moreau as primarily a history painter—concerned with the origin story, the foundational gesture, the epic myth—but also for the idea of exceptionality. Within the great scheme of history painting, in the context of the wide-ranging, oft-repeated, interconnected stories of legend, Moreau finds an aesthetic, composed of a formal, dense, aesthetic and visual vocabulary, that is utterly unique and specific to him.

This unique style makes unique demands on the viewer, creating a distinctly modern form of history painting in which the subject must work with the work. As Thomson puts it, “Seeing Moreau’s pictures in bulk [that is, so that their chronological scope and context are evident] and in sympathetic conditions reveals him as an emotive painter.” Rather than the cold remove of pre-Symbolism, in other words, we are confronted behind the density of ornate imagery, with a deeply subjective personal interaction: “He makes the spectator work...he felt a yen for insistently vertical or horizontal compositions, unstandard and identifiably individual. These are unforgiving formats. Both make the corners of the composition problematic.”

I have previously discussed the centrality of the Salomé myth in Symbolist art. The peculiarity, vagueness, sensuality, artifice, and mystery of the story make it an ideal object of Symbolist scrutiny, and a vehicle perfectly suited to the objectives of the movement. Oscar Wilde captured the importance of language and performance in his theatrical treatment of the story. Wilde’s version of the play goes deeper and further than earlier treatments. He subverts, glorifies and reworks the story in so many ways that it is both a quintessence of itself and paradoxically nearly unrecognizable. His version is also concerned with language: language, gesture and performativity or theatricality are inextricably intertwined.
Salomé’s story undergoes a dramatic transformation when it is (partially) removed from the context of language and rendered visually, as in Moreau’s depiction of some of the legends defining moments, in *Salomé Dancing Before Herod* (1876), *Salomé* (1876), and *The Apparition* (1876). These works represent only a very small proportion of the dozens of paintings, drawings, and watercolors that Moreau produced on this theme. Many of these works show very small changes or reworkings of the crucial moment. It is telling that Moreau endlessly reconfigured and reconceived not only the construction of the moments themselves, but the medium in which they were presented. This multimedia depiction and reinvention of the legend shows perfectly the generic instability and transformative mutability at its heart, themes that appear again and again in the artists examined here. Furthermore, the works present some fascinating questions in terms of the nature of visual representation and Symbolist aesthetics and in their relationship to Huysmans’s *A Rebours*. Brad Bucknell gives a useful interpretation of the visual and aesthetic significance of these works and their interchange with text in his essay *On “Seeing” Salomé* (1993):

The emphasis [that] early depictions place upon the dance and the severed head demonstrates an interplay between the signs of the narrative and those of the visual arts which suggests no strong division between the visual and the verbal, as well as an ongoing interest in the renarration of the story in dramatically different ways...In the re-presentation of elements, events or characters, in the movement from sign to sign, a great deal of space is left not just for the reinscription, but also for expansion and reinterpretation of the story.²⁴

We see, then, the unique and formally complex aesthetic space that is opened for the “reinscription” of the Salomé story by the reworking of genre boundaries and

the melting of borders. A closer analysis of Moreau’s paintings, broadened by their relationship to *A Rebours*, will provide an illustration of the painterly regard as characterized by Symbolist ideas and of the Symbolist blending of word and text that makes many of these works inextricable from each others’ influence. There is, in the symbolic exchange between these works of literature and painting, a blending of genre and theme that perfectly suits the hazy, indolent gaze of the Symbolist artist. Where Wilde’s text represents a totality in which language and gesture are indissolubly linked, the exchange between Huysmans and Moreau, or between Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes* and Moreau’s *Salomé*, produces a synthetic space that exists between but dependent upon two necessarily separate worlds.

*Salomé Dancing Before Herod* and *The Apparition* are extremely ornate, formal paintings that are illustrative of the Symbolist fondness for Neoclassical lines and composition juxtaposed with “oriental” themes. In both paintings the sensuous, sinuous, curving nature of the action is complemented and contrasted by the sharpness of line in Moreau’s technique.
Figure 1

Salomé Dancing Before Herod is eerie and evocative, conveying seduction and foreboding in equal measure. Perhaps the most obvious and intriguing problem of this depiction is that Salomé does not seem to be actually dancing—or moving—at all. This is not the princess Salomé we would imagine dancing so sensuously she can command whatever she wants of the king. She does not even seem like the nubile young seductress of the familiar story. This Salomé appears as nothing so much as a remote, stately queen commanding her subjects. The glittering, sheer drapery she wears could even be called modest, revealing as it does nothing more than a foot and her arms. She is regal and powerful, and holds a lily, a flower of mourning. With her left arm she seems to be conjuring something (the apparition of the eponymous painting, which we will discuss shortly), the absence of which leaves a central vacancy in the painting. In this depiction, neither Herod nor Salomé is the focal point of the painting. They are positioned around an absence, to which the eye is nonetheless inexorably drawn by the bright patch of light and roses on the floor in front of Salomé, and by the gaze of the eunuch to Herod’s left. Salomé’s implicitly sexual gaze (though oddly neuter in this instance), and the gaze of the eunuch (asexual by definition) converge at the strange point of the Baptist’s defining and definitive absence. This sense of absence hearkens back to the original text itself, where, as Rhonda Garelick reminds us:

“Neither Matthew nor Mark mentions the name of the girl whose dance entertains the noblemen gathered to celebrate Herod’s birthday; we know only that she is the daughter of Herodias. And neither Matthew nor Mark offers any description of her actual performance. We have, then, a nameless princess who performs an unnarrated dance and brings about the decapitation of John the Baptist, a murder of monumental importance” (130).

Moreau, then, presents a visual expression of the narrative absence that is at the heart of the literary organization of the Salomé story. This emphasis on absence is also

evident in Wilde’s play, where the prophet is not seen but heard in the majority of the action.

_The Apparition_ fills in the absence in _Salomé Dancing Before Herod_ with the hallucinatory vision of the head of the Baptist. Bucknell believes that, “We see now that the light which seemed to emanate from Salome [sic] in the first painting comes from the gaze itself, represented here by the head of John the Baptist.”26 While it is clear that in _The Apparition_ the light does emanate from the head of the Baptist, it is essential to point out that in _Salomé Dancing Before Herod_, the light does not merely emanate from the princess, but is the product of the openness of the palace walls (with their carefully orientalized Moorish arches) as it reflects from the white of the eunuch’s veiling. The power of the gaze, then, does not derive solely from Salomé’s skin, but from the juxtaposition of both non-normative erotic gazes coming together to indicate the space of absence. Although extremely similar, there are some notable differences in the composition of the paintings. Salomé’s body is in the position called “croisé en avant” in the classical ballet. The shimmering robes have been thrown open to reveal her breasts and a body covered in elaborate jewels. The body of the eunuch is likewise less covered—the apparition of the Baptist has literally unveiled the intention of the gazes which had indicated his impending absence. As Bucknell has pointed out, “The space of the phallic gaze in the first painting is now the space of the castrated gaze, the gaze, literally, of no-body” 27.

The positioning of Salomé’s face is equally revealing. While the face is presented in profile, as it is in _Dancing Before Herod_, the expression is now anything but regal or defiant. She appears, rather, ashamed and frightened by the vision of death which she seemed before to be imperiously conjuring. This seems to me to be an interesting interpretation of a clash between symbols—when Salomé is confronted with the actual _materiality_ of what she had only suggested in the first painting, the elegance

26 Bucknell, p. 514
27 Bucknell, p. 513.
falls away. Mystery suggests beauty, harmony, and metaphor; bald reality signals fear and nakedness. This reflects the Symbolist rejection of the real in favor of the veiled and the implied.

The difference between the imposing and commanding Salomé of the first painting and the princess in the second who seems to cower before the result of her own seductive power is so striking as to suggest they are not depictions of the same symbol at all. Rather, I would posit that the figure in the first painting actually encompasses the influence of Herodias the instigator and commander of the actions causing the Baptist’s demise. This doubled depiction contains two symbols collapsed into one: the commanding figure of Herodias conjuring her bloody desire is contained within a body that is nominally her daughter’s. In the second painting the terrified and complicit princess is depicted face to face with the result of this doubling: as her actual body (access to which is implied by the dance her mother commands) is unveiled, so is the Baptist’s head, the gross material consequence of her suggestive performance.
The arm that had imperiously summoned this symbol of her absolute dominance over the male ruler is now in an attitude of confusion, defeat, and self-protection.
Figure 3
The symbolic exchange or dialogue in the Salomé story is further complicated when it is drawn back to text. This ekphrastic interpretation, which Casal complicated and enriched with the elements of poetic, cultural and linguistic transformation, was deeply embedded in 19th-century artistic practices in France, and was particularly prevalent in Decadent and Symbolist texts. In Huysmans’s watershed *A Rebours*, Des Esseintes, the literary personification of Symbolist ideals, waxes euphoric when contemplating Moreau’s paintings (“Entre tous, un artiste existait dont le talent le ravissait en de longs transports, Gustave Moreau. Il avait acquis ses deux chefs-d’œuvre et, pendant des nuits, il rêvait devant l’un deux, le tableau de la Salomé“ 28). The Symbolists were so attracted to Salomé precisely because of the central vacancies in her story, which permitted them to insert their own imaginations and create a literary or artistic creature of their own invention; Huysmans makes des Esseintes do likewise in his adoration of Moreau’s depiction, as Bucknell describes it:

This is “life” only for the disembodied gaze, for Herod’s, and Des Esseintes’s [sic] “dormant senses.” Des Esseintes is imbuing Moreau’s figures with signs of bestial motion, which the gaze may take as life-like: in effect, by conflating the inanimate and the animate in such a fashion, Des Esseintes participates in the gaze of Herod as it is inscribed in the Moreau itself.

Huysmans is here participating in a curious act of creative doubling and re-doubling, reminiscent of the synthetic symbolism in Moreau’s work. Huysmans the Symbolist takes Salomé the symbol painted by Moreau the painter and has des Esseintes, fictional representative of Symbolism, describe Moreau’s (Moreau here is an element of the novel, not necessarily the painter himself) depiction of the painting (in the novel) of Salomé (character in the painting in the novel):

28 Huysmans, p 105
Dans l’œuvre de Gustave Moreau, conçue en dehors de toutes les données du Testament, des Esseintes voyait enfin réalisé cette Salomé, surhumaine et étrange qu’il avait rêvée. Elle n’était plus seulement la baladine qui arrache à un vieillard…elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l’indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l’immortelle Hystérie, la Beauté maudite, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui raidit les chairs et le durcit les muscles ; la Bête monstrueuse , indifférente, irresponsable, empoisonnant, de même que l’Hélène antique, tout ce qui l’approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu’elle touche.29

This peculiar doubling, by which Huysmans creates des Esseintes creating Salomé, exhibits a creative style particular to the Symbolists. Salomé, with all her elegance, Otherness, and symbolic power, represents, as we have seen, a perfect vehicle for Symbolist expression. Des Esseintes, as symbolic Symbolist incarnation, proceeds in a sort of hyper-Symbolist exercise to re-create the creation of a Symbolist. He does not suggest to us what he feels Salomé represents, he tells us what she becomes: “elle devenait…la déité symbolique de l’indestructible Luxure…la Beauté maudite [in an elegant parallel to that Symbolist paragon, the poet maudit].” She is the actual realization of Des Esseintes Symbolist dreaming (“Des Esseintes voyait enfin réalisée cette Salomé, surhumaine et étrange qu’il avait rêvée ”).

From this point of symbols and meanings doubling and collapsing, the trajectory of Huysmans’s narrative structure reverses itself and begins to move outward again, from the level of the content of the painting to analysis of the intention of the painter:

Le peintre semblait d’ailleurs avoir voulu affirmer sa volonté de rester hors des siècles, de ne point préciser d’origine, de pays, d’époque, en mettant sa Salomé au milieu de cet extraordinaire palais.30

29 Huysmans, p. 106
30 Huysmans, p. 107
This continuous outward and inward motion of the textual structure underscores the dialogue taking place on multiple levels between the paintings themselves, the paintings and the books, and the literary characters and their creators. Where Wilde’s text addresses the inseparability of language, gesture and performativity, a comparative analysis of *A Rebours* and Moreau’s descriptions of Salomé bring a different level of nuance and complexity to the questions surrounding this narrative. The meanings and symbols melting and collapsing into each other present a number of problems in terms of the relationship between literary and pictorial depiction: can we, for instance, actually take Huysmans’s analysis of Moreau through the words of his invented des Esseintes as a commentary on the (real) paintings themselves? They seem to be, rather, commentaries on the character of des Esseintes, though we know them to be grounded in actual paintings. It is certainly impossible to take des Esseintes’ views for Huysmans’s, given the ironic veneer that overlays the entire narrative. If this sort of analysis cannot resolve key questions about these texts, which are mysterious by design, it can begin to provide a multifaceted reading. There is nothing static about these stories and nothing sedentary about their depiction. Salomé is transmuted in the text from terrifying mother to frightened child, from sorceress to paradoxically innocent temptress. In Moreau’s paintings, even her dramatic, focal gesture is subject to debate—its shape remains nearly identical, its intention and consequences are nearly unrecognizable as connected from one painting to the next. Salomé is transformed yet again, into an imaginative literary representation of her painted self as seen by a literary character, when she is transposed from Moreau’s work to Huysmans’s. It is apt that des Esseintes compares her to a lotus, as the flower parallels the multi-layered structures of both paintings and the text. These are shifting narratives, and they shift not only in their frames, but
out and away from each other; they glide between the painted and the printed page, and this sort of amorphousness becomes, paradoxically, one of their central unifying and defining properties.
There are, therefore, two aspects of Casal’s physical positionality—his situation—that must be dealt with each on their own terms, and in dialogue with each other. The first is a geographical and socio-cultural space resulting not only from his historical place in Cuba at the end of the twentieth century, and the implications contained therein—the homosocial that Bermúdez points out is part, but not all of this. The second is his place as defined by historical and critical hindsight—the simultaneously privileged and marginalized space Montero identifies for him in the Cuban canon. Finally, there is the particular space—and, crucially—its formal workings, through which his poems move and of which they make use.

As I have already pointed out, the fixity of time and space is never sacred in Casal’s work—always there is a shifting, an opposition of contrary forces, a contrast and a transformation. This shifty subjectivity finds an apotheosis in Mi museo ideal, for in this series we are not simply presented with poems, full face, as we might confront a painting. Rather, the formal operations of the painting duplicate or at least resemble the operations of depth and perspective—the visual artist’s evocative tricks—using textual tools. The artist’s visual deceptions, described perfectly by Gianlorenzo Bernini in the very different context of Renaissance Rome, are given new life in textual operation:

“If a man whitened his hair, beard, eyebrows, and—were it possible—his eyeballs and lips, and presented himself in this state to those very persons that see him every day he would hardly be recognized by them….Hence you can understand how difficult it is to make a portrait, which is all of one color, resemble the sitter….In order to represent the livid hue that some people have around their eyes we must carve out the place in the marble corresponding to these livid patches so as to render their effect and to make up, so to speak, by this artifice the deficiency of sculpture, which cannot reproduce the colors
of things. And yet…the original has not the cavities which we make in the imitation.”  

The difficulties Bernini described as a sculptor in transforming an essential material quality through artistic representation are evocative of the challenges of adaptation that Moreau’s work elicited. In France, his influence was tremendous; the crucial representations in À Rebours alone assure Moreau a lasting place in the literary, as well as the painterly, canon. The generative power and inspiration of these works was not limited to France. Rather, in a globalizing, and increasingly cosmopolitan world, they were influential far beyond their geographical boundaries. 

One such adaptation—which transcends generic as well as geographic borders—is the unique case of Julián del Casal, who became enamored of Moreau’s work after receiving several prints in a trunk (much like the French impressionist’s veneration of Japanese Graphic art, the postcards, merely cheap prints in Paris, became invaluable treasures to Casal in Havana). First in an extended series of letters to Moreau himself (it was a highly one-sided correspondence), and later in a formally serious set of sonnets, Casal illuminated what he found inspiring from the tableaux and reworked them into his own sonnets, reflecting his own concerns, contexts, and aesthetic values. Not only are these formally and thematically among the most compelling and engaging of his works, they show the influence of Parnassianism, Symbolism, Decadence, and other major currents of 19th-century French and European thought. Because of Casal’s complex dualities and the enduring fascination that Cuban society holds, its engagement with French writing and, perhaps to an even greater degree, with French painting, is a point of both curiosity and insight into the early roots of 20th-century cosmopolitanism. As I will demonstrate over the course of the following chapters, Casal’s work is at the heart of a relationship of uniquely

---

embodied, ekphrastic representation between French and Cuba that would thrive, mutate, and endure throughout the twentieth century.

The unique ekphrastic duet between Casal and Moreau is a revealing 19th-century model for what was to come in the 20th century. Many of the themes explored in modernist twentieth-century Franco-Cuban artistic dialogues find a point of origin, or an early prefiguration, in the fascination Casal’s abiding fascination with Moreau. A short critical examination of these early networks of aesthetic affinity between French and Cuban artists sets the framework for a deeper, broader exploration of how these necessarily modernistic dialogues (transcending, as they did pre-twentieth century limitations of genre, space, and nationality) operated and evolved. Of particular interest are three perennially crucial themes: first, the international character of these dialogues; second, a performative poetics that cannibalizes, transforms, and internalizes a variety of generic practices; and third the preëminence of the body as a central metaphor and organizing principle a phenomenological poetics of radical, incarnate subjectivity. These artistic relationships are characterized, as we shall see, by a Glissantian process of relation rather than reduction, re-presentation, or explanation. As Glissant writes, “Le texte littéraire est par function, et contradictoirement, producteur d’opacité. Parce que l’écrivain, entrant dans ses écritures entassées, renonce à un absolu, son intention poétique, tout d’évidence et de sublimité. L’écriture est relative par rapport à cet absolu, c’est-à-dire qu’elle l’opacifie en effet, l’accomplissant dans la langue. Le texte va de la transparence rêvée à l’opacité produite dans le mots.”

Born in Havana in 1863, the Cuban poet José Julián Herculano del Casal y de la Lastra Casal’s lead a life of multiple and continual exclusions. Born into a wealthy family whose fortunes were quickly lost, sent to school with much wealthier peers among whom he was not accepted without difficulty, homosexual and perceived as effeminate and unmanly, Casal

32 Glissant, Poétique de la relation, p. 129
personified in many ways the radically excluded Other. This state of social alterity, coupled with his ongoing illnesses throughout his short life, manifests in his poetry as a continual taking apart and reasserting of the subjective body, which is destroyed only to be re-formed and transformed in accordance with the artists’ aesthetic praxis and poetic epistemology.

His physical illness, combined with a sexuality that, in his socio-cultural context was seen as nothing short of a pathology, creates a unique and particular aesthetic and poetic expression and construction of the body. The aesthetic, symbolic, and lived implications of the body are closely linked to notions of identity, space, and place, in Cuba at this time, and Casal especially strongly embodies some of these issues. Oscar Montero has shed important light on this question, describing what both Casal and his symbolic opposite number, the Cuban independence hero Antonio Maceo represent in the aesthetic and symbolic construction of Cuban nationhood, recounting a major moment in the history of Cuba’s struggle for independence and national identity:

“With one dramatic gesture, Maceo cut off the eager questions of the young writers and reporters who surrounded him. In this scene, the body replaces all possible rhetoric, becoming the evidence of heroic deeds, too powerful to be recounted in mere words. For a brief moment, the realities of the battlefield invade the city through the presence of the scarred body. At exactly the same time, in the same city, Casal's body was the center of a radically different strategy of representation, one where the sick, deviant body inscribed its own drama through the power of words.” 33

Tellingly, Montero describes an actual encounter between Maceo and Casal, which enacts this symbolic transubstantiation and perfectly encapsulates the encounters, contradictions, and dialogues of the emerging Cuban nation. As Montero writes:

“Maceo gave his photograph to Casal, and the two were photographed together. I want to stop on these two images: the body of the hero, scarred

---

and literally storied, and Casal's photograph. Each scar on the hero's body is a story. The scar points to the heroism of the battlefield, and the body tautologically gives credence to the story. The scar is also the fresh memory of the tortured slave body, now redeemed in the heroic presence of Maceo. On the other hand, Casal's photograph is all surface. As a unique representation, the photograph resists the process of classification that would constitute a corpus, that is, an object of study.”

Bodies, then become powerful symbols in the drama of nationhood, transcending “all possible rhetoric” to operate on their own symbolic terms, according to the power of their own aesthetic logic. It is important to note that the represented body operates powerfully on a non-textual level, the level of the photographic image. This encounter between two portraits and two figures perfectly articulates the tensions of technological advance, budding national identity, and the gendered, sexualized, and power-driven encodings of body that characterize the work of the artists in this study.

The body, then, is the metaphoric key to Casal’s work, as evidenced by many of his poems, and in particular by Autobiografía and Mis amores. At the beginning of Autobiografía, Casal creates a particular type of self, an articulate and declamatory narrative subject that is fixed both consciously and temporally. When he writes “Nací en Cuba. El sendero de la vida/Firme atravieso, con ligero paso,” Casal situates himself in what seems to be an irreproachably specific and defined space. However, even this seemingly definitive statement gives the lie to the possibility of a stable, totalizing subject. Casal’s Cuba was far from a singularly identifiable entity: it had endured and would endure years of warfare to determine precisely what Cuba was—a subject—a political body unto itself-- or a dependent piece of the bigger body that was the Spanish state. In presenting himself and his birth definitively in an unstable context, Casal establishes the give-and-take between fixity and transition. The continuation of this first verse

34 Montero
further complicates the theme of movement and stability. From the shifting yet definitive ground of Cuba, this narrative self has a particularly malleable sense of movement through life: “firme atravieso, con ligero paso.” He departs from shifting/stable ground to traverse, a firm self with a light step. The self would seem to remain the same self, recognizing itself as such as it carries out the act of traversing. His light step, in contrast to the firmness of the self, distances him from the same life he traverses: it is a light step, it leaves no mark, trace, echo or definitive impression of itself to connect the poet to this life. Nothing remains to prove his existence, rendering the self simultaneously permanent and fleeting, whole yet incomplete.

The ambiguous subject of the poet’s life further erodes the limits of its own subjectivity in the encounter with Death in the second stanza. Death wounds “a mis amantes companeros/Dejándome, en el mundo, solitario.” The poet himself remains untouched by death; he has established a self in the first stanza that surmounts or exists around these binaries, even while other, totalizad subjects, are affected by it. He remains untouchable by death because his subject flits in and out of the category of life.

The creation of the lyric subject that Casal establishes thematically is doubled by the structural construction of his poems. The third verse reappropriates the terminology and the content of the earlier stanzas, with a body that comes apart temporally, as the tense of the poem changes from past perfect to indicative: “Mi juventud, herida ya de muerte,/ Empieza a agonizar entre mis brazos./Sin que la puedan reanimar/Sin que la puedan consolar mis cantos.” The subject’s youth becomes a sort of nearly incarnate second subject, undermining the singularity of the narrative self as it is physically brought closer and separated by the primary subject. It must exist physically in this subject’s arms, underlining a closeness at the same time that the possibility of being held by this primary subject constitutes it as something separate and
apart. Casal, then undoes the binaries between self and other, life and death, present and past, undermining the notion of completeness. This seems to me to indicate completeness as problematic and oppressive—the poet must take apart this category of the total subject in creating his true vision of multiple subjectivities. In other words, he dis-members the received notion of the singular subject (spatial, physical or temporal) in order to re-member his own complex subjectivities, which have been categorized in the realm of the excluded.

Casal further dissects and recreates the body in his sonnet *Mis amores*. The first three sentences are an exercise in the kind of “artifice” he was frequently criticized for, ignoring anything like nature or carnality. The narrator articulates himself as a system of aesthetic preferences: “Amo el bronce, el cristal, las porcelans./Las vidrieras de múltiples colores.” The artist begins by constituting himself as a non-body, as an arbiter of inanimate beauty. This association with the French seems to me to have played against Casal, underlining his marginalization as effeminate, as other, as not “Cuban enough.” But the presence of the carnal, marginalized body, reasserts and re-members itself in dramatic and shocking fashion in the last stanza: “Y el lecho de marfil, sándalo y oro/En que dejá la virgin hermosura/La fragmentada flor de su inocencia.” The violence of this image trumps the delicate aestheticism of the earlier preferences. Rather than an “artificial” distant body, we are presented with a real body, and one which, through the violence and blood of the implicit sexual act, regains the ground of intersubjectivity and domination. The more luxurious materials associated with this body (ivory, sandalwood and gold) further underscore its dominance over the subject/body of the first stanza, described in terms of lesser materials (bronze, crystal and porcelain). The body is revalorized by sex and violence, overshadowing the allusive imagery of the first stanzas, by the end seems, if
not forgotten, at least inconsequential. tiene la impresión de haber olvidado que había todo un poema en las estrofas precedentes.

Through a sophisticated system of metaphor and representation, Casal revalorizes the body by taking it apart and re-making it in his own conflicting and multiple image, representing a relationship of self to body that is at once crushingly intimate and impossibly distant.

The themes of allegory and bodily transformation, of transcending the boundaries of one’s situations by pushing the boundaries of the text, and of engaging a mobile and mutable subject were already significant concerns—even identifying themes—in Casal’s poetics. These preoccupations and artistic efforts clarify why—at a vast remove of space, influence, and age, Casal found such a natural counterpoint—a visual inspiration and echo of his textual praxis—in Moreau. Casal set himself a daunting formal, structural, and conceptual challenge in replicating Moreau’s work. The Salomé paintings are shadowy and thickly deep—the eye plunges in to them and wanders, as down a series of sequential doors in a hallway shrouded in fog, even as the tattooed overlay of the surface gives the lie to the artist’s craft. Likewise, as Lee Fontanella has pointed out, “the idea of opening in the ‘vestibule’ [where Casal’s series starts] connotes from the start a spatial relationship from one poem to the other, by which we are to see that Casal is poetizing painted art as if it were on exhibit.”35 This exhibiting of the text is important for several reasons. In the first place, it renders the text visual—the distinction is between legibility and observation, and it is an essential one. Secondly, into the already clouded space between text and image, this spatializing of the text adds an additional dimension: a challenge to stasis. By making it a mobile, spatial experience, Casal creates a third space, one in which we move through a lyricized image—or a visualized text.

As we shall see over the course of the following chapters, exile—what it means, how it changes those who experience it, even what it is—is a central and evolving element in the development of these dialogues. Casal and Moreau provide an illuminating starting point that simultaneously—and fittingly—defines and complicates this construct. Not only do the massive ideological, geo-political, and technological upheavals of the twentieth century create movements of displacement large and small, but geographical unbelonging—the diaspora, the refugee, the exile—becomes an artistic identity unto itself, to be rejected as a reductive label or worn as a mantle of pride. As I described in the previous chapter, both Glissant and Benítez Rojo ascribe a particular power of expression and character to errancy—to wandering regardless of boundaries real, imposed, internalized, or imagined. In the case of Casal, the state of internal exile—of displacement in his own country—played an integral role in the construction of his poetics and lyrical worldview. Ivan A. Schulman wrote convincingly on the particularities of Casal’s situation, explaining that “His exotic fantasies, his yearning for delicate, aesthetic art forms, his reverence for French models are undeniably related to a social and cultural crisis whose Europeanized writers often preferred imagined to real landscapes or the vagaries of historical and mythic experiences to the exigencies of the domestic scene.” Casal’s “yearnings”, furthermore, have a particularly complex and intercultural aesthetic and expressive vocabulary—they absorb, or are at least inflected by, foreign forms, even as they express conflicts and tensions inherent in and unique to the Cuban context. The constructions of exile and displacement in Casal’s work are not simply reducible to the concerns of exile, escapism and alterity familiar from the great 19th-century European aesthetic and philosophical movements, but are rather modulated, as Schulman elaborates, by “the context of the conflicts of the

---

individual artist with his milieu.” Casal is important because he embodies and enacts facets of globally significant moments while remaining a completely unique product of his context and time—and the tensions these imply.

Casal’s complexities arise in large part from the difficulty of situating him anywhere. There is the determined aesthete, the quiet nationalist, the homosocial spaces he frequented and developed.

As in Benítez Rojo, the conceptual role of the horizon bounding the poet’s world is essential here. Cuba’s situation as an island is paralleled by the artist’s isolation, and his art becomes in some ways a means of escape. Unlike the dreamy escapes of the Parnassians or the Symbolists, however, Casal’s is firmly defined by this (literally) isolated positionality, as Schulman writes “Distance, in an aesthetic and ideological context, constitutes both an expansion of the telescopic structure and a counterstatement to frustrated attempts at harmonious social integration.” Casal’s position as exile, therefore, straddles several realms: the social, the sexual, the literary, and the canonical. All of them find structural and thematic echoes in his work.

Casal is an important starting point precisely because he demonstrates the instability of starting points. It is the rich expressivity that derives from the uncertainties his work inhabits that sets the stage for the other interactions explored here. The politics and semantics of exile are not fixed, but rather interpretive and interpretable categories that allow us to investigate the implications of space, place, and context. Because so much of the Cuban experience—from the days of his iconized compatriot Martí to the digital expressions of Yoani Sanchez—exists in relation to, in spite of, or in rejection of the threat or possibility of exile, Casal’s fixity in terms of place—he never traveled far from Havana—frees us to examine a purely aesthetic and localized sense of

---

37 Schulman, 114  
38 Schulman, 122
exile that is expanded and deepened by the physical upheavals of later exemplars. Because he sought spiritual and aesthetic fulfillment in a rapport with an artist from whom he was separated by medium as much as geography, Casal’s chosen subject matter and form of expression put him in an unequivocal state of errance. First, he yearns for that which is, in all ways foreign. Secondly, he wanders between genres and practices, refusing purely textual operations or mechanisms. Finally, his lyrical letters demonstrate a use of communication systems that—as we shall later see in the case of Artaud—transcends the functional to become an essential component of his compositional techne.

To begin with Casal, it is necessary to explore the implications of 1) the homosocial space Bermudez and Montero point out, and 2) Parse his latter significance in the Cuban canon. The themes that are established and prevail throughout Casal’s work—embodied subjectivity, yearning for the aestheticized dreamworld, alterity and contrast—reach their apotheosis in the series Mi museo ideal, simultaneously a paean to, absorption of, and reinterpretation of Moreau’s Salomé tableaux. This work is crucial to understanding Casal in himself, but also in relation to the history of Franco-Cuban artistic interaction and influence from the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. It deals with a major work of the French visual canon, which it refashions in a distinctly Cuban mode. And if its antecedents are unquestionably to be found, as I’ve written, in the French aesthetic and conceptual movements of the nineteenth century, it also sets the groundwork for the modernistic collaging, re-interpreting, grand gestures of twentieth-century modernism. By playing with surface and movement, worshipping the continent and then audaciously remaking its masterpieces, and yearning for the distant while asserting his Cubanness, Casal presaged the large questions of exile and relocation in a world rapidly becoming unimaginably cosmopolitan._formally, Mi museo ideal enact a series of
practices that echo that which they worship while refusing to become simple copies. In his radical plays with movement, subjectivity, and the privileging of the marginalized/other/represented Subject, *Mi museo ideal* presages important currents of twentieth-century art-making and notions of originality and influence, even as it insists on itself, on remaking the master in the student’s own image. It is imperative to understand the workings of *Mi museo ideal* as a touchstone of the historic dialogue I examine in these pages.

In Casal’s body of work, a significant amount of attention has been paid to the sonnets of *Mi museo ideal*. *Mi museo ideal* bears the explicit and unmistakable impress of the major artistic concerns of 19th-century France. I will focus now chiefly on two of these concerns. First: the subjective presence of the artist as guide and leader throughout the experience of the work—his voice functions as Virgilian torch as much as expressive medium. Secondly, on the expressive, affective, and identity-based conflicts and tensions raised by the encounter between an image and text, an encounter that becomes all the richer and more complex when it is not only two genres, but two cultures that come into contact. In this regard, Casal’s work goes beyond a simple ekphrasis to explore a deeply nuanced representational realm colored by what Silvia Bermúdez identifies as “el espacio homosocial, donde poeta y pintor se relacionan.”

> “Pienso escribir un poema que será, casi, vuestra apoteosis.”

This revalorization, this ambiguously sacred place accorded to the body reaches an apex in Casal’s poetics with his sonnets on Gustave Moreau’s paintings (he had only seen copies, having never been to Paris) and in his letters to Moreau about his work. Casal was, like all the Latin American modernistas, strongly influenced by various currents in French art and literature, and he worshiped Moreau. After receiving, in a trunk sent from Paris, some prints of Moreau’s

---

40 Letter to Moreau, no 4, 1 November 1891
Salomé series, Casal was smitten. (Similarly, after reading À rebours he began a long correspondence with Huysmans). In his article “Julian del Casal, Letters to Gustave Moreau,” Robert Jay Glickman writes « [Casal] sought escape from daily miseries through dream and through art. He replaced nature with an artificial world of his own making; he cultivated the exotic, he investigated the macabre. »

Glickman touches on two key aspects of Casal’s correspondence with Moreau. First, there is the importance of a creative world “of his own making” whose spaces are carved, ordered and shaped by the artist’s aesthetic and philosophical preferences (here we have the unmistakable impress of Huysmans, as we remember the careful selections of Des Esseintes’ library and study in À Rebours, including, in a dizzying bit of intertextual referentiality, Moreau’s Salomés, to which we will return shortly.) Secondly, there is the cultivation, evaluation and re-absorption of the exotic in Casal’s work, which is both a reaction to and a refraction of Moreau’s. From this last point, it is essential to point out that the letters themselves are part of an ekphrastic process: a third, literarily performative genre that encompasses and engages with the paintings and poems.

It is in this process that Casal supersedes his own stated and intentions as well as conventional boundaries of genre. In a letter to Moreau dated 11 August 1891, Casal writes that his entire second volume of poetry “estará dedicada a la glorificación de vuestras incomprables obras.” This is not, however, a simple work of admiration, not a mere dedication. Rather, as Casal reveals in the same letter, the poems are part of a complex process of reflection, absorption, and re-presentation: “Aunque no he tenido la buena fortuna de conoceros, except a través de copias de sus exquisitas pinturas, me atrevo a escribiros para enviaros los sonetos que

---

41 Glickman, “Julian del Casal: Letters to Gustave Moreau”
42 letter to Moreau
adjunto y que compuse basándome en grabados de estras obras maestras.”43 Here, then, we have Casal describing in letters the exquisite paintings, which he has seen only in copies, and then refashioned into poems. He goes even further with ekphrastic descriptions by lyrically describing more of Moreau’s paintings in a letter four days later: “Al revés de lo que imagina la fantasia burguesa, vuestros Hércules son fuertes, pero bellos, vuestra Prometeo es un Cristo pagano….y vuestras Venus son divinamente hermosas, pero frías, indiferentes, nostálgicas, y soñadoras. Ellas me traen a la memoria aquellos versos de mi maestro en poesía, el gran Baudelaire.” Casal has carried out, within the generic confines of the “letter”, a performative poetics which absorbs and interprets the copies of Moreau’s images he has seen reprinted in a magazine, and transformed them lyrically into an evocative series of impressions that then gestures outward again towards the poetry of Baudelaire. The lyrical structuring of the letter is evident not only in the careful cadencing of the phrase, but in their poetic ordering as a series of contrasts and even outright contradiction (Hercules is strong, but beautiful; Prometheus, a pagan Christ; Venus lovely but cold). In his subsequent letter (the regularity of Moreau’s responses is uncertain), Casal writes to his maestro of “mis cartas, que oso escribiros en la voluptuousa y delicada lengua que vos habláis.” As Casal frequently denigrated his own command of French, and wrote all his letter in Spanish which he then translated, we are left to wonder of what language, precisely it is that he speaks. His ambiguity suggests a language of relation, the paintings and poems speaking to each other beyond obvious linguistic boundaries. Just such a boundary-blurring language is suggested by a description very nearly approaching a kind of inter-textual mise-en-abîme, in which he describes both the tangible qualities of a poem he will make of one of Moreau’s paintings (it will be written in pencil, suggesting a work always in progress, eschewing finality, and therefore transcending the temporal fixity of the painted page), as well as the action of the

---

43 letter to Moreau
poem, which he describes in visually evocative, pictorial terms: “Primero, os daré una vaga 
descripción del escenario [here he gestures to yet another genre, the stage]. Pintaré un Dios 
hermoso, emergiendo entre nubes nacaradas, vestido de púrpura tachonado de pedrerías…Os 
bosquejaré muy misteriosamente.”

This transmutation and comingling of genres visual and lyrical is particular evidenced in 
the sonnets of which Casal speaks, and notably in those relating to Moreau’s series of Salomé 
paintings. The image of Salomé, so ubiquitous in Western art of the 19th century (painted by 
Moreau, Bonnaud, Gottlieb and Renault, voiced in operas, danced in ballets, set on stage by 
Laforgue and by Wilde) is uncannily well-suited to Casal’s simultaneously highly aestheticized 
and deeply carnal investigation of the exotic and the macabre. Furthermore, this process of 
investigation relies on a complex, shifting and elusive process of ekphrastic internalization and 
transformation. His sonnets Salomé (1892) and La aparición (1892) are not representations 
of the Salomé story in any direct sense but rather poetic interpretations of Moreau’s paintings; their 
images only exist in Moreau’s depictions. Furthermore, the choice of subject reflects the central 
importance of the moving, morphing, sexualized and fragmented body that will appear 
throughout the texts and paintings we examine here. The sonnets, then, are the outermost, textual 
manifestation of a complicated poetic process. First, he substitutes a multi-vocal, performative 
relation for a dichotomous, transparent representation. Because it draws upon, and in fact would 
not exist outside the context of the encounter between paintings, letters and poetry between two 
people who did not speak the same language, Casal is operating within an opaque symbolic 
rapport that destabilizes the signifying networks of both image and text as they relate to each 
other. Writes Casal:

44 Letter 4, 1 Nov., 1891
« Salome baila, y, en la diestra alzado/muestra siempre/radiante de Alegria/un loto blanco de pistilos de oro ».

This passage contains some rather extraordinary elements, most notably the assumption that Salome is dancing at all. Moreau’s Salomé refuses to be categorized, and the key to this refusal lies in the utterly static quality of the paintings. By stating explicitly that Salomé is dancing, Casal has accepted the truth as imposed by the painter, but it is not an unconditional acceptance, for he distances himself and its central figure and resituates them in his own text. What seemingly seems a bit of a jarring gender disagreement between the words « diestra » and alzado » clouds categories of sexuality; the clue of alzado, a masculin adjective, ensures that the flower, the loto, becomes the central subject of the phrase. The flower, variously described as lily or lotus, becomes unquestionably a lotus for Casal. This is curious, as a look at Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees reveals that the lily is the substitute for the "oriental" lotus in the Christian cosmology, representing pity, compassion, fertility and, mirabile dictu, the Virgin Mary. The lotus becomes the agent by which the boundary of semantic discourse between East and West becomes unfixed.

Like Moreau's painting L’Apparition, La aparición is conceptually more abstract and distant from the original story. In the last verse of the poem, Casal distances himself from the text (temporally) and from the painting (thematically):

"huye del Precursor decapitado/ que esparce el marmóreo pavimiento/lluvia de sangre en gotas carmesies."

The verb "huye" is crucial here; Salomé may appear to recoil, but again the composition is too static to suggest flight, as “huye” does. Casal internalizes and remakes the image of Moreau-- again, the artists are not bound by the constraints of their own representational selves.
In an affecting parallel, Casal uses the figure of Salomé to attempt to flee his environment. The obscure princess, originally confined in an opaque and mysterious narrative, becomes instead an agent of escape and flight; as she manipulates her sexualized position to take unexpected power and agency, so Casal appropriates, transforms, and re-dreams the image of Salomé to transcend his immediate circumstances.

The rapport between the works echo the geographic rapport between the disparate cities of Paris and Havana: Casal's poem could not exist without Moreau's painting, simultaneously its defining attribute is the desire to escape the painting. This is not merely a question of physical movement but of thematic intention. Representation art becomes a vehicle for escaping History and allowing Salomé access to a representation future that extends beyond the borders of the work. Casal separate's Moreau's story from itself, infinitely multiplying the action and temporal possibilities for the body of Salomé.

Casal’s letters and poems (for they touch on each other too often to be easily disjoined), reveal a performative, poetic, and epistolary practice that demonstrates the ekphrastic processes and generic mutability of cosmopolitan modernism as it would continue to evolve over the twentieth century. They also represent a crucial touchstone in the developing history of aesthetic affinity between Cuban and French artistic production, which would be deepened and complicated by the political, aesthetic, and geographic transformations of modernist currents and historical change.

There are several aspects of a historical reading of Caribbean poetics that I will address in the following chapters, and these present some specific challenges and opportunities. First, because the Caribbean is multi-lingual and multi-cultural, it is problematic to approach it or to try to read its artistic production from the vantage point of a single literary tradition. Secondly,
the discourses of art history and literary analysis must be used in flexible and dynamic ways, because stable categories of genre, image and text, very rarely apply; when they do, they can often be limiting or reductive.

It is in an attempt to seriously engage these questions that I have emphasized the analytical, theoretical, and poetic tools furnished by Benítez Rojo and by Glissant; the dialogues each establishes separately, as well as the parallels and divergences between them enables me to delve into the four creative correspondences I address in the succeeding chapters, in the mold of that between Casal and Moreau that I touched upon previously. Finally, as Glissant’s and Benítez Rojo’s vocabularies have already begun to demonstrate, these complex networks of poetics and representation in the Caribbean tend to revolve around the function of and representation of the body, and this colors and frames my reading of these dialogues. In their turn, these embodied poetics transcend genre—even within the confines of a single genre, they gesture outward through multiple mechanisms, including ekphrasis, heteroglossia, and translation. The history of mutual regard between the French/Francophone and Cuban artists I examine here, emerges as a rich network, a series of *transformative, mutable* expressive, representational and discursive practices.
Chapter 3

Of Nerve-Meters and Nervous Conditions: Antonin Artaud and Anaïs Nin

Translate the Speaking Body

Antonin Artaud's complex poetics, his dynamic visual-textual vocabulary, and his highly corporeal aesthetic philosophy find an unlikely interlocutor in the hyper-sexual, feverishly Freudian, always heteroglot prose of his onetime friend or lover, the French-Cuban émigrée Anaïs Nin. The artistic dialogue between the two artists sheds a fascinating light on the polyphonic body and the modes of expression required to express it. The indelible imprint of modernism broadly and of Surrealism in particular is clearly recognizable in their shifting, fluctuating lives, which were anything but stable: Nin’s trajectory took her from Cuba to France and Spain; Artaud found exile in asylums and, paradoxically, at home, and traveled extensively to Mexico and Ireland, with a brief stop through the very port in Havana that Nin had left as a child. Refusing geographical permanence or linguistic stasis, Nin, like Artaud, instead developed what Glissant might call a “creolized” voice. Her project of art, language and memory cannot be situated within a particular history or language tradition; it exists at the confluence of several. Her literary language, in fact, is translated before even being written: while she chooses to write in English, it is an English that is pervaded by the rhythms and formulations of French. Nin began her diaries at the age of eleven; already, her writing was defined by an intersection of genres, for her early diary could be considered as a kind of epistolary catharsis, since its entries were made up mostly of letters written to her absent father after he abandoned the family.

Antonin Artaud, it barely bears repeating, is a sprawling, monumental figure in 20th century art, philosophy, theater and writing. Because he has been scrutinized from so many
angles, and because the breadth of his influence still entrances and frustrates scholars in a tremendous range of disciplines, this chapter is concerned with narrowing, rather than with encompassing. Rather than addressing his extensive bibliography regarding and consequent influence on the theatre, or lingering over his transformative, quasi-anthropological experiences among the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, I will look at him through a quite specific lens; my aim is to reveal different facets and open different vistas onto his thought, which engages the themes of exile and wandering to reveal surprising parallels between his experience and those of the other artists examined here.

Within the broad range of his collaborations, dialogues, friendships and enmities, I focus on one brief but multi-faceted and important relationship: his fraught, abortive love affair with Anaïs Nin. I focus, also, on relatively narrow periods of his life—the clearly chronologically demarcated times when he was confined to the asylums—exiled, as it were, from the geographies of the quotidian and the normal to the prison kingdom of the mad. Finally, I focus on one very particular aspect of his expressive production—the fitful, fretful, frustrated drawings, etchings, inkings and paintings that engaged and preoccupied him during this time, and his writings on and about those, as well as on the early poems where he lays out his distinctively embodied vocabulary.

The seed for Artaud’s drawings and texts in various asylums is clear in his Premiers poèmes. Examining the ways in which these early lyrical works destabilize subjectivities and genre reveals the themes of exile, errancy, and generic instability that characterize Artaud’s lyrical and visual project.
**I: The Vessel**

*Bateau-feu (n.m.): navire mouillé en pleine mer, possédant un mât tubulaire qui supporte un phare.*

« Je ne peux plus, baigné de vos langueurs, ô lames,
Enlever leur sillage aux porteurs de coton,
Ni traverser l’orgueil des drapeaux et des flammes,
Ni nager sous les yeux horribles de pontons. »

It is difficult to begin, when beginning to write about Antonin Artaud. One has the sense, with much of his poetry—despite its instantly recognizable complexity of structure and architectural elegance—of having dropped, *in medias res*, into a spinning, fully functional universe, as though the writing is natural and ongoing, never stopping or starting but simply happening. Artaud’s poetry oozes inspiration. His voice is unmistakable, his intention unfailingly solipsistic, almost maddening in its richness of evocation and recursion. He is completely unique, and there is, for me, the real puzzle of Artaud, for his uniqueness derives precisely (and not without disorientation), from the impossibility of unity or singularity in his work. The multiplicities of Artaud are multiply, elliptically inspired. In fact, the word ‘inspiration’ itself might not be a bad place to start. *Inspirare*: to breathe in, and to breathe into. The inspiration of Artaud is inspired; it inhales the external, appropriates the alien, takes the other into a self already trembling in the process of making and unmaking itself, creating and exhaling multiple, hybrid selves. The inspiration of Artaud is essential for Deleuze and Guattari in the schizo-analysis of *Anti-oedipe* and elaboration of the concept of the rhizome in *Mille plateaux*; my intention here is, in part, to elaborate on the rhizomatic tendencies of Artaud and his relation to that multiply inspired theoretical framework. This consistently in-breathing inspiration leads us naturally to notions of doubling and reflection, as the self exhales itself in its creative process;


84
much has of course been written about Artaud and his doubles, about *Le théatre et son double* and his essays on the theater. However, his *Premières poèmes* provide a different perspective on his textual multiplicities and the representational structures at work there. The poems reflect a set of selves and texts (which I am not entirely convinced can be separated from each other), that in a Deleuzian sense, exist in tension with, rather than in opposition to, other texts, other selves. The importance of the prepositions *to* and *with* will be addressed later, because an analysis of the poems themselves necessitates it. I do not mean, in taking an approach that will be unmistakably inflected with deconstructionist strategies, to put words in Artaud’s mouth, or to attribute to him any particular intention. The texts themselves, in being taken apart in this way, reveal their multiplicities unbidden, and Artaud’s poems happen to be particularly well-suited to such an approach.

Artaud’s madness is, of course, an important element, perhaps the defining element, in the way his subjectivities are constructed. As I have said, I do not engage with the “scientific” particularities of his madness, but with the way in which it functioned systematically and relationally. As Wladymir Krysinski and Raili Mikkanen point out, “Being primarily the social adventure of subjectivity, madness enters into a multiple discourse.” It seems to me then, that Artaud’s uniquely fractured subjectivity, in being called madness, necessarily begins to be defined by the expressive subjectivities it engenders in turn; to dissect these becomes little more than an exercise in tautology. Secondly, I find it extremely problematic, even contrary to the spirit of the poems, to accept the totalizing, pathologized notion of madness, and then to impose it on the text, and find myself again agreeing with Krysinski and Mikkanen that, “The narrative of madness seeking to be other capitulates to a pre-established rationality which transforms it

---

into a rhetoric and a textuality, gives it a frame of reference pointed to by others.” I hope, then, that in examining the poems the issue of madness will play its necessary and implicit role, and the immanent quality of his subjectivities will become clear without being subjected to explicit indicative gestures: put another way, I hope for a “discourse which, without doubling itself, without even distributing itself (along the division between the critical and the clinical), but with a single and simple characteristic speaks of madness and the work, driving, primarily, at their enigmatic conjunction.”

In probing the perspectives at work in the *Premiers poèmes* while trying to keep from robbing them of their essential mystery, I will rely loosely on theoretical approaches to trace one particular network of symbols—those related, broadly, to boats. The multiplicities of Deleuze and Guattari, and the production-economy of the “body without organs” are central here. As they frequently pointed out, Artaud is in many ways the ideal ‘subject’ of the schizo-analysis that can be applied so readily to his texts. I will also, to a certain extent, rely upon Barthes and Foucault, as I examine the central conceit of the *navires, bateaux* and *nefs* which appear again and again in these poems, explicitly or implicitly. We will see that each of these vessels plays a particular symbolic role that shifts constantly and eschews hierarchy in favor of a rhizomatic multiplicity of meaning. It is nearly impossible to see the literary Artaud without seeing his artistic forbears Baudelaire and Rimbaud; the ways in which he ingested and reflected them shed another kind of light on the many kinds of selves he represents.

Artaud’s *Le navire mystique*, from 1913, is a complex of intertwining symbols. Gleefully referential even in their opacity, the dialogues among its images are illustrative of his constantly deferred lyrical selves and of his ingestion of other poetic imaginings. Baudelaire’s

---

48 Krasinski and Mikannen, p. 2
'forêts de symboles’ in Correspondances (1857)) is the clear antecedent of Le navire mystique, but it manifests in a wholly original, and immanent way, rather than in a direct hierarchy of influence. Baudelaire’s works color that poem and others as well, which I will address later on. The first of the 31 poems grouped as Premiers poèmes, Le navire immediately presents the crucial symbol of the water-bound vessel. That a substantial navire, neither a river-inclined bateau reeking of inland freshwater, nor a highly figurative and allegorically fraught nef, serves as our entry into the poems should not be taken for granted. A navire is full of particular and peculiar heft and ambiguity. Its etymological origins reveal its relation to multiplicity, ambiguity and mutability: “Navire présente en ancien français la même ambiguïté sémantique (italics mine) que le latin entre le sens de ‘flotte’ (1140) et de ‘vaisseau’ (1160).”51 We have then, a fundamental echo of multiplicity at the root of the singular vessel that leads us into this collection of multiple subjectivities. The roots of the navire are not only intrinsically colored by multiplicity, but defined by an essential ambiguity of the subject, as “Le genre du mot est resté indécis jusqu’au XVIIème siècle…On a voulu voir dans l’usage féminine une spécialisation sémantique, la navire réalisant plutôt le sens de “flotte...”.52 This defining ambiguity, at its grammatical source, of the subject, is exemplary Artaud: a navire, of course, should go from one point to another, traversing a vague liminal expanse. The vessel’s grammatical nature poetically undermines its own selfhood, and its own nature; it is defined by its un-definability, refusing singularity and definitive identification.

From this grammatical instability derives a poetics of skittering subjectivities and an anarchic archaeology of the symbolized self. From the beginning, the use of reflexive verbs splits the self, as it acts on itself even in being acted upon: “Il se sera perdu le navire archaïque”

51 Le Robert Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, direction d’Alan Rey, troisième édition, janvier 2000. Print
52 Le Robert
establishes the theme of the losing oneself from the self; the sense of alienation and
disorientation is underscored by the distorted syntax, as the line begins with a pronoun whose
antecedent confusingly follows it. The immediate replacement of the “mystique” of the title by
the “archaïque” of the first line conflates metaphysical distance (as in the distinction between the
real and the mystical) with temporal distance (separation between the archaic and the current)
and making the text’s intention murky. In the second line, “Aux mers où baigneront mes rêves
éperdus” a more definite subject is established by the pronoun “mes”, but it is, again instantly
fractured and deferred, as the subject’s autonomous dreams become the object of another
reflexive construction which then becomes forgotten, overwhelmed, desolate, éperdu. The final
two lines of this stanza complete the undoing of a hierarchical structure of meaning or a solid
construction of subjectivity, as “...ses immenses mâts se seront confondus/Dans les brouillards
d’un ciel de bible et de cantiques.” The vertical organizers, the masts, which give the boat
structure and thus hint at a more normative signification that is essentially and literally
hierarchical, are inversely submerged in a lyrical, textually authoritarian sky, a sky of bibles and
hymns. The inversion simultaneously gives in to that authority and undoes its hierarchical
construction, even as the masts “confondus” melt into each other. But even this structural
inversion is not as stable as it may at first seem, obscured by plural fogs that result in multiple
occlusions. The masts of these vessels are essential, for they are one piece of a significant
dichotomy between the rigidly hierarchical and the flowingly collaborative (the latter signified
by sails), which will unfurl as we look across the Premiers poèmes. It’s a game of smoke and
mirrors swirling around symbols of inversion; in other words, the act of subversion cannot be
observed from a stable vantage point, so that the calling-into-question is called into question.
There is no absolute, no objective viewpoint or fixed perspective. We are immediately
introduced, then, to a fantastical vessel that takes itself apart even as it bears us into uncertain waters.

The second stanza, like the first, uses the future tense (again conflating spaces and times inflected by the archaic and the mystical), to set up a vaguely defined yet compelling otherworldly scene. “Un air jouera”: the music is immediately clarified as being neither “antique” nor “bucolique.” The use of the word *air*, of course, underlies the duality of the subjects in this stanza, indicating music and implying by homophony a natural force, introducing the mysterious “arbres nus” of the second line. The third line and fourth lines are ineluctably linked, and begin with the motion of a negative future anterior: “Et le navire saint n’aura jamais vendu/La très rare denrée aux pays exotiques.” Even Artaud’s grammar refuses to sit still, doubling and refracting and undoing itself. Further, in this third line, the *navire* becomes a relic, or an icon, *le navire saint*, echoing back to the biblical sky of the first stanza; now, however, the *navire* has become holy, appropriating as its own modifier the holiness in which its organizing masts merged into each other. Even from here, exhaustingly, thrillingly, the subjectivities continue to extend themselves; even as we grasp its slipperiness Artaud’s time refuses to hold still and let us catch our breath. The word “vendu,” hanging at the end of the line, reaches out to the next line; in signaling an exchange it doubles back again on itself, before the “denrées” take us away again “aux pays exotiques.”

The lyrical selves approach something like singularity in the penultimate tercet, only to undo themselves further: “Il ne sait pas les feux des havres de la terre. /Il ne connait que Dieu et sans fin solitaire/Il sépare les flots glorieux de l’infini.” The choice of the verb « connaitre, » especially immediately preceded by its counterpart « savoir » suggests an immediacy and intimacy with its object, which, improbably yet unsurprisingly, turns out to be god; this
proximity, however, immediately undoes itself, for this subject remains “sans fin solitaire” as it “sépare les flots glorieux de l’infini.” Even in its undoing, it assumes the role of a creator, separating the tides of infinity, which, in turn, though separate, are part of this multiple unity of the infinite. This power of this mysterious and multiple entity is underscored, in this stanza, by the repetition of “Il” at the beginning of this line, which asserts, almost *ad nauseam*, its agency.

In the closing tercet, “Le but de son beaupré plonge dans le mystère./Aux pointes de ses mâts tremble toutes les nuits/ L’argent mystique et pur de l’étoile polaire. » The assonance between *but* and *beaupré* here gives a sort of stuttering motion to the beginning of a line whose action is one of encompassing totality. The metonymic device of the bowsprit (not incidentally, the support of the mast that is about to reappear) symbolically separates and encompasses the entire vessel; both the vessel and the piece standing in for it become submerged in mystery, which is, of course, “the point”. And what of those masts? They seem intact: having first melted into each other, disappearing into an overwhelmingly literary sky, then been figuratively replaced by the verticality of the bare trees in the second stanza, then presumably following the unknowable plunge of the vessel, they now reach skyward again, the mystic silver of the North Star trembling at their points. The duality of *argent* in French is significant here, on one level simply because duality is so important, but also because thematically it gestures back at the hint of economic exchange suggested by the *denrée* of the second stanza. Does this economy, then operate outside the symbolic dialogues that exchange meaning throughout the text? Or does it echo them or comment on them?

The influence of Baudelaire is unmistakable here, of course, and not to be overlooked. As I’ve mentioned, Artaud seems to have somehow swallowed bits of Baudelaire that then appear in his poems wearing different faces. *Correspondances* appears again in the second stanza, where
in our forest of symbols we encounter the “arbres nus” among which mysterious music plays, so evocative of Baudelaire’s “vivants piliers” and “longs échos” and “hautbois”. Identical in poetic structure, the two poems also share the crucial verb “se confondre,” which distills the theme of the subjects that enter into and become each other. Artaud has inhaled a part of his inspiration and exhaled it, fractured and fully his, yet recognizable, into his poetry Le navire mystique has also swallowed bits of Parfum exotique, but the ways in which Baudelaire and Artaud use the exotic are very different, a subject which merits its own, longer discussion.

The subjectivities and totalities of the seabound navire (originally a “bâtiment destiné à la navégation marine”53) recall Barthes’ interpretations of the Nautilus (undoubtedly a navire in the Artaud-ian sense) and the Bateau ivre. For Barthes, Verne’s navire becomes a world unto itself, reflecting a particular bourgeois sensibility: “Verne appartient à la lignée progressiste de la bourgeoisie: son œuvre affiche que rien ne peut échapper a l’homme, que le monde, même le plus lointain, est comme un objet dans sa main, et que la propriété n’est, somme toute, qu’un moment dialectique dans l’asservissement de la Nature.”54 Herein lies the particularity and peculiarity, the paradoxically transformational and immanent, decidedly un-Hegelian power of Artaud’s mystic vessel. This self-reflecting, shifting, disruptive navire simultaneously interacts with a “monde lointain” as an object and as a subject. It acts upon itself, and therefore on everything around it in, shiftingly, ambiguously, impermanently. The Nautilus is a dialectical vessel that serves a particular bourgeois aesthetic (Verne, according to Barthes, is “un maniaque de la plénitude: il ne cessait de finir le monde et de le meubler, de le faire plein à la façon d’un œuf”).55 The navire mystique is outside dialectics as Artaud is outside psychology: there is no singularly stable thesis, so there can be no antithesis; rather, the symbols and images of the poem

53 Larousse
55 Mythologies, 79.
exist in a continuously synthetic complex that is dynamically full. For Barthes, furthermore, *le bateau* (he does not distinguish between his vessels, which for my purposes can become somewhat confusing, so for clarity’s sake I will say that Barthes’ vessel-vocabulary is interchangeable, whereas Artaud’s is not; Artaud’s *bateau, navire*, and *nef* are very different from each other, and from Barthes multi-purpose vessel as well), is not only “symbole de départ; il est, plus profondément, chiffre de la clôture. Le goût du navire est toujours joie de s’enfermer parfaitement, de tenir sous sa main le plus grand nombre possible d’objets.”\(^{56}\) Barthes’ vessel, then, is a productive body (more on this Deleuzian elaboration later) that is self-contained and presupposes a very direct exchange of signification between subject and object. The two are clearly defined; the power of enclosure is necessarily a power of differentiation and delineation. Further, it is a hierarchical body—the boat gives the power of controlling “le plus grand nombre possible d’objets” under a particular set of conditions (namely, the conditions of being enclosed in a given structure, space and time). By contrast, Artaud’s *navire mystique* transcends the boundaries of time, space and selfhood. The most exciting sentence of Barthes’ famous essay is the last: “L’objet véritablement contraire au *Nautilus* de Verne, c’est le *Bateau ivre* de Rimbaud, le bateau qui dit “je” et, libéré de se concavité peut faire l’homme passer d’une psychanalyse de la caverne à une poétique véritable de l’exploration.”\(^{57}\) For me, Artaud’s various vessels move even beyond the singular subjectivity of the *bateau ivre*, while still containing its swaying mobilities.

The shift from a *navire* to a *bateau* here is neither arbitrary nor insignificant. We have seen the multiplicities etymologically and conceptually implicit in the *navire*. In succeeding

---

\(^{56}\) *Mythologies*, 81

\(^{57}\) *Mythologies*, 82.
poems, however, the identity of Artaud’s vessels changes, and this is a central illustration of the evolution of the subject/object relationship in the poetics of these early works.

We are greeted by a familiarly broken self in *Sur un poète mort* (1914), and the title itself take a certain prepositional distance from its subject ( if we consider, for instance, how very different *Le poète mort* would be, how much more singularity and certainty a definite article would confer, as opposed to a preposition followed by an indefinite article). Again, we have the feeling of dropping, suddenly and completely, into a scene already set in irrevocable motion: “Son âme de poète hêlas était partie/Dans les sons musicaux et gothiques d’un soir/Et merveilleusement parmi les haubans noirs/Le soleil inclinait sa carène jaunie. ” There is a certain ambiguity in that “son âme”, for it could suggest either that the poetic part of his soul has departed, or, in a more highly figurative poetic tone that his soul, intrinsically poetic, has departed entirely. This ambiguity serves to underscore an inherent split in the self—from what, we might ask, did the soul depart? Is there still a *lui* to which the *son* refers? This symbolically divided, multiple self is echoed by the sun, a dizzying double of metonymy and metaphor whose color becomes almost autonomous in its action. The sun’s definition in terms of a nautical metaphor echoes both the *beaupré* of the preceeding poem and the construction of a deferred, multiple self as a navigating vessel. We have also, intriguingly, an arbiter, a commenter on this poem—that first *hêlas* is all that is needed to establish the voice of an observer, through whom this poem comes to us, and he appears again, quickly, with the *lush, merveilleusement* that takes its time taking up a good piece of the second line.

Is this commenter the same “je” who makes himself suddenly known at the beginning of the second stanza? “Alors j’étais venu dans ma mélancolie/De cet homme divin voir la dépouille et voir/La Beauté où se forme ainsi qu’un reposoir/La Sublime Pensée éclatante et fleurie.”
Melancholy surrounds this subject; it is almost personified; insubstantial, it nonetheless frames the action of seeing the dépouille, and a better example of Artaud’s relation to the self might be difficult to come by, for it indicates so many things: skin, bodies, mortal remains and therefore the dividing line between life and death he revealed as untenable with the ambiguous departure of the poet’s soul. From the Dieu of Le navire mystique, we have moved to l’homme divin, the dynamic, synthetic subject(s) only hinted at before. Interestingly, even as this entity is presented, the poem works outside it, creating itself as a vessel out of hints and bits of boats and the “bruit de la foule.” We have a highly figurative carène, and seemingly more concrete haubans in the first stanza, but only after being filtered through a baffling array of subjectivities do they manifest into the “grand vaisseau” of the closing tercet, which dissolves into the paradoxical sweetness of the flutes of a personified death.

The theme of the nautical and the figures of various vessels appear again and again in the Premiers poèmes. In 1920’s Bar marin, a more overtly surrealistic work than some of the others, the navire is replaced simply by its metonymic indicators: we have matelots and a naufrage, but no explicitly named vessel, although we do now have an explicitly named subject, Gaspard, who exists next to these other pieces of subjectivity, but acted upon, in typical fashion, by a set of unnamed operators (a nameless reine, the matelots) who symbolize both collectivity, as in the plurality of sailors, and hierarchical authority, in the person of the vague and oddly benevolent queen.

Harmonies du soir, from 1920, returns, of course, to Les fleurs du mal, pluralizing the title of Baudelaire’s Harmonie du soir. In many ways, this examination of traveling subjectivities and synthetic vessels can come full circle at this point, for we have here many of the familiar elements of Artaud’s endlessly alien subjectivities. He begins with a surrealistic subversion of
authority, serving himself of the religious as a modifier in a highly figurative phrase: “les bois sacerdotaux chammariaent l’horizon.” From the plural article “les” used at the beginning of the first stanza, we move to the singular “un/une”, which becomes multiple through repetition, beginning each of the other three stanzas. Even as “un” implies singularity, the use of both genders anchors the poem in ambiguity. Meanwhile, the authority of the religious becomes undermined again, resisting transcendence. The sacerdotal is only a modifier here; it is not granted the substance of a subjectivity. It colors, but does not act.

The final stanza illustrates almost perfectly the symbolic action of rejecting the hierarchical and the singular. “Un vent plus fort tordit les crinières des bois/Éveillant les orgues de profondeurs soneurs/ Et la voix se perdit comme efface l’aurore/Dans les voiles du jour les bagues de ses doigts.” Artaud here completely undoes hierarchies of being like George Bataille’s (“Each of us is incomplete compared to someone else - an animal is incomplete compared to a person... and a person compared to God, who is complete only to be imaginary.”). In Artaud’s imagining, vegetable woods have animal manes, a voice can be lost, or lose itself, the dawn acts actively upon a sailed day. The sails here act as the counterpart to the rigid, organizing mast of the earlier navire, for sails are soft, collaborative, pliable and mutable, where masts are hard, singular, authoritarian and rigid.
While the other artists I deal with all faced more or less literal, geographical exiles, Artaud is their compatriot not for geopolitical reasons, but as a body on which parallel power structures—these are most closely approximated by Michel Foucault’s model as developed in *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*—were played out. He was forcibly exiled both from the “normal” world of French society (by his own desire and by medico-legal dictum), and, concurrently, from the prescribed, hierarchical Surrealist movement that had once embraced him. As Renée Riese Hubert writes, “…Artaud articulated through his diverse writings the exile imposed upon him by outside authority. This reaction on his part did not result from political or ethnic displacement, for he lived among people whose language he had always shared and which he had completely mastered. Exile for him meant not only a cutting off of communications with others, but finally with himself.”

Artaud’s particular experience of exile represents the modes of errancy and alienation that appear obliquely and structurally in his work and in Nin’s, on which he had a strong influence. It is necessary first, to understand the particulars of this experience, for Artaud produces ineluctably phenomenological-derived work that cannot be understood if divorced from corporeal experience. Secondly, it is essential to comprehend the conceptual frameworks of power, belonging, and alterity against which this work consistently pushes, and these are best defined by Foucault. Finally, I show how the concepts of errancy and madness are, as Foucault

---

demonstrates in his description of the “wandering mind.”\textsuperscript{59} inextricably linked. Both are unacceptable, both are other, both are written on the body, both resist.

Artaud’s \textit{Le pèse-nerfs} is a hybrid work that consists of a seemingly-random amalgam of genres: it is in parts a work of prose, a series of poems, and a tiny play (its last word is “Curtain”, emphasizing its quality of performativity). The text, partly legible as the artists’ description of his existence and process, floats through the themes of creation, gestation, interdependency, and dismemberment. The body Artaud envisions is not limited by the assemblage of categories to which it can be reduced, rather, it is a mode of imagining that posits existence as deriving from the body. Philosophy and ontology are expressed in terms of material existence, everything is ruled by what could be called a metaphorics of the body. For Artaud “… le ventre, les seins, sont comme les preuves attestatoires de la réalité.” (“The belly, the breasts, are the evidence of reality.”)\textsuperscript{60} This early work sets out many of the themes I investigate more fully here.

Artaud spent various periods of his life interned for reasons that all fell more or less under the umbrella of mental aberration. The greater part of his young adulthood was spent in institutions; in 1915, after destroying his early writings and giving away all his books, his parents confined him to the first of many sanatorium stays he would undergo. He remained interned until 1920, with a brief interlude in 1916, when he he was conscripted into the French army and called for service at Digne (where, in the throes of the First World War, he encountered a different kind of madness) and discharged for medical reasons.\textsuperscript{61}. For the rest of his life, lengthy, fraught, periods of intense engagement with contemporaneous social, literary and artistic movements would alternate with crises and institutionalization, until his death at Rodez in March 1948.

\textsuperscript{59} Michel Foucault, \textit{History of Madness}. London: Routledge, 2006. Print
For my purposes here, I do not engage with the complex medical implications of that madness, which are many, nor with the re-reading of Artaud’s madness which the nearly a century of hindsight and development in psychiatric medicine no doubt warrant. Rather, I am interested in understanding constructions of madness: how these function, what they end up meaning within a broader hierarchy of power, and the role they play in conceptually framing mechanisms of alterity and exile. As Foucault writes: “What we need to address is a whole cultural surface.”

A striking and defining element of Foucault’s classic conceptualizing of insanity is its materialism. Foucault’s representational apparatus, his geographic, districted, organizing model, was groundbreaking not only for its description of how madness has appeared in art and literature, but for articulating the way its implications played out in space. From its opening lines, Madness and Civilization equates madness with its corollary of physical exile: “In the margins of the community, at the gates of cities, there stretched wastelands which sickness had ceased to haunt but had left sterile and long-uninhabitable.” In setting up the model of leprosy and evoking the traces it left on the physical landscape, Foucault prepared a discourse that would apply to madness’s particularly dislocating spatial effects. In the case of Artaud, Foucault is particularly important for both the equivalence (or at least parallels) between madness and geographical or political (that is, spatial) exile, and for understanding the dynamic quality of madness, which resisted the stifling, uniform labels to which the correctional system would reduce it. He is doubly important, therefore, in understanding Artaud’s exile and his own resistance to the conditions and implications of that exile, which would manifest conceptually and structurally in his work.

---

62 Foucault
63 Foucault
The drawings and poems he produced at these early stages are fascinating in already resisting normal boundaries. They are defined by neither genre (they often include words, fragments, or outbursts, refusing to remain strictly drawings), material (some are so complex they come to resemble collage or découpage), nor space (Artaud often compromises the integrity of the writing surface, much the way, for Foucault, madness punctures the integrity of the “cultural surface”). Examining the visual work produced during this period shows how the (imposed and appropriated) label of madness, and the experience of socio-medical exile, are paralleled for Artaud in a visual and lyrical poetics that is ineluctably grounded in a dynamic, changing vocabulary that undoes facile categorization. Artaud’s status as exiled madman a “deporté en France,” his exclusion from normal society, is paralleled by his revolutionary and self-imposed exile from the condition, expectation, and implications of accepted artistic artwork: as he declared (intertextually) in a poem about his drawings: “Mes dessins ne sont pas des dessins.”

In 1915, shortly before his first internment in a sanitorium, Artaud completed an unsigned self-portrait. (Fig. 4). When contrasted with his later work, this drawing is remarkable for its stylization, directness, and seemingly untroubled line of sight. In three-quarter profile, the subject, reminiscent of a Byronic romantic figure with his high cravat and tousled, fleshy hair seems, initially, to gaze directly at the viewer.

---

64 Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper
65 Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper
This, however, is a handy technical trick, a dissimulating flourish. The image is constructed in such a way that the organization of its sight lines belies the subject’s shifty gaze. In relation to his own face, the subject gazes sideways; his eyes are at once searching and suspicious. They do not, however, elide the viewer—quite the opposite: situated in front of this drawing, the viewer
cannot escape the subject’s unsettling, surprisingly probing sidelong regard. This early drawing—one of the very few works, in any medium, to survive from this period—can be seen as an experiment in outlining of the themes that would always concern Artaud and reappear consistently throughout his productive life. What is seemingly a steady, fixed, uncomplicated subject toys compositionally with the viewer, so that a handsome young man, archetypically Romantic in aesthetic affect, becomes an inescapable visual interlocutor: the sight lines of the paintings command the viewer’s attention and then slip off sideways, refusing to engage it. As Artaud wrote many years later in Le visage humain: “The human face is an empty force…The human visage hasn’t yet found its place….it behooves the painter to find it in its place.” This “empty force” would constitute a kind of muse and nemesis for Artaud, who never stopped engaging with the human figure as one of his primary modes, models and metaphors.

The early, disavowed self-portrait of Fig. 4 is in striking contrast to the “Spells” Artaud produced during his stays at various asylums during his long period of internment in the later years of his life. The “Spells” are cries from exile—a categorizing, confining exile whose mode of resistance is defined by its refusal of categories and confinement. They make explicit what had only been foreshadowed: after his “disastrous experience in Ireland” from which he returned in chains and was directly interned, Artaud began sending, to friends and correspondents, a series of “Spells,” made up, as Agnès de la Baumelle writes, of “Strange little pieces of paper, written and drawn upon, often stained and burned, bearing imprecations.” The trajectory of these spells is revealing; first, for their origin, and secondly for their mode of dissemination.

---

68 Agnès de la Baumelle in Antonin Artaud: Works on paper, p. 39
69 Baumelle, 39
As with the other artists I address, the physical space Artaud occupied at the time of their production played a significant, even defining role, in making them what they came to be. The space of the asylum parallels the spaces of exile occupied for reasons other than madness, but it is the confined or unwillingly occupied space that is the crucial point of departure. While Foucault’s analysis is heavily Marxist and depends in large part on the implications of labor, industrialization, and physical economic conditions, it also sheds light on a conceptual, organizing structure guiding the way madness was addressed in France that is applicable to Artaud’s position as internee and to the work he consequently produced. As Foucault writes: “If in the classic form of madness there is an element that speaks of an elsewhere of something else, it is not because the mad do come from a different heaven, that of the meaninglessness, still bearing its signs, it is simply that they have crossed the frontiers of the bourgeois order, and become alien to the sacred limits of its ethics.” 70 Foucault’s metaphors, grounded in boundaries and location, show us how Artaud’s practice from the asylum is not coded according to the signs of meaninglessness, but according to the signs necessarily resulting from the “elsewhere” the occupies. The act of making these spells into actual letters and sending them through the mail is telling. In the first place, it uses the postal service—a communicative nervous system within the oppressive government bureaucracy and society that interned him—against itself (he has “crossed the frontiers of the bourgeois order” by the most mundane of communicative means). By sending his incendiary, profane, “mad”, magic messages through the mails, Artaud pollutes this nerve center (his conception of nerves is thematically important in his literary writing as well, as I shall show in the second half of this chapter dealing with Le pèse-nerfs). This evokes and enacts Artaud’s concern with purity, a concept he would engage with throughout his work, for its uniformity and sanctimonious tone are directly at odds with Artaud’s

70 Foucault, 72
inter-textual howls against convention and false morality. Secondly, the sending of letters underscores the physical distance between Artaud and his correspondents, thereby calling attention to his condition as exile: the form of the message stems from this condition.

Exemplary among the “Spells” is the “Spell for Roger Blin”, sent in May 1939. Like Artaud’s polluting of the postal system, the “Spell” resists purity. The paper itself is violated: stained, burned with cigarettes, painted with an unctuous red gouache in which Artaud’s fingerprints are thickly, angrily apparent. The “Spell” speaks to us first as a visual object; its material contact and impact are powerful and immediate, the words almost an afterthought. Artaud, crucially, is prodding and troubling the junctures at which, as Foucault has it “madness existed in relation to reason, or at least in relation to the ‘others’ who, in their anonymous generality, were supposed to represent it and grant it the value of an exigence…on the other hand, it existed for reason, in that it appeared in the consideration of an ideal consciousness, which perceived it as difference from the others…[it] had a double mode of facing reason—it was at once on the other side, and offered to its gaze.” 71 The epistolary act has precisely this effect: it situates the “mad” subjectile in relation to his interlocutor. It is, unlike the writing of a novel or a poem, a very urgent and intimate kind of communication, that grants to the mad poet the authority of defining his audience and immediately establishes a rapport between them. This dialogue comes into being before the letter is even received, at the moment it intrudes into the recipient’s mailbox and places him in relation to the writer. In this way, Artaud troubles the exile of madness, collapsing and violating the confines of his internment. We can see here a conceptual trajectory stemming from the early self-portrait. From his internment, Artaud’s missive reaches out like the self-portrait’s inescapable sidelong gaze; both perform the operation

71 Foucault, 182
Foucault describes, enacting the double mode of facing reason while remaining apart, opposed to, in conflict with its regulating gaze.

So far, we have seen how two fundamental aspects of Artaud’s artistic practice play out. First, how his self-willed and imposed isolation from society due to his perceived madness (which he described as a feeling of being out of the world), parallel the conditions of exile. Secondly, we have seen how his texts and images resist normal boundaries of genre and categorization. Their impact on the viewer is simultaneously visual and lyrical, while also engaging with massive structures of social organization (the missives sent through the post). The third crucial piece of the works Artaud produced during this period is their corporeality. Indeed, Artaud’s primary mode of expression within this wandering, exiled condition of impermanence is deeply concerned with the body as central metaphor.

The body, for Artaud, is never incidental: whether as muse or nemesis, it is inescapable, the essential vehicle with which he must grapple. In the “Spells,” Artaud has punctured the body of his medium itself: the text is penetrated, defiled, the images smudged, their corporeal integrity is compromised. A similar process is at work in his poems and self-portraits, where literal bodies often make an appearance. As he wrote: “And this is the mystery of man that god the spirit does not stop pестering. And this body is a fact: me—there is no inside, no spirit, no outside or consciousness, nothing but the body such as we see it a body that does not cease to be even when the eye that sees it falls. And this body is a fact: me.” For Artaud, there is no discontinuity between the body of the artist and the body of he wrok he produces. Rather, what he is attempting to translate can only be told, can only be honestly expressed, by engaging with the body.

---

72 Adrian Morfee has written extensively on the manifestations of the body throughout the course of Artaud’s literary trajectories.
73 *Works on paper*, 69
In the drawings from his final days and years, spent in and out of asylum stays at Rodez, all kinds of bodies and their fragments proliferate, as though Artaud is trapped in a frenzy of phenomenological replication. Among many such works that illustrate this, his drawing *La présence du gouffre*. (Fig. 5).

![Figure 5](image-url)

Double-sided, the drawing, in graphite and wax crayon, structurally illustrates the complex dualities Artaud engaged. It is two distinct works contained within the body of one. The recto face represents two vaguely defined bodies, whose dynamic lines suggest to the viewer that they are gazing at each other, even as the viewer gazes at them. In profile, with hints of breasts, fragmented links, Cubist forms and simple lines, the figures’ visual relationship is framed by words written across the top of the page in pencil: “la potence du gouffre est l’être et non son âme,” and, across the bottom, “et c’est son corps.” The words and the images, while standing alone, each convey an aesthetic impression, but it is in their intersection or juxtaposition that their complete meaning comes across. In this way Artaud relies upon an unstable poetics of synthesis: the words undo the primacy of the image, the image undoes the primacy of the text, and together they make up one component of a work that is neither image nor text, but that, through a process of internal ekphrasis, narrates and describes itself. The artist remains both inside and outside the work: with words, he underlines the insurmountability of the body: it is indissoluble from the artwork. Artaud first defines the being itself as both absence and material presence. The lines “la présence du gouffre est l’être et non son âme” suggest the primacy of a “real” being rather than the longing absence implied by a quasi-religious “âme.” He literally underlines both his visual figures and his textual point by emphasizing, across the bottom of the page, “et c’est son corps.” For Artaud, two realities remain inescapable: the generative potency of the “gouffre,” and the inescapability of the body.

The verso face of the drawing is more crowded with figures, as though the two facing profiles of the recto side were columns guiding the entrance into this reverse panel. Here the quietly facing figures are replaced by multiFEATUREED bodies of multiple and indeterminate

74 Works on Paper, 68
gender, and the isolated limbs transmuted into fleshy, phallic cannons and embraced inverted bayonets.

Figure 6
This panel, entitled *Le Soldat au fusil*, (Fig. 6) seems to overcome the more clearly articulated, symmetrical features of the front panel into the bodily confusion of war.

Artaud further develops the themes in these drawings in the double-sided "21" and "La machine de l'être". In these drawings, done with graphite and wax crayon, the body is transmuted into a machine, one that is made up of other bodies which are fragmented, in transition, almost bionic. The bodies progress to abstraction--they are truncated, amputated, or unfinished, and they seem to generate a code of signs, and then to deprive these signs of their meaning. By absorbing them into his own system, Artaud takes command over the signs his unstable bodies generate. The number 6, for instance, scrawled at the top of the "21", recto face of the drawing, seems an arbitrary sign in a system which contains no other allusions toward counting or numerical symbolism. The verso side, by contrast, relegates most of its figures to the margin of the page, so that they are supplanted by text that is both blocked off from and coursing freely across the face of the work. This face is particularly noticeable among the recto-verso drawings because it contains explicit instructions as to how it is to be observed: its subtitle is "Dessin à regarder de traviole". This is exemplary of the slippery, opaque, and destabilizing qualities of Artaud's work, and perfectly illustrates the mutability and transformative potential of his figures. He has set up an entire system resisting organization, order, hierarchy. First, drawings are supplanted by words—the figures are impossible to contemplate apart from the text, which, as in *La machine de l'être*, is sometimes literally written across or above them. The separate systems of visual and textual vocabulary can no longer remain separate, just as the body cannot be separated from its expressivity. In depriving them of their boundary lines, Artaud has transformed them into signs or frames of potential in service of his own vision. Secondly, bodies are conquered by or transformed into machines, subverting the boundary between the human and
the unknown, mechanical Other, which Artaud refuses even as he appropriates its image. Finally, the painted surface itself ceases to function as an ultimate limit: figures crowd the frame even as they fall from its edges, extending the reach of Artaud’s expressivity. Because they are not bound by the work as object, his signs extend themselves outward, resolving in limitless potential. The instructions on how the work is to be viewed, then—it is to be looked at “de traviole—perform a double, and contradictory function. First, they underline and make explicit the slant of the work: it is to be looked at sideways, we should not even consider engaging with its slanting, sloping figures head-on. The injunction, however, operates along a quite clear binary line of power between the artist and the viewer: in instructing us on how the work is to be experienced, Artaud sets himself in a place of power. All the same, he is reaching out, communicating with us directly, infecting the vocabulary of subject/object interaction by inserting himself in it, much as he has done with the mails. The dynamics and lines of tension in these drawings go on like this, calling attention to, absorbing, appropriating, and deflecting accepted paradigms ad infinitum, undoing the lines between bodies of image, text, and subject(ile).

It was during the highly productive period of the early 1930’s, between the wars in Paris and before the later “decline” at Rodez, where he died in 1948, that Artaud encountered Anaïs Nin. The accounts of their “brief but intense friendship” are scarce and contradictory. Nin attributes their lack of romantic development to several conditions. First, there is her own lack of desire for Artaud due to a fear of being drawn into his madness: “I looked at his mouth, with the edges darkened by laudanum, a mouth I did not want to kiss. To be kissed by Artaud was to be drawn towards death, towards insanity.” Later she attributes their unconsummated passion to physical impotence on Artaud’s part, writing, in Incest: “He kissed me devouringly, fiercely, and

---

75 Esslin, 36
I yielded. He bit my mouth, my breasts, my throat, my legs. But he was impotent. There was a dead, heavy pause.” 76His letters to her are often hyperbolic, passionate and yearning; like her diary, the missives occupy an uneasy space between the documentary or declarative on the one hand, and the performative and fictional on the other. Their correspondence, and Nin’s description of it in her diaries, reflect a dynamic artistic practice which could not, by necessity, be confined to any accepted genre, but rather found expression in a variety of literary games and performances. What is as clear as can be, given the source, is that Artaud was a tremendous influence on Nin: his errancies, his passion, and his madness, echoed hers in surprising and uncanny ways, which would find their way into her diary both descriptively and structurally.

If Artaud transcended genre, Nin, influenced and guided by his ideas and practices, translated it. Where Artaud could rarely, even in a single work, confine himself to one form, Nin’s primary vehicle of artistic expression throughout most of her life was in one genre: that of the diary.

The connection between these works, his exile, and his links to Nin finds common expression in the primacy of the body. It is Artaud’s corporeal poetics, and their connections to wandering and exile, that link him to Nin artistically even as their lives intersected physically. From Artaud to Nin, they resist not only the mundane (and in Artaud’s case, intolerably oppressive) spatial confinements of quotidian existence, they push against boundaries physical and conceptual, destabilizing subject and genre.

---

III : La belle infidèle

“I fell in love with English. I really have a great love for English. A foreigner will fall in love with a new language. It’s an adventure, an exploration…”

Anaïs Nin’s *Incest: A Journal of Love*, published in unexpurgated form only in 1992, once “virtually all of the people referred to…[had] died,” represents a radical poetics informed by Artaud’s dynamics of instability, opacity, and corporeality. *Incest* covers the period from October 1932 to November 1934, and particularly Nin’s self-reported affair with her father, which transcends the usual transgressive and suggestive patterns of her better-known works of erotica, abandoning the easier delights of sexual experimentation for the darker, less easily charted waters of fundamental social taboo. The erotic philosophy of Nin’s life, as well as her literary ambitions, have been well documented, by herself, by her biographers, and by a variety of often-feminist literary critics; she was particularly venerated by the American 1970’s Second Wave feminists as a counterpoint to the unchecked machismo of the Henry Miller clique. Much of the study of Nin’s work has tended to focus on her affairs with Miller and his wife June, on her many sexual liaisons (though not, notably, that with her father), and on her links to her artistic, intellectual and literary contemporaries, including the likes of Antonin Artaud and her analyst Otto Rank, a well-known pupil of Freud’s and an important first-generation analyst.

---

79 Pole
81 *Incest*, 120
82 *Incest*, 294
The perhaps inevitable frisson of scandal and titillation that has always been attached to and elicited by her work has tended to occlude any more serious analysis of her literary formulations; still less attention has been paid to the particular and unique language in which she writes. My intention is to correct these lacunae through a careful examination of the deep structures of Nin’s lyrical language, which is completely unique, and of the mutable role that language, and its ongoing translation, implied translatability, and constant transformation play in her text. My approach may be broadly divided into five parts. I will begin with a brief explanation of Nin’s multi-national and polyglot background, which gave her a particular and essential relationship to English and to French, and, to a lesser degree, Spanish. An examination of the diary as literary form, and of Nin’s relationship to it as such, joins the linguistic voice to its unstable vehicle. From her heterogeneous background, I attempt to parse Nin’s need to write in English (the language of her truncated secondary education but not of her primary formation), with which she willfully sets herself into the loneliest of exiles, as the sole speaker of a language of her own invention, legible only in the context of her own experience. This sort of subtle self-translation will illuminate the role of changing, shifting text in shaping Nin’s narrative, and, again, to its problematic and intriguing label of “diary.” Various theories of translation, drawn notably from Steiner’s *After Babel* and Derrida’s *Des tours de Babel*, will inform an examination of the translational and authorial functions in Nin’s text. The central role of incest, both its actual practice and its role in literary history and as literary metaphor, necessarily forms the nexus of Nin’s translational poetics. Finally, I attempt to synthesize the notion of a paradoxically incestuous translational praxis into a clearer mapping of Nin’s narrative construction, which, like Artaud’s, functions according to its own unique mechanics, metaphors, and vocabulary, grounded in the exiled, wandering, alienated body.
Angela Anaïs Juana Antolina Rosa Edelmira Nin y Culmell (her name, which she retained legally in the Spanish style, is one of the few relics from the language that manifests in her life) was born in the upper-crust Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1903, to a Cuban pianist father and a French-Danish-Cuban mother, who relocated the family to Barcelona and finally to New York after Joaquin Nin’s abrupt departure. Nin attended school in New York briefly, but ended formal schooling by the age of 16. She would spend the rest of her life traveling between New York, Paris and Los Angeles. The indelible imprint of modernism broadly and of Surrealism in particular is clearly recognizable in this shifting, international existence. Refusing geographical permanence or linguistic stasis, then, Nin instead developed what Glissant might call a “creolized” voice. Her project of art, language and memory cannot be situated within a particular history or language tradition, despite her association with the Miller group and the French Surrealists, but instead exists at the confluence of several. Her literary language, in fact, is translated before even being written: while she chooses to write in English, it is an English, as we shall see, that is pervasively by the rhythms and formulations of French. Nin’s translational and multilingual project is very different from that of someone like Nabokov, whose astonishing facility and uncanny ear (and, likely, more sophisticated education) lends his English a perfect expressive clarity. While still in Barcelona, Nin began her earliest diaries “at age eleven as letters to her father entreated him to rejoin the family.”

This literary precocity suggests notions of veracity, innocence, childish sincerity and, by extension, literary purity in the reading of Nin, which will come into a complex and problematic interplay with the various implications of a literary modus operandi defined by translation and translatability. The notion of the writing child also suggests a sort of literary proto-language, something as yet uninformed by the careful crafting that, as we shall see, characterizes Nin’s later work. Further, the proto-

---

83 Pole, ix
language as pre-symbolic, Babelian space will also re-emerge later as an undercurrent in the
ongoing process of translation through which Nin put her writing. The relationship to her father
will, of course, be of essential interest throughout the life of the devout Freudienne. It is worth
mentioning here that I will not, for the purposes of this essay, be engaging in any deeply
Freudian reading of Nin, as both she, as a lay analyst, and the Freudians in her life, such as Rank,
were much more qualified to do so than I, who will undoubtedly (not being an analyst by
training) miss much of their subtlety. Furthermore, the problems raised by the text are at least as
much formal as they are psychological, and it is in the formal innovations that their real interest
lies.

To begin at the beginning, or at least at the center, we must turn to the idea of diary itself.
The majority of the academic writing on Nin seems to take her at her word that, as she was fond
of declaring, the diaries are unvarnished, guileless creations that stem, almost automatically
(again, the indelible impress of Surrealism, and of its fascination with l’écriture automatique, is
unmistakable), from quotidian experience and then to promptly criticize her for the fact that this
is so clearly not the case. Rather than as a lie, or an act of disingenuous self-aggrandizement, or a
misrepresentation, I read this tension between spontaneity and craft as part of a performative
artifice that is as essential to understanding the mechanics of Nin’s work as the diary text itself.
As with Artaud, the gesture of describing the work, and of calling its generic body into question,
is a necessary performance that extends its expressive potential. Whether fully intentional or not,
and I will not delve into the artist’s motives, the particularities of diary as a form of auto-
narration are such that statements made by the author and possible subject about their veracity
can only be accurately read as constituent pieces of a wide-reaching project of self-(re)creation.
As Joan Bobitt has pointed out, in her essay, “Truth and Artifice in the ‘Diary of Anaïs Nin’”,

114
“Upon close examination, however, the diary reveals a determined self-consciousness of design and content, a calculated artistry which is in direct opposition to Nin’s espoused idea of naturalness and spontaneity.”

This assertion, which is borne out by even a cursory examination of the writing style in the diaries, nicely parallels Nin’s own statement, in the opening pages of Incest, when she writes as though she were alone, although, of course, the act of writing in the diary implicitly negates total solitude: “I have been surprised to be so seized, so dépouillée of artifice, of my webs, my charms, my elixirs. And tonight, alone, waiting for visitors, I look upon this newborn core…”

In these opening words, some of the keys to the work reveal themselves. First, we have the shifting nature of the self, a writer whose only permanence is mutability. The separation of the self from the self, suggested by the verbs “surprised” and “seized,” applied to the narrator by the narrator, implies a fractured subjectivity that is reconstituted in large measure by the incestuous, or self-recuperating, translation of the inner, proto-language, into the public, permanent text. The penetration of the text by the French dépouillée is illuminating for two reasons. It brings up the notion of penetration which defies the text both structurally and thematically, for the French conquest of English language structure is one of the key defining stylistic acts of this text, while Nin’s penetration by various lovers is, if not the primary theme of the text, certainly a central one. Furthermore, from the very first page, our attention is called not only to the fact that French words explicitly (like French rhythms, more subtly) invade the text everywhere, but also to the importance of which French words are the agents of penetration. The choice of dépouillée is particularly apt, for the word is, grammatically, profoundly ambiguous and telling; like Artaud, Nin uses language, to penetrate and puncture the uniform surface of the mundane. As a verb, its meanings are many: flaying, robbing, laying bare (as in the English

85 Incest, 1
despoiled), scrutinizing and many others; as an adjective it can be applied, unsurprisingly, to a writing style (as in “spare”), or to a tree denuded of foliage. The connotations of intimacy and violence inherent in this stripping, which, as we have seen, are perpetrated by the self, upon the self, will expand to what is, in within the logic of this text, the logical conclusion: the incestuous embrace of the father, the other self, (incestuous echoes too, of Baudelaire’s mon semblable, mon frère). Even more to the point, this grammatical instability and multiplicity of meaning speaks to the total nature and theme of Nin’s text, at a macro level, and to the acute penetrations of French, at a micro level. A few pages later, we have the incursion of another stranger, the word simoon, which appropriates and consumes a word of Arabic origin into, ambiguously, both English and French.86 87 A Semitic word for wind is also particularly important, for not only is it another instance of the linguistic dance of penetration and appropriation that characterizes Incest, it invokes Genesis with its implications of the Hebrew, and specifically Biblical, ruach:

86 The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition
88 The Hebrew-English Tanakh Student Edition. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000. Print. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.88

The ambiguity of ruach, as either “wind” or “spirit”, nicely underscores the linguistic instability of the text. The association with Genesis serves to remind us that the diary is not a mimetic reproduction or memoirist recounting of reality, but an artistic creation of a symbolic self.

Rather like Proust, to whom she repeatedly alludes, Anaïs is engaged in the project of constructing “Anaïs”, a construction analogous to the “Marcel” of Marcel. Critical analyses of Nin’s writing, then, have suffered from either a fatal misreading or a lack of imagination, caused by a narrative and linguistic structure that escapes accepted delimitations of genre. As Bobbit
points out: “When Diane Wakoski comments facetiously that ‘there are times reading Anaïs Nin’s diaries when I think she invented them and her whole life,’ she is actually closer to the truth. For in fact the world of the diaries is a carefully contrived and beautifully synchronized artistic creation, a world fashioned and executed by Anaïs Nin.”

The question of genre is an essential one, for it applies both to the consistent misreading of Nin, and to the importance of her structural innovations. There have been numerous attempts to situate Nin within a genre, or to invent for her a new one. These have mainly consisted of hybrid genres with iterations of the themes of journal-diary-novel-autobiography-memoir, remixed in varying proportions. These have tended to ignore, however, the language of the text: Nin’s French-toned English in fact becomes its own medium. Put another way, the genre of the text is definitively not novel, diary or memoir, but performative translation, the translation of a poly-verbal proto-language that in speaking gives birth to itself.

This performance of translation can be seen in an illuminating passage:

"J’ai présagé des cercles. The circle motif in my John novel. The fascination of astrology. The circle marks the earth’s turning, and all I care about is the supreme joy of turning with the earth and dying of drunkenness, to die while turning rather than die retired, watching the earth turning on one’s desk like these cardboard globes on sale at Printemps for 120 francs. Not illumined. That is more expensive. I want to be the illumination in the globe and the dynamite which explodes on the printer’s machine just before he has put a price on the page. When the earth turns, my legs open to the lava outpouring and my brain freezes in the arctic—or vice versa—but I must turn, and my legs will always open, even in the region of the midnight sun, for I do not wait for the night—I cannot wait for the night—I do not want to miss a single rhythm of its course, a single beat of its rhythm.”

The passage reads, at first, like awkwardly-translated French; but the stylistic dislocation is telling, as is, again, the choice of words to be written in French, an examination of which

---

89 Bobbit
90 Bobbit, 269
91 Incest, 22
reveals a theme of transcendence and transformation. The extraordinary first sentence of this paragraph, “J’ai presagé des cercles,” suggests a transcendence of chronological constraints, joining time with space and language to the boundaries the text elides. The foreseeing of circles also suggests a doubling back to the seer, that is, a doubling back to herself, which gestures forwards in time again to the impending seduction of her father, an act which, again, doubles back upon her Self. This sort of textual doubling, or linguistic ambiguity, is repeated again and again in this paragraph; its effect is the literary parallel of the disorienting sight-lines in Artaud’s early self-portrait. The "outpouring of lava” is syntactically problematic, for it could be either noun or verb, pouring from the legs or into them, and doubles the linguistic polyvalence of the text. The definitively odd "illumined", from illuminé, in the place of the more natural-sounding "illuminated”, gestures back to the French; a French speaker instantly recognizes its natural counterpart in French; we thereby are left to perceive English as the stylistic tool by which we recognize both the self and the other. We grasp her meaning, while simultaneously grasping the disorienting oddness of the word choice, an inquiétante étrangeté that refers us, once again, to the Other. The “these” is fairly jarring—from the more ambiguous French ces, it is a strictly correct translation, but in English the equivalent of ces becomes divided, with the translation as either “these” or “those” being dependent on the context. The ambiguity, here, of a word that in the English is split by the essential idea of proximity into two words, further demonstrates how the performance of English as a stylistic tool is a necessary part of the function of a text whose main structure is one of a divided and re-incorporated self. Also in this vein is the use of "which," for which in French qui would be the more natural choice, so that the grammatical multiplicity in French translates to a stylistic awkwardness in English. This kind of artifice, or willful distancing even, is, it seems to me, an essential element

---

of the aesthetic fascination Nin's diaries continue to hold-- they are so carefully crafted, so precise, so artistically conceived, as to lose any sense of spontaneity, so the writing seem to spring completely formed, Athena-like, from the artist, without human obstruction.

The dépouillement of which Nin speaks is not a rejection of stylistic pyrotechnics (those, for better or worse, cannot be avoided) but a distinct engagement with opacity, mystery and dislocation. One of the most important French penetrations of the text is in the use of the word “ensorcelled.” Readily apparent in her repeated use of "ensorcelled" where a native speaker, unless (s)he was terribly pretentious or making a different kind of stylistic statement would almost undoubtedly have used "bewitched." Its inquiétante étrangeté, highlights a definitional oscillation between intimate engagement with and icy isolation from the text, which is again echoed by the transformational implications of sorcery itself.

Fluctuations between intimacy and distance, objectivity and subjectivity, are at the root of a textual structure reliant on a repeated translational performance. Particularly problematic in this construction of intimacy is the notion of fidelity—which relates to sexual and translational practices, the defining processes of the text. From the Steiner model, we get a metaphorics of translation where it is equated not merely to sexuality but to a particularly penetrative, heteronormative sexuality that in many ways parallel’s Nin’s own evocation of gender roles, her differential feminism. As Steiner writes in After Babel, “Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication. […] To speak and to make love is to enact a distinctive twofold universality: both forms of communication are universals of human physiology as well as of human
evolution.” Translation, therefore, necessarily belongs to the symbolic ambit of the adulterous, as Lori Chamberlain has indicated,

“...fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author. However, the infamous ‘double standard’ operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the ‘unfaithful’ wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing. This contract, in short, makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of infidelity. Such an attitude betrays real anxiety about the problem of paternity and translation; it mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity—not maternity—legitimizes an offspring.”

Steiner’s articulation of the erotic charge of language, of the ineluctable link between linguistic performance and sexual performance (he also claims, memorably, that “the sexual discharge in male onanism is greater than it is in intercourse”), corresponds directly to the first stage of Nin’s diaristic process, that is, to a lyrical creation of the sexualized self. To understand Nin, we must first understand this indissoluble connection between sex and language. Nin’s art is in large part based on a peculiarly cyclical sublimation of language by and into sex; the parallel structures merge as she creates her “Anaïs.” Furthermore, the added element of a uniquely translational narrative language ensures that Nin’s simultaneous practices of translation and promiscuity can now be seen to reflect this fundamental instability of language: what the lyrical structure and thematic concerns of the diary present is an engagement with the fundamental infidelity of the self, an essential anxiety that, as Chamberlain points out, begins to articulate itself in a profound concern with kinship links. In fact, Chamberlain’s analysis not only further strengthens the notion of sexual fidelity in translation, but, by highlighting the “anxiety about the problem of paternity and translation” enables us to begin nearing the center of Nin’s creative project.

94 Lori Chamberlain, “Gender and the metaphors of translation”, in *The Translation Studies Reader*. Electronic.
95 Steiner, 41
If we begin to see a Romantic streak in this process of literary production (as in Byron’s incestuous relationship with his sister, later re-worked by Nabokov in *Ada*) that uses incest as a refusal of the other, we return to the complicated oscillations of Nin’s text. The tradition of the incestuous in the Western literary imagination acts upon and affects our reading of Nin’s writing in ways at once illuminating and destabilizing. The drive for “originality”, for difference, for exogamy, which has tended to be equated with artistic value (with the notable exception of the English Romantics), is reversed or undone in and as Nin’s project of formal creation. In an intriguing essay on Melville’s (in)famously confounding *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, Gillian Silverman writes: “Exogamy….is itself hopelessly imitative [because it is premised on accepted literary value systems]. It is represented by the conventional marriage and has its counterpart in the ‘common novel’ [italics mine]. The incestuous union, by contrast, stands as a powerful vision of ruptured or distorted procreation and thus of nonimitative prose.” Nin’s creation of a new form, similarly, refuses the exogamous, and pushes her once more into the incestuous embrace. The lack of satisfaction in her relationships with Allendy, Rank and others stems, in each from the fact that each is, in its way, exogamous, imitative of an existing, and therefore unsatisfying, schema of performing love, sex and seduction: “Even when I possess all—love, devotion, a match, Henry, Hugh, Allendy—I still feel myself possessed by a great demon of restlessness driving me on and on […]I cover pages and pages with my fever, with this superabundance of ecstasy, and it is not enough.” The normal tropes of romantic love do not suffice, do not satisfy either the woman or the creator. The exogamous expenditure of emotion, of possessing another, is not the ultimate goal. Rather, it is possession by, and the internalization of, the “great demon” that cause her to “cover pages with my fever.” Fever, endogamous heat, not exogamous

---

97 *Incest*, 90
emotional performance, becomes the agent of the creative process. Nin’s translational writing is nonimitative precisely because it refuses heterogeneity. It is a project of taking in, not of putting out. However, the structure of Nin’s self-created genre is less stable even than that of Pierre; it is not fully endogamous but strangely dialectical. For even as it refuses otherness, it embraces it, only to penetrate it by various other Others. Furthermore, Nin’s celebration of sexual “impurity” by virtue of linguistic “impurity” circles back on itself: monolinguisum becomes not only undesirable but impossible—to disrupt the “purity” of sex means, necessarily, to disrupt the purity, or the singularity, of language.

A Derridean, specifically a Babelian reading, sheds light on the fundamentally shifting, pluralistic language of Nin’s writing, and Genesis-like creative process, and helps us to address some of its apparent paradoxes, and brings us closer to understanding the necessary role of the incestuous embrace of the Double. Sex, both heteronormative (though even her heterosexual encounters tend to be with analysts or married men, thus violating other, less sticky taboos) and incestuous-transgressive, tends to be the agent of transformation by which in Nin’s diaries the quotidiant body is transubstantiate into the aesthetic wafer. Derrida writes, commenting on a translation of the Babel story, “Je ne sais comment interpréter cette allusion à la substitution ou à la transmutation des matériaux, la brique devenant pierre et le bitume servant de mortier. Cela déjà ressemble à une traduction, à une traduction de la traduction.” Derrida’s observation of the translation of stone into brick bring us back to the notion of translation as infidelity, a traitoress turning on the original text. Even with the consequent doubling, the translation of the translation, we are left with a fairly stable conceptual framework, for the moment. Nin’s own particular kind of translation, however, complicates this structure, forces it to turn in on and undo itself. For she

---

is translating herself, of course, from first, more intimate language, into her second, more distant
tongue, and this fundamental need in her writing speaks to an incestuous structuring of literary,
or creative desire, that is echoed thematically by the incestuous desire for her father that drives
the narrative and is, in all ways, its climax.

Crucially, the relationship to Genesis, a good name for Nin’s project and the literary
space in which the Babel story takes place, nicely articulates the unique project of Incest: “…Car
le texte de la Genèse enchaine immédiatement, comme s’il s’agissait du même dessein: élever un
tour, construire une ville, se faire un nom dans une langue universelle qui soit aussi un idiom, et
rassembler une filiation [emphases mine].”⁹⁹ This chaotic, Babelian creation of a universal
tongue, and of a unique, cyclic mode of filiation, are the key components of Nin’s artistic
construction. The translated translation of the self into the text happens internally, doubling the
longing for a recursive filiation that is achieved via the sexual penetration by the parental double.
When Nin writes, of her father, “I walked down the dark hall to my room—with a handkerchief
between my legs because his sperm is overabundant,”¹⁰⁰ she brings us to the epicenter of her
lyrical structure. The hall, the space of passage and transition, which she inhabits with the
(literal) internalization of her Double’s (re)generative substance. Incest, in fact, is the town
square of Babel; it is a constant undoing of the normative boundaries of subject and object,
interiority and exteriority, the creation of a necessary multiple Self. Nin’s text is written from a
creolized voice, a juxtaposition of languages, but not in a fully hybridic language; rather the
rhythm remains fully French while the English remains fully English: the tension this causes is
not resolved because it cannot be, it is the motive power of the text. We are left with a text that
exists, with no illusion of totality, at the confluence of many languages, a translation in to

⁹⁹ Derrida, 213
¹⁰⁰ Incest, 211
multiplicity. As Derrida writes, “let us note the limits of theories of translation: all too often they treat the passing from one language to another and do not sufficiently consider the possibility for languages to implicated more than two in a text. How is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated? And what of translating with several languages at a time, will that be called translating?” Nin’s project lies precisely in eviscerating these limits that Derrida sets up as problematic; she writes from many languages into many languages, and in such a way that her subjective self, objective text (and, as we shall see, personified text) and projected audience become melded, indissolubly connected by the process of linguistic juxtaposition.

As we have seen, the Babelian space of Nin’s diaries is inextricable from her endogamous project of translational literary creation. The particular language of her seduction of her father forms the obvious conceptual core of the text, and is explicitly invoked well before their actual reunion as the foundation of her longing: “I was cheated once of my Father’s love,” she writes, describing her “years of famine,” “and I do not want to be cheated again.”

The procession of the text moves, ineluctably, towards that climactic incestuous embrace, which, at first, she equates with her previous lovers, groping first toward fraternal love as defining metaphor, not yet explicitly re-making her linguistic filiation. “Today I have finally understood these mental, patient, controlled, Saturnine, cold men I have loved so passionately and consistently. I understand their way of loving. I can achieve with them an affectionate, fraternal companionship, and with others a passionate one. Tout va bien. I have come to terms with life, the relativity of love.”

---

101 Incest, 101
102 Incest, 102
companionship, that these relationships provide. However the deeper linguistic self, the French language imposes, penetrates the scene of exogamous happiness, betrays its impossibility. The *tout va bien*, by virtue of being in French, contradicts itself, undermines the wholeness of the text, and of the statement. She begins to move, then, towards the relativity of love—that is to say towards an embracing of mutability but also, by a gentle and essential turning of phrase, towards a literal love of the *relative*. The doubled implications of relative here indicate the future progression of the text, which is ordered by the relating (as in the recounting) of this relative-love.

She begins, also, to invoke both an abstracted incest and the image of her father in the process of dreaming and artistic production: “Softly I close the door upon the world. I draw a long mystical bolt [...] the blood-rhythmed music of Stravinsky; Joaquin’s chaste face at the piano; a new understanding of Thorvald, my long-lost brother, thoughts of a “feminine” Father!”103 This extraordinary passage marks a liminal point in the text: the elements of the essential union are all articulated here, but still fragmented, or unaligned. Her father’s face is “chaste” in his moment of artistic production; mirroring Anaïs’s stage, he has not yet joined in the fullest expression of the artistic project, the incestuous appropriation of the doubled self. Rather he remains, for the moment, unengaged sexually. The project of artistic expression has not yet been fully articulated in its sexual performance. Rather than being expressed in the person of Joaquin the father, the incestuous project is dislocated even sublimated, into the “understanding of Thorvald.” Here the long-lost brother stands in for the long-lost father. Joaquin at the piano bears his pianist father’s name, a homophonous stand-in a translation of incestuous desire. Unlike in Byron’s work, or Nabokov’s, however, the incestuous project for Nin is necessarily, as we have seen in our reading informed by Derrida, a process of *filiation*, and

103 *Incest*, 113
not of sibling love. It is necessarily the parental love that frames Nin’s work, because it is not
only an endogamous embracing of the double, but must be an appropriation of a generative,
rather than a replicative function. The anxiety about kinship links that Chamberlain articulated is
directly hierarchical—its movement is vertical, not horizontal.

The definitive importance of the father becomes more and more clearly articulated, more
explicit, as their meetings, not yet sexual, begin. “And Father comes, resplendent, and we
understand each other, so it is miraculous. I see the equilibrium that is the basis of our natures
[…] Father, too, is jealous of my journal. ‘My only rival,’ he says.”

104 A perfect understanding, from Nin père to Nin fille. For what could be a clearer articulation of the relationship of the
journal? Joaquin Nin is jealous, for the diary represents a variation on himself—an endogamous
expression of the sexual self. Joaquin Nin’s jealousy, here, casts him preemptively in the role of
the lover, for it was Nin’s most important lover, Henry Miller, who had first expressed a similar
jealousy: “[Henry] asks me to go on our vacation without my journal. Yes, because the journal
is a personage. Out of jealousy (it is lying on the café table) he won’t read it.”

105 When Nin expresses the same jealousy, he equates the journal with a sensual process and casts himself in
the role of jealous lover, a jealousy we instantly equate with Henry, the central love interest of
the text. Further, casting the journal as a ‘personage’ is yet another act of unspoken translation
pointing to the ambiguity and instability of language. The consonance with the French personage
hints at a fictional character, even as the English usage in the actual text seeks to translate the
diary from inanimate object to nearly incarnate active participant in the relationship. As Nin
herself comments, later, analyzing herself in Freudian language (yet another process of
metaphoric and translational creativity), “Diary then originates in the need to cover a loss, to fill

104 Incest, 164
105 Incest, 180
a vacancy. I call the diary, little by little, a personage; then I confuse it with the shadow, *mon ombre* (my Double!) whom [sic] I am going to marry.” Nin articulates the parity between incestuous reproductive process and literary project when she explains her continuation of their affair, once it becomes sexual, even in the face of grave doubts, because of her essential, artistic, longing for a Double: “I will yield to my Father when he comes, out of loneliness, with a love of coming close to his own loneliness, a love of these secret qualities in him which I love because they are like my secret qualities. I love him with the thousand divinatory eyes I want to be loved with. It is the *disease* of love, not the fruit. It is when one’s self has become so masked to the world, one’s language so unintelligible, one’s loneliness so consuming, that only one’s Double can penetrate one.”

The passages, like the one above, that deal with the explicit details of their affair, are intriguing, for they are as difficult to read as they are engaging. If the constant association of Joaquin Nin with Don Juan (on whom Rank, her lover-cum-analyst, had written a monograph) is unsettling, it is also the apex of her model of literary production. “I had at moments the feeling that here was Don Juan indeed, Don Juan who had possessed more than a thousand women, and now I was lying there learning from him, and he was telling me how much talent I had, how amazing an amorous sensibility, how beautifully tuned and responsive I was.” This sublimation of the father into a literary icon speaks to the transmutation of desire into literature, which in Nin’s process of endogamous creation is only fully achieved via the incestuous sexual act. The joy of completion, which she had only foreshadowed in previous literary attempts ("J’ai présagée des cercles …") becomes fully manifest only in her father’s embrace, where she attains,

---

106 *Incest*, 298
107 *Incest*, 284
108 *Incest*, 211
“A joy which spreads in vast circles, a joy for me without climax,”¹⁰⁹ that is to say a solipsistic, complete, hermetic kind of joy, a recursive rather than productive sexual expression. Together, father and daughter re-perform the daughter’s creative process. As she has documented her own amorous experiences, the father now recounts them to her, to be further inserted into her own narrative: “Endless stories about women. Exploits. Teaching me at the same time the latest expertness in love.” Nin consumes the father’s narrative, absorbs her double into her prose. The father, absorbed into the journal, now becomes jealous of any exogamous mode of literary production: When the servant presented the mail and Father saw letters for me, he said, “Am I going to be jealous of your letters, too?”¹¹⁰ The father and the daughter have become joined, physically as well as literarily. They are sublimated into each other, even sharing a symbolic vocabulary. Joaquin Nin uses a sun-filled vocabulary to describe his daughter: “I always wanted a woman with eyes on a level with my own. And there you are. Tall, royal. A sun. You are a sun. You not only match and equal my thoughts. You sometimes precede me! A match! I have found my match!” The father, then, relies on a solar symbolism to express his search for his double, his match, which doubles his double’s search for her own double. Only pages later, away from her father, with Miller in Avignon, Nin echoes her father’s choice of vocabulary: “All the while I am obsessed, dark, appalled. My passion for Henry dying, dying. Physically, sensually, too he has diminished. Is the change all in me? Is it my Father who thus obsesses me, obscures and eclipses all others?” Like her father, Nin has proceeded from simple physical description (‘and there you are. Tall’/’Physically, he has diminished’) to this metaphor of the sun. Like she for him, Joaquin has become the sun for his daughter, eclipsing her other lovers. The text absorbs him and they collapse into each other.

¹⁰⁹ Incest, 211
¹¹⁰ Incest, 214
Any analysis of Nin’s literary project, particularly in *Incest*, comes up against two very serious obstacles, one formal and one socio-ethical. The formal issue concerns whether the seduction of the father ever actually happened, and if it did, if it went as far and continued for as long as it does in the diary. The reader’s impulse to downplay the relationship and to question its reality must stem, in part, from a strong cultural aversion to incest. We would rather believe it does not happen. As Mary Hamer has written, “Language itself, like shame, seems to block clear thinking in this area[...] As a topic, incest confronts us with questions about pleasure even while it asks that we also bear in mind trauma and damage. This demand seems to paralyse our minds.”

The broad (and seemingly universal) cultural taboo against incest adds another layer of complexity to the already snarled notions of truth and reality inherent in any diaristic process, and particularly in one as literary and creative as Nin’s. Furthermore, it is difficult to write about the problematics of an incestuous relationship that has been seamlessly absorbed into a work of erotica in a way that is simultaneously mindful and tasteful. From a literary criticism perspective, however, it seems to me that if we take the other relationships in the book seriously (and the affairs with the Millers, for instance, are particularly well-documented), then we must follow the same logic in engaging with Nin’s affair with her father, no matter how distasteful it may seem. In fact, to form a literary critique of the work informed by this distaste is a social and ethical gesture, but not a critical one. For this reason, the only satisfactory answer to the question of “did this actually occur?” is that it is as likely to have occurred as any of the other affairs documented in the *Diary*. The fact that the unexpurgated sections included in *Incest* were not published until most of the affected parties had died lends further credence to the reality of the events described. The literary question, paradoxically, seems to lead into and partially answer the socio-ethical

---

concerns. Is there a moral obligation for the critic of Nin’s work? Her husband, Hugo Gilier, certainly believed her father was sexually abusive towards her; in fact, he stated more than once that he believed incest had occurred before Joaquin Nin left the family, that is to say sometime before Anaïs was eleven years old. If we read the text with this knowledge, it necessarily takes on a darker side. Can Nin’s seduction of her father in later life then be read as the process of empowerment she endeavored to frame it as? The question is an almost insuperably difficult one. On the one hand, it poses a serious moral issue for the reader. If we accept the text as she presents it and engage with it as a work of erotica, do we become, by implication, complicit in problematic grappling with previous abuse? In other words, even if Nin herself does not see the relationship as having been an abusive one, and if she seeks to recast incest as just another sexual experiment, should we, to use the pop-psychology terminology, enable this sort of practice? It would be risky, as I have mentioned, and not particularly illuminating to engage in a retrospective psychoanalyzing of Nin the woman. As readers and critics, the fundamental choice seems to be whether to take the artist, however damaged, at her word, and to engage with the work she has presented us as a valid literary oeuvre. The Diary provides us with Nin the artist, and it is in mapping her creative process that incest, both practical and symbolic, becomes central; as this essay has demonstrated, I have chosen, for better or worse, to engage with her work as she presents it, while remaining aware of the underlying ethical questions it raises.

To write in a second language that is informed by the first, and to refuse exogamous production in favor of a more original and endogamous process generates the fascinating dynamic tension that drives Nin’s work. Despite her own assertions of spontaneity and artlessness, we are faced nonetheless with a grand project of artful crafting, a unique artistic voice with a particular and peculiar symbolic structure. Nin’s translational practices, her careful
and strategic penetrations of English by French, frame a narrative whose theme, incest, is not particularly new in literary history. Only the framing of it, the joyous embracing, the graphic, non-traumatic description of it is new. Incest is a theme as old as literature, as old as Lot and his daughters. By re-imagining it, and putting it at the center of a transformative literary process, Nin creates a particular genre defined by doubling, ambiguity, transformation and the artistic translation of the self.

The translational poetics of Anaïs Nin’s prose, and her invention of a language parallel to all those she spoke in the creation of her Diary, have, historically created much misunderstanding about her work. The seeming superficiality or irrelevance of her work has, I contend, to do with a fundamental misunderstanding of how she wrote, and of how deeply she transformed and engaged with the various languages at her disposal to come up with a unique literary style and voice. While she had many influences, that Artaud was among, if not the most, significant, is not in doubt. She spoke often of him as an inspiration and as the pinnacle of artistic genius, and her mode of expression\textsuperscript{112}, which on first glance can appear so highly stylized as to seem pretentious or self-indulgent is, in fact, an interpretation or enacting of crucial themes developed by Artaud. Like his, her work exists at junctures of language and meaning that are difficult to locate or define. Where Artaud occupied the uneasy and generative space between image and text, Nin chose a liminal language to occupy space between genres. Artaud’s canvases literally present two different faces to the world; Nin’s Diary literally does likewise, constantly refusing to define itself as either fact or fiction, art or document. The shifting quality with which they both imbued their modes of expression is grounded in a refusal to accept “normal” codes—of either “sane” or “appropriate” behavior, that exiled them both from a variety of systems, including the everyday working world, the family structure, and even the possibility of

\textsuperscript{112} See Nin and Esslin
conventional relationships. They were exiles both, from others and from themselves, who refused to be otherwise even in their work.
Chapter 4

Lyric and Look: Wifredo Lam and Aimé Césaire

I: Seeing the Seers

"Je serais bien en peine de dire où est le tableau que je regarde. Car je ne le regarde pas comme on regarde une chose, je ne le fixe pas en son lieu, mon regard erre en lui comme dans les nimbes de l'Être, je vois selon ou avec lui plutôt que je ne le vois." 113

There are two—or, really, three—kinds of looking that inform this study. The first is the seemingly straightforward way of looking informed by painting. Painting is visual; it is meant—literally, explicitly—to be looked at. As Martin Jay has noted in his seminal work, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Sight in Twentieth-Century French Thought, in the twentieth century the process, idea, and notion of seeing, become increasingly complex and problematic. Rather than enjoying primacy in a kind of hierarchy of senses, as in the nineteenth century, seeing becomes unreliable, untrustworthy, even perhaps, unworthy as a modality of artistic perception. Jay writes, “a great deal of recent French thought in a wide variety of fields is in one way or another imbued with a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era.” 114 The scope of Jay’s research, which relies upon such luminaries as Bataille, Breton, Derrida, and Irigary among many others, is a far-reaching and important analysis of a fascinating series of cultural moments. What he has expanded into a broader reading of French philosophical tendencies in the twentieth century, remains, for me, informative and enriching in terms of nuancing the implications of how and why we look. This suspicion of vision, applied to the artists in this chapter, is transmuted into refusal to depend on a single sense or a single object for

aesthetic experience, seeking to focus, instead, on a whole series of sensory practices and evocations, a poetics of encounter. It is the refusal of only vision, of the primacy of any sense, that emerges, for me, as the main lesson of this suspicion of hegemony—it is not the act of sight, but that of any reductive hegemonic practice that these artists seek to undo through their unstable, expressive, ekphrastic practices.

Within the newly complicated context Jay describes, Surrealist artistic practices engendered a very specific kind of looking, one that activated the viewer and supplanted the Occidental tradition of a uni-linear looking at. As Mary Ann Caws has written (in the context of Man Ray’s *Indestructible Object*), “…seeing takes its own time. If the look is inseparable from its timing, it is remarkably and uncomfortably separable from its agent. The eye as emblem or icon, once it is set in motion, will tick right along. Things do not necessarily belong in their human context. The surrealist look exists independent from the onlooker.”115 By contrast, poetry, although it can evoke a visual experience through the use of what is commonly termed “imagery”, has an intermediary step—the interpretive transformation that takes place in translating the read representation of the image into the visual-sense experience it evokes in the mind. This results in a second kind of looking, phenomenologically distinct from its unmediated counterpart. These two modes of seeing—the seemingly direct visual vocabulary of painting and the mediated, interpretative vision of lyrical seeing evoked by poetic imagery—result in a third mode. More opaque and ambiguous, the space that emerges when poetry and text reference each other (more or less explicitly) is my main concern in these chapters. The painting and the poem and the poem in the painting produce a complex space of recursion and semantic dialogue that enrich the work and elicit new questions for criticism and interpretation.

---

115 *The Surrealist Look*, p.12
The kind of cognitive and affective refractions this kind of seeing provokes can be illustrated, art-historically, by the notion and processes of ekphrasis. At its simplest, the process of ekphrasis is simply the description (which really becomes the delimitating or containing) of one art form through another, as in a poem about a painting. A well-known example is Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the same urn which has been famously cited by Barbara Johnson as an interpretive and signifying vessel. For Johnson, the ekphrastic urn is a model that embodies and communicates our aesthetic expérience of the world, illuminating the potentials and evocative insufficiencies of lyrical representation. As she writes, “This ever-open receptacle, this *shaped* void, resembles, in the human body, an ear. It, too, seems a hole surrounded by a shape[...] And what is normally poured into the ear? Speech. Address. Words. It is a container, a receptacle, an always-receptive receptacle.” The work of art as Johnson describes it is defined by its shape, which becomes, in her aesthetic economics, a corporeal receiver, an agent unto itself, always receiving, processing, and interpreting. This dialogic positioning of the work is crucial to comprehending the operations of ekphrasis, both classical and modern.

The figure of the urn gestures back to the Classical origins of ekphrasis, and particular, to the prime (and one of the original) examples of its use: Homer’s description of the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*. The Shield of Achilles may not be a unique literary object. In antiquity it finds great—and arguably equally significant—counterparts, notably Dido’s murals in the temple of Juno, in the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas encounters, seemingly, everything that ever was, future and past:

“The striving artists, and their arts’ renown;  
He saw, in order painted on the wall,  
Whatever did unhappy Troy befall:  
The wars that fame around the world had blown,  
All to the life, and ev’ry leader known.”
Achilles’ Shield remains, however, among the greatest examples of the ekphrastic process; with it originates a practice that continues to evolve and transform today, and to raise significant questions while opening new spaces of exploration in art and literature. The lines in the *Iliad* dedicated to the Shield are notably not simply for their lyrical beauty, which is undeniable, but for the technical alchemy they perform. On the Shield is represented, within the confines of the poem, nothing more nor less than the entire world and the cycles and rituals that guide life from birth to death. The god Hephaestus creates on the Shield a visual landscape wherein

“…herds of oxen march, erect and bold,  
Rear high their horns, and seem to low in gold,  
And speed to meadows on whose sounding shores  
A rapid torrent through the rushes roars:  
Four golden herdsmen as their guardians stand,  
And nine sour dogs complete the rustic band.  
Two lions rushing from the wood appear’d;  
And seized a bull, the master of the herd:  
He roar’d;”

This is not merely a snapshot of a static idea of a world, but rather an evocation of a dynamic universe, wherein animals not only move, but invoke artistically-felt illusions (they “seem to low in gold”), run through fields filled with sound (“a rapid torrent through the rushes roars”), and enact universally-understood cycles of life and death (“two lions…seized a bull.”).\(^{116}\)

The most common definition of ekphrasis is deceptively simple: the consequences and implications of ekphrastic processes in poems are significant in terms both technical and pheonomenological or experiential. Beyond functioning as an evocative technical device, ekphrasis as a process threatens the boundaries of both works and subjects. As James A.W. Heffernan has written, “ekphrasis is narrational and prosopopoeial; it releases the narrative

\(^{116}\) These cycles reappear as “geneses” in the *Wifredo Lam…* suite of Aimé Césaire, which I discuss later in this chapter.
impulse that graphic art typically checks, and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak.”

By putting two works (or two kinds of work) into dialogue with each other, then, ekphrasis can begin to loosen and reconfigure the structural impulses that underpin the work, allowing the graphic work to operate in the mode of the lyrical, and vice versa. In consequence, one potential experiential effect of an ekphrastic process or interaction is that it allows the viewer to experience a poem as though it were a painting. Because this third mode is only activated through the ekphrastic process, it really constitutes a distinct mode of interaction with the work(s), neither purely visual nor purely textual, but evoked by the encounter between the two.

This is the broadest phenomenological sketch of ekphrasis. Intra-textually, its rich structural and operational potential is such that it and can conflate, freeze, or expand the progress, structure, and feeling of time within a work. As many commentators and scholars have noted, it arrests the temporal movement of the poem’s actions to represent the operations, motions and temporal progression of a whole world removed from that—the world of Troy, ravishment, trickery and war—which the poem has created and in which it takes place. It freezes the narrative trajectory of the poem at a crucial moment in order to explode an entire world, a whole other series of events, eternal within the very definite temporal limits of the Trojan war. Not only does it contain this representation of another world—an almost arrogant artistic tour-de-force—it also inscribes in this world an entire set of literary devices and operations. Among these is the famous transformation, through literary alchemy—of the black earth into gold, so that, within the representation of an artist’s art in the text, Homer goes further, to duplicate the art of nature, its tricks of perception, thereby calling the viewer’s attention back to the act of perception itself and to the structural operations of the text. As Dianne Chaffee writes, citing as

inspiration Murray Krieger and Leo Spitzer, “literature…could turn itself metaphorically into the object which it was describing; thus a temporal work could become frozen in space while trying to capture its subject, an objet d’art, in time.” Chaffee’s reading provides an important mode of reading that informs my analysis. By engaging the transformative potential, she illustrates the inherent mutability of the work of art. My approach to these particular works is slightly different from Chaffee’s, largely because I do not read this transformation as purely metaphorical—metaphor, after all, being a primarily literary device that finds its visual analogue in allegory, to rely too comfortably on a metaphoric description of the ekphrastic process would mean relying upon the very boundaries ekphrasis undoes. Nonetheless, Chaffee’s point that ekphrasis arrests time is an important one for a phenomenological, viewer-focused understanding of what is at work in this process. Activating this frozen space of time, or destabilizing chronologies by framing one within the other (image within poem or vice versa), activates the interpretative presence of the viewer, who must grasp both temporal experiences simultaneously within the additional temporal experience of his or her own, “outside” viewing of the work.

The Shield is also important for a phenomenological reading of ekphrasis; the reader’s body, and particularly the viewing eye, are directly invoked, and guided by the artist’s art (within the context of the Shield, the artist is literally a god, Hephaestus):

“Next this, the eye the art of Vulcan leads
Deep through fair forests, and a length of meads,
And stalls, and folds, and scatter’d cots between;
And fleecy flocks, that whiten all the scene.”

Here, the reader’s eye is led through the mutable and narrative world the artist has created within the work, calling attention to the reading and seeing experiences at the nexus of the text.

---

This kind of viewer-activated self-consciousness presages the subjective, embodied poetics we will see in the images and lyrics of Lam and Césaire later in this chapter.

Finally, the world-within-a-world poetics of encounter that classify this entire ekphrastic process become clear when we look at the boundaries of the Shield:

“Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd
   With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round:
   In living silver seem'd the waves to roll,
   And beat the buckler's verge, and bound the whole.”

The great ocean that encircles the world of the Shield would seem to clearly delimit its world from the broader world of the Iliad. However, because the Shield can only be seen through the prism of the larger poem, its inability to stand on its own is structurally unarguable, even if the poem describes its distinctive, self-enclosing limits. A similar ekphrastic process constituting the creation of multiple subjectivities and multiple universes, is also at work in modernist dialogues of image and text, bounded, this time, by a different sea.

The Classical structures and tropes apparent in the ekphrastic process, which these works both reference and refashion, has hardly gone unremarked by Caribbean poets—Derek Walcott’s Omeros is among the best, and best-known examples of this refashioning of the Greco-Roman epic word. Within the Francophone tradition, this fascination is strongly evident in the work of Édouard Glissant and his colleague and inspiration, Yves Bonnefoy. Glissant became acquainted with Bonnefoy during his years in Paris, having received a scholarship to attend the Sorbonne. Bonnefoy played the role for him of mentor, critic, and interlocutor, and many concerns of Glissant’s poetics are deeply informed by Bonnefoy. Their shared relationship to the classical world, doubtless informed by the French university formation, is in evidence in the poems we shall see here. Like Bonnefoy, Glissant relies upon the tropes, icons, themes, and universal narratives of classical texts to communicate significant themes; in undoing, questioning, or
absorbing these works into their own poetics, Glissant and Bonnefoy, each within their own aesthetic vocabularies, rework the classical to signify and convey new visions of the world.

Two poems in particular, Glissant’s *Le sel noir* and Bonnefoy’s *Du vent et de fumée*, are explicit re-tellings of Classical themes. These works, their structure, imagery, and classical underpinnings, provide a useful example of how this classical presence manifested in the twentieth century, and particularly in French and Francophone lyrical and epic poetry. (Other Classically-inflected works of the period, by H.D. and Pound, are, like Wolcott’s, excluded not because their poesis is not relevant, but because they are not as directly associated to the French lineage that touched Césaire and Lam).

Carthage, as one of many “Others” of the classical world, is a perfectly suited example for Glissant’s poeticization of history. The epic poem *Le sel noir*, in other words, absorbs into its own poetical concerns of alterity and *relation*, a classical model of otherness, and refracts it back towards the reader. He draws on the tenets, rhythms, and narratives of one tradition to rework and represent it to its descendents. Representing representation, Glissant opens a network of dialogue, communication and relation where an older war across a much smaller ocean becomes the model for the trans-atlantic encounters that shaped the New World.

Where Glissant re-produces and re-presents the classical story by absorbing it into the rhythm of his own epic, Bonnefoy engages directly and explicitly with his classical predecessors-cum-interlocutors, giving thought and voice to a nameless commentator: “Mais non, A pensé un commentateur de l’Iliade, anxieux /D’expliquer, d’excuser dix ans de guerre/ Et le vrai, c’est qu’Hélène ne fut pas/Assaillie, ne fut pas transportée de barque en vaisseau/Ne fut pas retenue, criante, enchaînée/ Sur des lits en désordre. Le ravisseur /N’emportait qu’une image : une statue/ Que l’art d’un magician avait faite…” This kind of eliding gaze is a lyrical device that
positions us askew in relation to the poem (we might recall, here, Artaud’s *Dessin à regarder de traviole*). By giving us the vantage point of a *commentateur*, Bonnefoy keeps us at a critical distance from the text. This renders the text mutable—in being commented and interpreted, it loses some of its fixity, being subject to subjective inquiry and reaction. In the next beat, Bonnefoy further undermines the permanence of the text, using an artistic sublimation to rewrite the story. A swift sequence of processes undoes the stability of myth: first, the veracity of what happened is called into question by someone outside the text, second, the accepted story is contradicted (“Hélène ne fut pas/Assaillie), and, third (and most extraordinary), the confusion is attributed to an artist’s magic, to a *representation* carried off by a ravisher, which representation then circles back to become the stand in for the woman Helen, in the accepted story. Even the artwork that was carried off, it seems was hardly definable in terms of genre—was it a two-dimensional “image”, or a three-dimensional “statue”? The face that launched a thousand ships, it seems, was really a rendering of a face.

Image and text simultaneously inform, enrich, and subvert each other. This is not a negative kind of subversion, but rather an expansive subversion—the fixity of the categories “image” and “text”, their defining rigidity, is undone, but in their place surges a richer, stranger, and more mysterious space of meaning and dialogue. As Mary Ann Caws wrote in her book on Bonnefoy, “The fluidity of words and images makes, in a paradoxical sense, their strength and their carrying power.”

In the context of the artists concerned in this study, the ekphrastic process takes a specifically corporeal turn. The body is often the locus on which the images and lyrics turn, in terms of both production and interaction. This kind of embodied ekphrasis is informed by a deeply phenomenological productive mode, in which the artist is highly present in the work. This

---

goes beyond painterly self-consciousness and self-representation of the kind famously exemplified by Velázques in *Las meninas*, even if it owes a debt to the device of activating the viewer by making the artist his own subject. In the case of Lam and Césaire, the artist’s body, and the weight of the bodies historically and contextually associated with and invoked by it, is almost literally inseparable from the text itself. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the classic *L’oeil et l’esprit*, “"L’énigme tient en ceci que mon corps est à la fois voyant et visible. Lui qui regarde toutes choses, il peut aussi se regarder, et reconnaître dans ce qu’il voit alors l’autre côté" de sa puissance voyante. Il se voit voyant, il se touche touchant, il est visible et sensible pour soi-même."” The enigma of which Merleau-Ponty speaks touches, for me, upon that complex and opaque space evoked by the body traversing the ekphrastic encounter between image and text. The enigmatic, unstable body is, as Merleau-Ponty rightfully points out, both invisible and visible in the text/image/encounter. It is invisible because, even in the case of the self-portrait, the painter does not physically inhabit the work, but leaves his impress everywhere: in his style, in his signature, in the viewer’s knowledge that he generated it. It is visible, not only in the explicit case of the self-portrait, but in the representation of every human figure and visage, informed by the author’s experience of his own. Seeing the represented body further engages, or recalls, the presence of the viewer: of all visual referents, the body is unique in immediately and ineluctably invoking subjective physical experience: seeing a body collapses the formal distance between viewer and artist, because, quite simply, we all have one. This does not, however, imply that the body is a universal experience: instead, it draws upon the most foundational (and perhaps incontrovertible) of human experiences—that of inhabiting a human body—to evoke a

---

120 The consequences of authorial absence or presence have continued to preoccupy artists in the twenty-first century; among the most notable examples of this engagement is Marina Abramovic’s 2010 installation/performance *The Artist is Present*, at the Museum of Modern Art.
series of contradictions and variations that undermine the notion of the body itself. Put another way, the representation of the body simultaneously invokes and negates the universal. It elicits a common response—“that is a body as I am a body”—but immediately subverts it by presenting a whole series of questions and categories, including size, race, gender, sexuality and so forth. In dealing with figures and bodies, Lam and Césaire recall Glissant’s situation of the local within the universal the body, coded by their particular experience, evolves into an epic, universalizing representation that draws power from its own instability.

This instability of the body complements the ekphrastic process; even as the represented figure relates to other figures while remaining differentiated, the poem and the painting evoke each other by crossing the boundaries of genre and category.

II: “Des os qu’explosent grand champs”

It would be difficult to overstate Aimé Césaire’s importance or the scope of his influence. Politically and poetically, the strides he made were enormous, and their impact on twentieth century artistic thought and on the implications of the surrealist turn remain significant nearly a hundred years on.

As the father of Négritude, Césaire valorized and empowered the voice of the colonies by rerouting the established itineraries of the Eurocentric gaze. By emphasizing pride in blackness, by refusing to shy away from the legacies of slavery, and by shouting an alternative history to the homogenous, triumphally whitewashed paens of French nationalism, Césaire nearly single-handedly re-wrote literary landscapes by his forceful reimaginings of geographical ones.

122 Lyric and Dramatic Poetry
Africa, alternately a fetish, an object of scorn and ridicule, or a synonym of everything that was dark and to be either feared and avoided or triumphantly plundered, became instead a source of power, a necessary referent in giving voice to the colonized multitude. In the now-canonical *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Césaire re-imagined the relationships to country, landscape, body, and experience in a great generative howl that reverberated politically and lyrically across the colonies and the European world.

The *Cahier* is notable not only for the vast political implications of its outcry (black voices, after all, had not been frequently afforded the opportunity to assert themselves, and certainly were not generally regarded as entitled to such an assertion) but for the radical syntactic and semantical improvisations and innovations of its text. In his appropriation of archaic terminologies, repeated use of polyvocal and highly ambiguous narrators, and vivid, sometimes excruciating imagery Césaire was at the forefront of modernistic technical invention.

Because it is such an essential, even foundational document, the *Cahier* is not without its critics. Césaire’s disciple and frequent, eloquent interlocutor, Édouard Glissant, was formed by the Négritude generation but found its thinking too static and limited His concepts of *le tout-monde* and *l’antillanité*, which posit a unique Caribbean identity expanded into a global interpretive modality that is not as dependent on a totalizing, fixed African referent as was Césaire’s poltical-poetic cosmology, is nonetheless deeply informed by Césaire’s practice and innovation, a fact Glissant readily acknowledged despite his often-severe criticism.

Likewise, the generation that succeeded Glissant, the generation of Chamoiseau and the *Éloge de la créolité*, turns to and acknowledges Césaire as a maître even as it struggles to create a literary identity of its own.
Because his influence is so tremendous, and his literary output so rich that the poems themselves, removed from political context, can yield reams of analysis, I focus here on three particular aspect of Césaire’s legendary career. First, I examine the startling encounter between the lyrical and the visual in his poems, a multi-faceted project that stands out sharply in his epic works, like the *Cahier*. Secondly, I parse his characterization and representation, sometimes so evocative as to be truly frightening, of the human—and particularly the enslaved—body in his texts. Finally, I focus on the later lyric (rather than epic) poems he wrote after, with, or to Wifredo Lam, and of the simultaneously opaque and revealing space that is revealed in the encounter between their works.

My main goal in intervening in the substantial body of work accorded to the work of Césaire is framed by parallel intentions: first, to examine how (and whether) the poetry of Aimé Césaire announces and invents a new genre in the interstices of the epic and lyric traditions, and to closely examine the possibilities and the constructions inherent in such a construction. Can it really be a new genre, when it is a poetics dedicated to and predicated on the ability to define genre? How can it be linked to other texts and artworks of the Caribbean, and to the development of a poetics of the *tout-monde*? By relying not only on Césaire’s oeuvre, but, rather, on its relationship and *relation* to other systems and networks of reference and representation, I examine some of the challenges, as well as the foundational tendencies, of this enigmatic and dynamic new genre. Once examined and articulated in this context, the invention of this new genre becomes a practical, thematic, and aesthetic model that is applicable to other artistic genres, most notably, of course, painting. Examining Césaire’s work in relation with Lam’s painting (the two signal each other explicitly and allusively) reveals a new space for inter-genre
exploration and shows the founding poetics of auto-representation of the New World—the Caribbean inventing itself, and its origin myth.

Césaire’s poem *laisse fumer* seizes again upon the theme of smoke we have seen in Bonnefoy. This smoke is no coincidence: it is a by-product of purification (from the Greek *pur*, for fire), and it is also mobile. Much like Glissant’s black salt, Césaire’s smoke simultaneously stands in for fluidity and for historical residue. Structurally, its physics mimic those of the sea, which is in constant motion and indicates both the geographical island bodies in which these histories are grounded, and also the vehicle by which commerce, and consequently history, moved between them and the rest of the world. The salt left on the beaches physically and symbolically enacts the traces and marks of history. It also, though more obliquely, takes a classical referent, invoking, after an intentionally “misspelled”, stuttering beginning, “Taurus.” The evocation of Taurus is important because it can serve as both a geographical situation (we can be located in relation to the constellation, which works as Classical inscription of cosmology on landscape), and as a literary one. It is useful to recall here that Taurus was the form taken by Zeus in the story of the rape of Europa; Césaire is giving us a violent genesis, a reversed domination. In this way, Césaire appropriates now-universal, Classical imagery into his own vocabulary, which, as we shall see, can transform and re-work its meaning.

As in many of the works we have seen, notably Glissant’s polyphonic subjects in *Les Indes*, and Casal’s shifting narrator in *Autobiografía* and *Mi museo ideal*, Césaire’s subject is both highly present, and highly unstable, and is described in highly corporeal terms: “moi l’encordé du toujours/toujours dans la gorge/ce passé en boule non mâché.”123 Like the freezing of time exemplified by the Homeric shield, Césaire situates the sweeping universals of time and history (“du toujours” and “ce passé”) in terms of specifically physical, even individual

---

123 *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, p. 190
experiences. The “I” in the poem is not simply “trapped” or “confined” or otherwise prevented from moving, but is physically roped-in. The massive universals of time and history are lived “in my throat” as an “unchewed mouthful.” Like the shield, too, time is frozen within the confines of the body: the “toujours”, that unchewed mouthful, remains in a suspended moment, neither fully ingested and absorbed by the subject, nor completely externalized. Time and history, this suggests, occupy a limbic, transitional space, simultaneously contained by and outside of the subject. This subject is, in turn, highly ambiguous—Césaire echoes back to Rimbaud’s “Je est un Autre” with the enigmatic “Avec les nous-mêmes.” The dissonant effect of adding “les” before “nous-mêmes” distances the author, and the speaking subject of the poem, from a collective “Nous” of which he is, in using this “nous,” implicitly a part. This is further complicated by the following line “Aved les hiers”). By structuring the “hiers” along the same lines as the mysterious and unstable “nous-mêmes”, Césaire establishes a textual parallel between “selves” and “yesterdays”. Speaking subjects and historical moments share an affinity, if not an equivalency, in Césaire’s poetic economy.

By conflating subjects and objects, and historical moments, Césaire creates an unstable network of meaning in which bodies and their context are both unstable. They function as similar semantical units in his poetics, intermingling time, place and self. This instability is echoed, at the end of the poem, by the same refusal to find the correct word with which it begins: “Parlage./Parlure.” Both are types of speech, both allude to speech, and both refuse the general fixity of, simply, speech itself. Ultimately, the poem defends its own opacity and vagueness, refusing to do, refusing to name, gesturing only to the purifying/suggesting fire: “Le faire rétrécit/laisse fumer le volcan.”
Without ignoring Glissant’s illuminating criticisms of Césaire, we can nonetheless identify in the latter the origins of a new poetic genre that is in the process of approaching a more heterogenous, fragmentary mode of thought an expression—a mode, in other words, more closely related to Glissant’s construction of the *tout-monde*. Is it the case, as Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Jean Bernanbé have written, that “La littérature antillaise n’existe pas encore. Nous sommes encore dans un état de prélittérature: celui d’une production écrite sans audience chez elle, méconnaissant l’interaction auteurs/lecteurs où s’élabore une littérature.”? I will touch only in passing on the close correlation that has existed, until this point, between questions of *antillanité, créolité*, and the notion of the *tout-monde* (does the tout-monde originate, finally, in the Caribbean?). For the moment, nonetheless, it seems necessary to me to respond briefly to the question of pre-literature, for the performative operation of Césaire’s text is such that it encompasses this question of failure, it conceives itself as incomplete or gestational, and, in absorbing these questions, it addresses them.

As I have pointed out before, one of Césaire’s great innovations if the challenge he poses to rigid boundaries of genre. The *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* is already, in some ways, at a transformational point of poetics and genre. Among his other poems, several operate similarly, moving towards intertextuality with visual art even as they engage the limits of the self, of horizons, and of frames.

Looking at the way imagery unfurls in the poems reveals the multiplicity and instability of the subjectivities he creates, which transcend genre and category. One of the narrative voices cries out in the first person, a lyrical “I” that seeks to define itself but finds itself intolerant in the face of definition: “je n’ai pas le droit de calculer la vie a mon empan fuligineux ; de me réduire à ce petit rien ellipsoïdal qui tremble à quatre doigts au-dessus de la ligne, moi homme, d’ainsi

---

bouleverser la création, que me comprenne entre latitude et longitude !/Au bout du petit matin/la male soif et l’entêté désir/me voici divisé des oasis fraiches de la fraternité/ ce rien pudique frise d’échardes dures/cet horizon trop sur tressaille comme geôlier.\textsuperscript{125} With these lines, Césaire establishes some of the themes that illuminate the poetic structures at work, not only in the \textit{Cahier}, but in much of his other poetry. Furthermore, these structures are applicable and apparent for other artistic interventions, beginning to articulate a poetics of the \textit{tout-monde} that elucidates the possibility of a new genre of self-creation and self-representation. This is a poetic genre characterized by changing subjectivities, evading limits and frames, and creolized and creolizing self-identification. These lines from the \textit{Cahier} show not only the importance of how the limits of the self are conceived—the self cannot be reduced to “ce petit rien ellipsoidal de la main,”\textsuperscript{126} nor to a geographic situation of latitude and longitude, nor to that horizon-as-jailer. This rejection of reduction, of accepted categorizations, complicates the question of subjectivity itself. By personifying thirst and desire, Césaire alternately humanizes the non-human, and by implication, dehumanizes the human—or that which has been, legally and culturally, enforced as dominantly human. As I and others have argued, the sprawling poetics of the \textit{Cahier} represent a new generic intervention, performed in an epic mode. The \textit{Cahier} articulates and enacts a worldview, predicated on material and historical experiences at once broadly universal and deeply subjective. The \textit{Cahier} offers a corrective founding mythology, an origin story that gives a new multitude of voices a space and body with which to speak—“la bouche pour des malheurs qui n’ont pas de bouche.”

Césaire’s polyvocal, ambiguous “narrator” (I alternately refer to this figure as the subject, narrator, or speaker, depending on which hews most closely to its appearance and operation in


\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Cahier d’un retour au pays natal}
the poem at a given moment) announces and contains his own embodied poetics, in a recursive, evocative action of corporeal metonymy. In an almost rhapsodic, rhythmic moment of prose rumination, he muses: “Partir…j’arriverais lisse et jeune dans ce pays mien et je dirais à ce pays dont le limon entre dans la composition de ma chair: ‘J’ai longtemps erré et je reviens vers la hideur désertée de vos plaies.’ Here, the wandering body is central – it is the primary vehicle or modality that transmits the multiple expressive voices of Césaire’s poetical world. Geography and subjectivity cease to be fixed in any definitive way. Directions are confused; the speaker, this unstable “je”, departs and arrives in the space of a single beat, and arrives somehow transformed, into something “sleek and young.” The landscape and the body of the speaker are intermingled, and absorb each other, in an act reminiscent of Communion even as the poem broadly evinces disgust for the sacred: nonetheless, the country’s earth, its limey loam, is part of the speaker. The way in which the country is absorbed into the speaker’s body is exemplary of the corporeal specificity that characterizes the Cahier: Césaire’s speaker does not metaphorically absorb the land, nor is it somehow a part of his spiritual makeup; rather, it is explicitly a part of the “composition de ma chair.” By invoking flesh, Césaire has given primacy to the evocative power of the body, and to the literal, physical experience of the enigmatic subject and his relationship to the land. He nonetheless maintains a distance, or an alienation, from the pays natal. He announces that he was wandered for a long time, underlining the notion of a spatial alienation; this separation is grammatically reinforced by the subtle use of the formal address “vos”. By addressing the country in a formal register, Césaire gives the lie to the spatial proximity of the return; he undoes the intimacy he had established only a few lines before in asserting that the country’s soil made up his very flesh. Césaire continues addressing this pays natal in distinctively embodied terms: “Embrassez-moi sans crainte”. His request is, again, a

127 Cahier, 61
physical one—he returns to the intimacy of the “embrace” even as he maintains the formality of the “vous.” Finally, he metonymically substitutes another sign of his body—the mouth—into the place that cannot be occupied by others: “Et je lui dirais encore: “Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont point de bouche…”” By making the physically evocative mouth operate in the nonsubstantive place of the “malheurs qui n’ont pas de bouche,” Césaire confuses the boundaries between embodied subject and abstract conception. The body, rather than accept this delimitation, reaches beyond what is physically possible, to embody an abstraction—the malheurs. These malheurs, in turn, are so specific to an experience inscribed on the body that they nonetheless require a bodily mode of expression—a bouche.

If the Cahier represents poetry in an epic mode, the highly ekphrastic and dialogic poems that Césaire writes in what I refer to here as the “Wifredo Lam suite” of poems return to or reference a more lyric tradition. They perform a more immediately evocative function and do not follow a grand thematic narrative. They do not offer a worldview, nor do they re-imagine ontologies or histories. Rather, they rely on a series of rich, nuanced, and densely evocative moments, predicated on syntactical economy rather than narrative scope, to reflect and produce a unique space between poem and image. This lyric transition is an important one, for it minimizes the distance to be traversed between image and text. By compressing the narrative sprawl of the epic, Césaire brings immediacy and impact to the image-text relationship and facilitates the ekphrastic process. In other words, the signifying economy between the lyric poem and the image (and image-maker) it both references and produces, is denser, more efficient and more compact, in the lyric words. The brevity of the lines, their syntactical sparseness, produces a tight, urgent effect. The Cahier cries out to us, with a raw throat and a desperate message, but it also creates a history that requires time to unfurl. The lyrical poems of the Wifredo Lam suite, by

128
contrast, produce immediate visual sensations. They rely on the third space produced by poetic imagery to draw on the power of both the read word and the imagined image it evokes.

The compression of semantical expression that takes place in the lyrical works does not remove it, however, from the distinctive corporeality that characterized the voices in the Cahier. Where that sprawling work allows for a long-term tracing and following of metonymies and metaphorics, the lyrical works in the Wifredo Lam suite rely upon line, meter, and spacing to convey textually what Lam has conveyed and evoked graphically. In this way we see hybrid bodies emerge, but not just any hybrid bodies—these are distinctly evocative of Lam’s winged, hooved, human-animal hybrids. The bodies in the poem reach out to the bodies in the painting, appropriating and reworking them, so that the signifying space produced by the encounter between image and text is haunted by the presence of the lyrically conceived Wifredo Lam as much as by the man himself—Césaire’s own “mon semblable, mon frère.” As we shall see, the works comprising the Wifredo Lam suite rely upon a poetics intentionally inflected by and structured according to the same rules of visual economy that guide Lam’s paintings. Between the two works there exists a kind of ouroboros of mutual influence whose origin mystifies

Césaire’s poetics, which destabilize the categories of “human” and “self” as well as those of genre, rely consistently upon the body. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Cahier, which never ceases making, unmaking and remaking, in a kind of corporeal inter-textuality: Et ce n’est pas seulement les bouches qui chantent, mais les mains, mais les pieds, mais les fesses, mais les sexes, et la créature tout entière qui se liquéfie en sons, voix et rythme.” Rather than enclosing, the body and its evocative imagery are spaces of broadening, reaching out, and communicating. It is a literature of opening, such as Glissant conceives in Poétique de la relation.

---

129 Cahier, 49
The question of the epic is an important one in this text. As Sylvie Kandé has argued, the poetics of Glissant can be read as a new epic genre for the new world. If the works of Césaire and Lam cannot precisely be qualified as epic, I would nonetheless maintain that they contain elements of the epic—that is, of the impulse to create a foundational mythology, cosmological organizing principles, a symbolic lineage, and the appropriate aesthetic vocabulary to convey and sustain these. In this way, there is certainly an epic gesture in both of these works: it is magnified in the encounter between their textual and visual expressive worlds.

**III : The Cane Field : Line and Limit in Wifredo Lam**

Wifredo Lam manages to be a simultaneously central and marginal figure in the Surrealist movement and in early-to-mid-twentieth century avant-gardes. Like Césaire he was formed by multiple European influences, including early exposure to canonical works (the influence of Van Gogh, for example, is often very apparent), but remained a deeply Antillean, and deeply Cuban artist, his work pervaded not only by forms and references of Africa, but imbued with the totems and visual signifiers of santería.

Born in the Cuban countryside, in the town of Sagua la Grande, the son of poor campesinos, Lam bore in his face the traces of Antillean intermingling—his Chinese, Spanish, and African heritage all readily apparent in his features. A polyphonic, highly referential and evocative visual vocabulary is one of the constant hallmarks of his paintings, and also appears in his drawings and works of sculpture.

130
In 1923, Lam received a scholarship to travel to Madrid, where he would remain for 13 years before moving on to Paris in 1936. While in Madrid, he attracted admiration for his expressive painting and became a collaborator and friend to André Breton and Pablo Picasso, who in turn introduced him to the luminaries of the European avant garde, including Braque, Matisse, Miró, Léger, Éluard, Leiris, and Tzara.

In the museums of European cultural capitals, Lam obsessively studied historical masterworks for technique and craftsmanship, even as conceptually he was greatly influenced by the brash and exciting practices of Cubism, Surrealism, and the various modernistic currents surging throughout Europe. He was an object of both real, artistic respect from his peers, and, perhaps inevitably, of a certain fetishistic fascination. The avant-gardists, after all, were fascinated by alterity generally and their work formally and specifically informed by African shapes and referents. The presence of the Afro-Cuban Lam must have been a kind of nexus for a whole series of desires, some more worthy than others.

V.Y. Mudimbé, in his now-classic *The Idea of Africa*, problematized and complicated this relationship between Africa, exoticism, and the reductive gaze. Mudimbé, however, quickly transcends a reading, that while important to acknowledge, is a bit limiting: the critical tendency to simply stop at the assertion that the Western gaze is exoticist and colonializing. While such an assertion is duly noted, and not incorrect, it is also limiting, casting both the regarding Occidental subject and the regarded object (which can occupy numerous categories, of which the most frequently invoked include African, female, queer, etc.) into very fixed categories that truncate any further exploration or more nuanced reading. Grateful notice is therefore due to Mudimbé’s more subtle reading of the situation, in which, as he asserts, “I prefer to understand the concept and history of this literature in such a way that I can transcend the continuity and pervasiveness
of an exoticist imagination and, at the same time, account for its conception.” Mudimbe’s way of reading the tradition of “exoticist literature” enables us to account for the Surrealist’s gaze toward and appropriation of African forms in a richer context. While not devoid of troubling political implications, being inseparable from their time and context, Surrealistic artistic practices nonetheless enter into a richer, more complex relationship of mutual influence, informed by poetics of errancy and relation, with the alterity of the forms, themes, and narratives that fascinate their omnivorous gaze.

André Breton wrote Fata Morgana in 1940. While his formal appreciation for both Lam and Césaire cannot be fully divorced from the problematic fetishization of generally “Black” or “African” forms that informed and pervaded Surrealism, he also wrote about both artists in glowing terms and he asked Lam to provide the illustrations for that text. In this way, Lam was inducted by the high priest into the canon of formal Surrealism. The story of Fata Morgana is both evocative of Surrealist themes of desire, magic, and transformation, and inseparable from the classic Arthurian mythology of Brittany. Interestingly, many of the illustrations for Fata Morgana show the influence of Cubistic forms more than the evocative African totems that so piqued European interest. Even when the figures are explicitly representational and identifiable, they prove unstable, dissolving and re-moving symbols, signs, and shapes, so that they become divorced from accepted context. One figure of Morgana herself (Fig. 7), for instance, shows a reasonably straightforward face, an identifiable shoulder, clearly delineated breasts.

The breasts, however, initially legible as signs of femininity, enchantment, maternity, and so on, are deprived of their stable meaning, being reproduced, more abstractly, on the figure’s forehead. Using a Cubistic perspective, the figure’s breasts, which, at first glance, are one of the most identifiable and reliable images in the figure, are abstracted and turned in profile. More specifically, the nipples of the two-dimensional breasts—a series of concentric circles—are
turned into full flat profile, removed from their original location, and re-situated on the forehead. Through the use, then, of both conventional signs of femininity on the one hand, and the destabilizing, highly technical compositions and apparatuses, on the other, Lam produces an image that conveys both the classical femininity that underlies the text, and, simultaneously, the infinite permutations and interpretations that such a construction can produce. This figure reappears in Lam’s illustrations of the text, often conflated with other of his icons, accosted by or transmuted into other bodies, inverted or differently scaled. Throughout his work in *Fata Morgana*, Lam develops a whole bestiary of more and less abstract creatures that interact with each other in varying degrees of violence and intimacy (Fig. 8).
Sometimes they seem to encroach on each other’s borders almost tenderly, as in the flower that blossoms from what seems to be a foot. Within a single image, however, other figures can seem to be almost attacking each other: a creature with a spiky back aggressively
climbs Morganas hair in the same figure; another head, in profile, appears about to fall of the
page, and the signifying iconography in the shape of the breast is appropriated into the spread-
eagled figure, menacing and encompassing despite its proportionally small stature, that
dominates the center of the page. Lam’s illustrations deepen and enrich the text, without,
crucially, explicitly narrating what the text communicates. This aesthetic engagement again
evokes the third space of looking—that at the intersection of poetry and image—with which I
began this chapter. The story of Fata Morgana is not told only in its words, nor only in its image,
but is a mysterious aesthetic experience that operates at the juncture between the two.

Like many of the artists I look at here, Lam, who would die in Cuba, a darling of the
revolutionary government (although the relationship was, from his side, not uncomplicated)
followed a restless and wandering itinerary over the course of his life, often traversing the
Atlantic and getting caught in the snare of wartime Europe. His long, wandering journey home,
and the vagueries of travel, inflected his work, and were all faithfully documented by his second
wife, Helena, whose mémoir, Wifredo and Helena: My Life with Wifredo Lam, 1939-1959, was
an invaluably intimate and authoritative resource for this study.

Lam occupies multiple and shifting aesthetic, historical and geographical spaces. Usually
described as a Cuban Surrealist, although his famously contentious member was the Cubist
Picasso, and his vocabulary is distinctively his own, his works show the stylistic impresses of
various modernist currents, in addition to his own particular and inimitable style. Many of his
paintings reflect a nuanced and evolving relationship to the body and its representation, raising
complex questions as to what and who constitutes the body (of the subject, of the object, of the
corpus of the work). His exposure to Afro-Caribbean forms during his upbringing in Cuba,
exploration of canonical European works while in Madrid and Paris, and relationship to
cosmopolitan early-twentieth-century avant-gardes are all factors in the construction of an intertextual, multireferential, and consistently hybridic body of work, at the core of which is a profound engagement with the limits of identity and the boundaries of the self, or, more precisely, with the question of what constitutes a self and the delimitation of the entity—a question that involves not only a radically phenomenological approach to the “human” self, but to the boundaries of the literary or painted object. We can recall here Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations, we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions, but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Eye and Mind}, 353. (The Merleau-Ponty Reader)} The figured body—the representation of subjective forms in painting—provides a critical aperture for my intervention. In Lam’s work, I find an embodied lyricism that reacts and exists in a tenous, certainly uncertain relationship to image and text. Here I examine his works (including paintings, sketches, and lithographs) in dialogue with Édouard Glissant’s \textit{La Terre Inquiète} and Aimé Césaire’s \textit{Wifredo Lam}.... The relationship between image and text in each of these cases reflects a fundamental anxiety, an uncertainty about genre and medium, that resists transparency and easy explanation, embracing opacity and uncertainty as defining qualities—even \textit{raisons d’être}.

As with Césaire’s poetry, figures and bodies—human, animal, hybrid, and imaginary—play a crucial role in Lam’s work. Critically, putting Lam into dialogue with Césaire, also enters him into discourse with Surrealism more broadly. The illustrative relationship and the ekphrastic dialogue he held with Césaire, while highly evocative and meaningful, was not his first or only inter-artistic, inter-genre relationship. I examine here first, his visual vocabulary and the problematics of African representation, particularly as regards his interactions with Picasso.
Then I examine his drawings for Breton’s *Fata Morgana*, and the ways in which drawings and text mutually inform and deepen each other. After this encounter with mainline European Surrealism, I turn back to the Antilles: in his relationship with Césaire, I look at the painted referent to the poems I engaged earlier. Finally, I conclude with the drawings he produced for Glissant’s *La terre inquiète*, which represent an apotheosis of image in *relation* with text.

Before engaging with these specific works, I would like to begin with a brief examination of three of Lam’s paintings that will enable us to see the complex and mysteriously embodied visual vocabulary in which he works. *Zambezia-Zambezia* (1938), *The Casting of the Spell*, (1948), and *La Fiancée* (1950) among others, all present figures that suggest bodies, strongly delineated yet moving toward abstraction, and refer back to some other way a body should be, a faint but defined blueprint in the viewer’s mind, a phantom referent that allows us to identify them as bodies although they don’t resemble any bodies we have ever seen. Their iconographic quality undoes itself even as it establishes a seemingly direct economy of signification, raising questions as to what constitutes a (“whole”) body and what separates a “self” from an “other.” Structures of interiority and exteriority that will be familiar to those familiar with Derrida’s analyses of literary and visual cultural production (Specifically *De la grammaalogie* and *La vérité en peinture*) may be identified in this paper, weaving, as they do, in and out of notions of the function, action and implications of the body in Lam’s painting. It is important to understand, for instance, that “the body” in Lam’s work operates as a particular kind of frame that is inextricably linked, both implicitly and visually, to the constantly collapsing boundaries between subject and object. Further, the notion of *différance*, although originally modeled as a textual rather than a visual relationship, brings fascinating questions to bear on Lam’s painting, as this
shifting economy of the body’s limits or frame results in a constant deferral of meaning that eludes positive identification.
Lam painted *Zambezia Zambezia* (Fig. 9) during his years in Paris as part of the artistic circle that included Léger, Matisse, Braque and Miró. He had already come into contact with the ideas of Surrealism and Cubism from his encounters with Dalí and Picasso in Spain. This hybridized group of influences is characteristic of Lam’s work and evident in *Zambezia Zambezia*, whose Africanized title indicates both the Surrealist, and particularly Cubist fascinating with African art and forms, and refers back to his own experience of hybridized African art forms in Cuba. Zambezia is the name of both a village and a province in Mozambique, which Lam never visited. It seems then, that the title valorizes the unknown exotic, referencing an *idea* rather than something known or fixed. Indeed, as Lam wrote, ‘’’“ce que vraiment élargit ma peinture, c'est la présence de la poésie africaine”’. We have here, then, as we will shortly see in my analysis of Lam and Glissant, the basic link between image and text-- one that paradoxically gives a very definitive character and quality to the painted and lyrical works even as it renders untenable notions of the space between genres that had generally been assumed. The undoing of bodies—the body of the work, the body *in* the work, the body of the text, is signaled by the reaching outward—geographically, towards the African influence (which is, in turn, historically internalized into the santería iconographies of Cuba) and generically, towards poetry. This is echoed by the “body” represented in the painting. One of its most prominent features is a single breast, protruding from the body like a large nose on a profile, its hard grayness softened by the slightest dab of palest pink on the nipple. The breast gives the body a feminine cast, as does the triangle between between the thighs that betrays no trace of a phallus. Is this, then, a female or feminine body? Is it even a body? And is it a body with a subjective identity? The top of the “body” is nothing resembling a head, in sharp contrast to the simple but clear lines of legs, hips, abdomen and breast.
The conceptual implications of the frame will be familiar from Derrida’s analysis of painting, and a similar process may be observed in the Lam’s figures which force us into “working relentlessly to dislocate its angles, rummaging in its corners.” The idea of a body operates as a kind of frame unto itself, its edges being the fundamental divide between self and other. This is a crucial point, for it brings into the visual realm a major theme revealed by Glissant, Casal, and Césaire in the textual realm, and by Glissant and Benítez Rojo in a historical socio-cultural context.

The body in Zambezia Zambezia destroys the illusion of wholeness because it cannot be identified as a particular kind of body. It has human traits, but is not a human body; something tail-like seems to protrude from its left clavicle. The gaze, moving from left to right, as the profiles of the figures direct it, encounters a progressive abstraction that pulls the viewer away from the notion of a cohesive body. A funnel-topped tube above where the implication of a human body leads us to search for a head resembles a factory chimney or a torch, combining the natural and the mechanical, but certainly not an organic subject. The painting both undermines and underlines the notion of the body as frame: the instinct is to want to view it as such, to have a central, identifiable object that is the focus of the painting. But the varying shapes, some identifiable as “something”, some not, make it impossible to identify a definitive body, and pull our shapes outward, blurring and undoing the body’s frame and thereby calling into question the lines of inter-subjectivity in viewing it. By making it impossible to identify the frame of the body, Lam paints the impossibility of the framing the self.

La fiancée (Fig. 10) further complicates the question of subjectivity and the identity of the subject or object.

---

133 Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*
The title hangs heavily over the work, and alludes to the issue of framing and naming. The figure in the painting, “feminine” and hybridized like *Zambezia Zambezia* is now defined by the title as feminine. The author is instructing us to view this as a feminine body, and not only a feminine body, but one with a very specific relationship to another, presumably male (given social and
historical context) body, which is not represented in the piece. The notion of engagement highlights the collapsing limits of subjectivity. Engaged, this “woman’s” future is bound to another body’s; the “body” or “self represented in this piece is linked by a social function to another. It is the fiancée of some other body, and now therefore exists in reference to it. Lam’s titling of the work therefore makes textually explicit the notion of intersubjectivity that the painting represents visually.

Strangely, this work does have a head-like object atop the head of the hybridic body, a body which further blends the limits of the entity by alluding to animal as well as abstract bodies. Finally, and most perplexingly, this body is topped by an almost sarcastic-seeming caricature of what the viewer expects to see at the top of the body: a head. But this head in no way feels like part of the central body represented in the text. It indicates, rather, the fiancée’s fiancé, the other subject with whom she would enter into an uncomfortable symbiosis, or an untenable melding of subjectivities. The objects can remain neither independent nor wholly melded. The grafted quality of the head is echoed by a similar shape dangling from the mane, suspended upside down. The inversion of the head further emphasizes the instability (or even meaninglessness) of the notion of a coherent body. The doubled head hanging from the manelike hair (which, again, comes out of nothing resembling a “normal” head—and which is echoed, in its absorption of nature, by the wavy or oceanic hair we will see in other Lam works), emphasizes the vagueness of the limits of subjectivity and the difficulty in delimiting the individual.

These fractured bodies recall again Derrida’s explanation of différance and deferred meaning, when we consider “différance as temporization, différance as spacing. How are they to be joined?” In the case of Lam, it seems only too apparent as an applicable model transposed onto the framed and framing body. The represented body is “put in the place of the thing itself,”
its shape alluding to some latent idea of a body in the viewer’s mind whose meaning is simultaneously but into question and deferred by the painting. The sign of the body in Lam is complex because it is a dismembered, hybridized body (dismembered because hybrid), but by being represented “the sign represents the present in its absence,” indicating the impossibility of fixing a referent or a ubiquitous sign. The deferral resolves in a dismemberment of signification; the body doesn’t work as a totality, but as a conjunction of disparate elements that articulates the instability of any internalized and totalizing subjectivity. Furthermore, the process of deferral set in motion by the encounter with the painting, and the experience of the “deferred presence” of a body, affects all parts of the sign: the represented body, the imaginary or aesthetic body prototype to which it alludes, and thus the idea of the body of the viewer itself. The central image of an unidentifiable or definable, but nonetheless present, body blurs the idea of the frame and therefore of the self. This, in turn, affects the viewer’s relationship to the frame of the canvas, to the framed body inside the canvas, and to the frame of the viewer’s own body itself as it relates to all the others.

The representational give and take (the Spanish vayviene, with its spatial shiftings, or the similar French va et vient, better connote what Lam expresses) in Lam’s work is characterized by an endless circuit of allusive meaning, a Glissantian relation rather than a dialogue. The hybridized body of the Fiancée continually establishes and undoes the idea of what Derrida identifies as a consistent “present element.” There is certainly a nearly singular presence at the center of the painting, but it is undermined by its hybrid composition, with each piece alluding both to something else (another body or entity), to the body of which it is a part and from which it is apart, and to itself as an independent entity.
The Casting of the Spell, (Fig. 11) interestingly enough painted two years before La fiancée, seems an even more radical example of this hybridization of “bodies”.

Figure 11
The figure here has very clear breasts and appears to be sitting in a chair. The clearly-delineated arms seem to meld into the chair, rendering the subject part-object. The figure has an obviously identifiable navel, suggesting a relationship to another being (the mother). This painting has the most clearly defined head of all, but it is all the more unsettling for that, in some ways. This head seems to belong to an eel or snakelike creature; Lam has, in other words, put the least human head on the most human figure, effectively confusing a totalizing hierarchy of beings. What to make, then of this strange creature, a represented figure, in which the humanoid body, is only really completed by the incomplete (that is animal) head? Even more perplexingly, there are, in fact, two head-like appendages: the snake- or eel-like one, and another, shaped like a crescent moon, protruding from the neck, with a small circle in it suggesting an eye. The phallic/feminine dimension created by snake and moon, divided from each other by the main body of the figure but each possessed of an eye is at the crux of the complexities of the divided yet indivisible, inter-subjective yet fragmented gaze of Lam’s unidentifiable subject. It is a gaze that relates directly to the viewer, causing the viewer in turn to be drawn back in, interpreting both subjects through this hybrid lens of conversing gazes. The two gazes also deepen the fragmented and framing operations of the painting, for the gazes are framed by the “heads”, which are both framed and divided by the main figure, which in turn should be framed by itself as an entity, but which in fact melts out from its frame, its hybrid components eluding the possibility of wholeness, making both the represented figure and the viewer into uncertain subjects.

We have seen how the painted bodies in the Lam’s works are characterized by their unique style, their grand narrative and their uncanny ability to unmake and refashion accepted notions of looking and seeing; in much the same way, Césaire (an early influence for Glissant, whose deep respect and abiding appreciation for his mentor did not prevent an essential
philosophical rupture) undoes received notions of poetic structure and harmony. The two come together in Césaire's poem *Wifredo Lam*, in which ekphrastic, dynamically mutable processes of bodily transformation operate at textual, lyrical and literal levels. At the heart of the poem we find the fundamental ambiguities that framed the great cry of the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Who, first of all, is this Wifredo Lam? Simply a title? A person-- more specifically, a painter, with a close personal and artistic relationship to the author? The transformation and absorption of the painter and the painting into the poetic work illustrates the central confusion of subjectivities, for Césaire is broadening not only the limits of the poem, but of the artist, which he does in a series of poems from the collection *Les Armes Miraculeuses*, published by Gallimard in 1946 *Wifredo Lam*, one of the many poems influenced by or relating to Lam in the collection, is not only a poem, a pure elegy, but rather the celebration, the lyrical approximation, or the performative articulation of a poetic relation and an aesthetic rapprochement. In his paintings, Lam undoes visual limits; in Césaire, we see how once more, by a process of alchemy or ekphrasis, the painter and painting are transformed by poetics: "rien sinon le frai frissonnant des formes qui se libèrent/des liaisons faciles/et hors de combinaisons trop hâtives s'évadent." At bottom, this poem is propelled by a particular and forceful engagement with the world, reinventing its frames and its narrative horizons. In *Wifredo Lam*..., this tendency to remake the shape-- the body-- of things is set out at the thematic level from the outset: "rien de moins à signaler/que le royaume est investi/le ciel précaire/la relève imminente et légitime." Césaire articulates this legitimate, imminent reinvention and reshaping of the world. He announces, with his poetry, that "le cycle de genèses vient sans préavis/d'exploser." Césaire and Lam become intermingled in the poem, and together they catalyze an undoing of genre that is not limited to the category of poetry, but in fact is at the interstices of the poetics of painting and is a kind of
passage between various categories and subjectivities. Lam's painting, and its transformation in Césaire's poetry, evoke and articulate a praxis founded in multiplicity, fragmentation, and the aesthetic construction of a new world, a tout-monde beyond the limits of genre and qualification. The Wifredo Lam suite begins with a quote of Lam. In this way, Césaire allows Lam to speak for himself, writing the epitaph for the works dedicated to him. Lam’s introductory quote evokes the hybridic religion of santería, as well as the influence of ancestors: “Matonica Wilson, ma marraine, avait le pouvoir de conjurer les éléments... Je l’ai visité dans sa maison remplie d’idoles africaines. Elle m’a donnée la protection de tous ces dieux.” By invoking the presence of the African gods, Lam (and Césaire, quoting him) signal to us that we are entering a world in which magic, and the operations of the gods (“Ogun-Ferraille, dieu du métal qui dorait chaque matin le soleil”) are part of the poetic operations of the text. (We can recall here the active presence of Hephaestus, the artist-within-the-work of the Homeric ekphrasis).

Back, then to the first poem in the suite, to Wifredo Lam..., which begins almost as a messenger’s missive in wartime: “rien de moins à signaler/que le royaume est investi”. This opening is direct and effective: it lets us know that we are at a crucial juncture, where the existing order (“le royaume” ) is besieged. From the very outset, Césaire makes clear that the stability of established structure is, far from being unquestionable and permanent, presently under attack. As if to highlight that this threat to the normal order of things is not limited to man-made laws, or to things as fleeting as governments (which the “royaume” might suggest), Césaire ties this instability to the natural world: the state of the sky itself—“le ciel précaire”—is in question.

In the two following stanzas, Césaire drives home the existential magnitude of this instability: not only is the kingdom besieged, but, there is more. Césaire has so far destabilized
man-made systems of order ("le royaume") and natural ones ("le ciel"). He now questions the assumed progression of phenomena through time: "rien sinon que le cycle de genèses vient sans préavis de s’exploser". Fundamental cycles of life and rebirth have exploded without warning; furthermore, the fact that they can explode without warning lets us know that there is no omniscient order to things; this devastating undoing of accepted systems does not even grant the small concession of foreboding.

There is indeed nothing to announce, except the coming of the New World: "rien sinon le frais frissonant des formes qui se libèrent /des liaisons faciles/et hors de combinaisons trop hâtives s’évadent.” In this distinctly anti-Platonic pronouncement, Césaire seems to valorize the self-determination of these new forms, free from pre-conceived notions of shape or order. These new forms evade conventional boundaries, escaping reductive links ("liaisons faciles") as well as ill-considered configurations ("combinaisons trop hâtives").

At this point in the poem, there is a fairly abrupt shift of content, as well as a change in style and syntax. The opening lines may be read in a fairly epic mode: they announce a new world, call into question its lineages and filiations, and establish a new cosmology. The next several stanzas have shorter, more evocative and fragmentary lines: “mains implorantes/mains d’orantes.” They are moving towards a more lyrically suggestive poet, and in doing so they evoke magic, undo the normal progress of time, and begin transforming bodies and subjectivities.

In the intriguing fifth stanza, time becomes highly ambiguous, for Césaire addresses himself to a subject who reads, in the interior of a physical body, the future and destiny: “Liseur d’entrailles et de destin violets,” he writes, seemingly addressing himself to a “récitant de macumbas/mon frère.” Is this brother the same diviner who divines from entrails, pulling bodies
apart and undoing time? The evocative power of the *macumba* is fascinating, for it evokes practices similar to those of santería, but practiced in Brazil rather than in Cuba. While the title, the hybridic religious practices, and the intimacy of the “mon frère” could suggest that Césaire is addressing Lam, the geographic dislocation undermines the certainty of this conclusion. Structurally, Césaire makes us aware of this with the fragmentary announcement “toute choses aiguës/toutes choses bisaiguës.” If, for a moment, we had a moment of certainty—that all things have a sharp, defined moment of demarcation within this cosmology, the illusion is summarily punctured: everything that might have had a sharp point has two. There is no true north; all things hold doubled referents.

The last stanza emerges from, and, paradoxically, draws its defining strength from, this unstable duality. Within the battles for justice, for the creation of a new world, structured along different lines, the speaker writes recognizes “le rare rire de tes armes enchantées/le vertige de ton sang/et la loi de ton nom.” Reluctantly, it would appear, the speaker has come around—while all things are possessed of duality and instability, it is precisely this seemingly chaotic content that enables him to identify the irreducible: “la loi de ton nom.”

Throughout the *Wifredo Lam* suite, the figure of the speaker’s interlocutor reappears, in various manifestations, embodiments, and guises. The second poem in the suite, *conversation with Mantonica Wilson*, immediately engages us, with the first word “toi”, and then pushes us away with “diseur”—it is to a teller, not to a reader, that the speaker addresses himself. From the two very first words, Césaire establishes a dialogic structure to the poem, in which the speakers are mutable and undefined, as are their relationships to each other and to the reader. Each of the following stanzas is addressed to a different figure (“toi diseur,” “oh capteur”, “eh détrousser”). To each of these figures the query is posed, almost reverentially, “qu’y a-t-il à dire”. No matter
who is speaking or being spoken to, it seems, the question of what is to be communicated between two speaking subjects remains unclear—there is a progression of false starts moving, as in the first poem, towards something like resolution. In the first stanza, there is nothing to say. In the second, a kind of transactionality or communion is suggested: “la vie à transmettre/la force à repartir/et ce fleuve de chenilles.” The last image, that of the river of caterpillars, invokes hope—both for a flowing movement towards something greater (the river’s culmination in the ocean), and the potential for new, spectacular life (the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly). In the third stanza, the speaker appears to resign himself to the tyranny of language he has been seeking to undo, conceding that “…la piège fonctionne/la parole traverse,” suggesting that words, after all, may traverse the very limits they enforce. The next stop, however, that this potential opens, is ambiguous at best—if the roads can be opened by the highwayman, by the “oeuvreur de routes”, who uses systemic arteries according to his own rules, their conclusion remains “les demeures au haut réseau de la Mort.”

In these poems, the radically subjective, embodied universe that springs forth from lyrical representation is always in a state of becoming, a state of not-quite, though ultimately inevitable, coming-into-being. The spare, stripped-down lines of génese pour Wifredo provide a perfect example of this. Here, we begin with a nothing, a non-situation—“plus d’aubier/rien qu’une aube d’os purs”—that eliminates the “aubier” (with all its associations of trees, rootedness, knowledge, and so forth) to replace it with the vaguely consonant “aube, ”—a dawn on his own terms, where the trees of old are no more, replaced by the root structures of new poetics—bones.

134 Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 216
135 Glissant’s development of the rhizome, notably in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari, illuminates the important distinction between rhizomatic versus rooted constructs of identity and tradition.
Césaire then relies upon one of his favored devices, anaphora, to establish the potency and expressive potential of these bones, a power that is dynamic and transformative, evading reductive definition. As Brent Hayes Edwards has written, regarding the use of anaphora in the *Cahier*, “affirmation cannot become dogmatic—cannot be reified as an ‘absolute’—because its seeming definitional fixity is immediately undone when, in an anaphoric verse structure, it is reformulated in the subsequent lines…anaphora does not instill regularity, but instead introduces transformation and even contradiction.”

We have then, bones that engender any number of expressive and generative actions: “des os qui explosent grand champs” become “des os qui explosent aux quatre vents,” only to become transformed again in to “des os qui dansent” and “des os qui crient.”

Ultimately, the evocative power of the anaphora gives way to its instability, and dissolves again into the expectant space of the coming into being. The bones are transformed into blood, “du sang il ne sinue que juste/celui median d’un verbe parturient.” The genesis ends with a near-beginning—with a pregnant verb.

The anaphoric evocation of instability and transition appears again in passages, another poem of short lines and sharp images that draws its power from geographic bodies. It begins with an ambiguity: the fundamental doubt of categorization almost immediately accepted (though it is a qualified acceptance), because it facilitates transgression: “(la nécessité de la speciation/n’étant accepté que dans la mesure/où elle légitime les plus audacieuses transgressions).”

This qualified acceptance is at a double remove from the text: in the first place, as the opening lines, it is our entrée, our transition into it from a space exterior to its operations. Secondly, enclosing this acceptance in parentheses simultaneously underlines its dubiousness or uncertainty, and

---

137 *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, 216
138 *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, 220
establishes a conspiratorial intimacy between the speaker in the poem and the reader—it is the lyrical equivalent of being pulled aside before a conversation to be told some confidential information about the other participants. The main body of the poem anaphorically duplicates the instability of this transitional process, with the repeated word “passer”. “Passage” seems to be invoked as a potential mode of existing; it is not, we are quickly (and parenthetically) assured, optimal, for the speaker continually second guesses it, setting up caveats and oppositions, such as “passer/mais ne pas dépasser les mémoires vivantes” and “passer (penser est trop rapide)”. Anaphora thus operates structurally to echo the transitory uncertainty of the passage, which, simultaneously, might yield a kind of emergence, as the poem concludes, “déjà se dégage du fouillis au loin/tribulation d’un volcan/la halte d’une vive termitière.” The passages here reach beyond the poem itself, for the passages it invokes lead us towards other poems and other paintings.

The Wifredo Lam suite concludes on an uncharacteristically definitive note. Even as its last poem, nouvelle bonté, begins by resuming its instabilities, it seems to be gesturing towards an undefined but cautiously optimistic future. It is heralded, however, by Césaire’s poetics of flux, mutability, and instability, beginning with a negation, and a non-clarification: “il n’est pas question de livrer le monde aux assassins d’aube”.139 Here, the speaker seemingly asserts that, for all the chaos and instability these poems evoke, there is no question of surrendering the world to darkness; rather, there is a quest to encompass its constant flux: “la vie-mort/la mort-vie.” For all the negative traces left on the surface of the earth, the speaker asserts, “il ne peut s’agir de déroute.” All of this chaos, instability, productive undoing, which would lack evocative power without the fear and violence of their imagery, have, ultimately, only removed the predetermined markers in the night (“seuls les panneaux ont été de nuit escamotés”). All this instability, and

139 Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 230
undoing, have served to undo restrictive structures and signs, they have represented “le
dégainement des couteaux de justice.” And if their avatars have been frightening, consisting of
“oiseaux vampires” and other haunted and haunting creatures, ultimately they have also yielded “
des seins qu’allaitent des rivières/et les calebasses douces aux creux des mains d’offrande.” They
have yielded to new potentialities, to new fields of conception and possibility. They lead, as
Césaire’s concluding line attests, to a space where “une nouvelle bonté ne cesse de croître à
l’horizon.”

III : “À la limite de la terre et de la mer”

The new dawn Césaire alludes to finds new articulation in a particularly intriguing
ekphrastic object. The first edition of Glissant’s La terre inquiète, a prose/poem/epic hybrid like
many of his works, (and to my mind, one of a cycle with the previously published Le sel noir and
Les Indes which I addressed earlier as epic origin stories of the New World) was published in
Paris by Éditions du Dragon in 1955 and is a fascinating book-as-object, recalling Derrida’s
musing “When the beautiful object is a book, what exists and what no longer exists? The book is
not to be confused with the sensory multiplicity of its existing copies. The object book thus
presents itself as such, in its intrinsic structure, as independent of its copies. But what one would
then call its ideality is not pure; a very discriminating analysis must distinguish it from ideality in
general, from the ideality of other types of object, and in the area of art, from that of other classes
of books (novel, poetry, etc.) or of nondiscursive or nonbook art objects (painting, sculpture,
music, theatre, etc) In each case the structure of exemplarity (unique or multiple) is original and
therefore prescribes a different affect.”¹⁴⁰ The genre of Glissant’s book reflects the problematics of this identity as a book. Further, the physical materiality of this *unique first edition* distinguishes it not only from other books and genres, but from other versions of *itself* as an “exemplaire unique” containing original artworks. Its title page identifies simply “Lithographies de Wifredo Lam”.

With the exception of a single, black-and-white image preceding the title page, the images are not integrated into the text as a whole, but rather folded, quite literally, around the text, within a color lithograph external sleeve. The images, then, are by sheer physical positioning, actually situated in an uncertain relationship to the text. The complete lack of

¹⁴⁰ Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*. P. 49 (Parergon section)
explication or explicit relationship between the images and the text serve to structurally (and here
the word has a specifically physical connotation, underlining the notion of an embodied poetics)
convey the non-transparent elective affinity between Lam’s visual representations and Glissant’s
textual lyricism. La terre inquiète, concerned as it is with the intermingling of boundaries and the
destabilizing of limits, transcends the limits of its own genre by entering text into relation with
image. Hence its opening line, “Ce qui inquiète la Terre devient présence et mouvement de
l’Océane.” The unidentified, allusive rumblings that mysteriously disturb the Earth (undefined,
uncertain in origin), are transformed into the presence and the movement of the ocean. Nothing
is still, nothing is fixed. Presence is equated with movement. Similarly, the uncertain force that
stirs is echoed by the deliberately undefined presence of Lam’s lithographs. The images, too, are
mysterious and uncertain: their presence serves as an aperture, a hint, or a suggestion, into the
opacities of the text. In the first, mysterious figures quietly but sharply bisect the parchment;
unstable bodies (humanoid but not identifiable), familiar to us from Lam’s vocabulary, form a
stratified composition of uncertain figures. Images borrowed from Picasso (eyelashes) conflate
artistic influences. In the second, a bird with a back like a trumpet evokes jazz sounds and
African rhythms, transcending genre yet again by alluding to music.
In the third, the figures have become radically abstract, even though shapes alluding to heads, elbows and torsos may be identified. In the first, mysterious figures quietly but sharply bisect the parchment; unstable bodies (humanoid but not identifiable), familiar to us from Lam’s vocabulary, form a stratified composition of uncertain figures. Images borrowed from Picasso (eyelashes) conflate artistic influences. It is not only in imagery, but in shape and organization
that the influence of Picasso is clear. The eyelashed figure seems to function as a second head beneath the primary head; its profile, deliberately flat within a dynamic, mobile figure, is distinctly Cubistic. Furthermore, this body confuses limbs and directionality—what seems to be a wing, is, in its symmetrical parallel, interpretable as a beak. What might be horns protrude from the primary head sideways, destabilizing the directionality of the figure. The figure has a mane and tail, but also a birdlike beak. Finally, its feet, Pan-like, evoke the shape of hooves, suggesting hybridity and Bachanallian abandon. To read this lithograph from left to right (our eyes moving over the image as they would across text) is to follow a progression towards abstraction.
The second, green-tinged figure is suspended from what might be a vaguely avian foot and appears to have what might be an eye—or could, simply, be a target or decoration. Similarly, its inverted “horns” echo those of the first figure, but they are removed from the context of even that body’s abstracted lines. The third figure is deprived of any eye-like marking, making it the most abstract and difficult to identify (or identify with). This progressive removal of the eye calls
into question the primacy of the gaze; we are left looking at a body that does not look back. The second and third lithographs seem to blend into each other while remaining distinct. They occupy the same sheet of onionskin paper, but Lam has taken panes to draw not one, but several frames between them. The first lithograph seems to be engaged with the idea of the portrait and self-representation. A fairly straightforward figure, whose long hair, delicate neck, and gracefully sloping shoulders, along with a decorative necklace, seem to imply femininity (this painting alludes to gender more clearly than many others), is crowned with an abstract shape and gazes directly at the viewer. To the figure’s right is an image that structurally parallels it—round head, long neck, long hair, double crown. The outlines of the face, however, here function as a frame for a distinctly birdlike creature, represented in profile. Even when he presents a seemingly straightforward figure, Lam opposes it with ambiguity, hybridity, and transformation. Not even the contours of the representation remain clear—the head within the drawing functions as a frame for the bird’s bust-like representation. Meanwhile, he has supplemented the rather plain straight square frame around it with not one, but two other frames, curly, and incomplete, as though to underline the lithographs generic instability. Finally, it is separated from the drawing beneath it with the added emphasis of another line bisecting the drawing itself. Lam’s concern with the frame exists both in and around the represented figures. The lithograph directly preceding the text is notable for three reasons. First, it is the only one not in color, but in sharp black-and-white. Second, it contains four distinct image sets, with clearly delineated frames. Third, its imagery is appreciably more violent, its graphic dynamism more jagged and urgent than in the colored lithographs. One of the most noticeable differences is that the figures previously identifiable as having faces now lack eyes. Lam’s figures repeat, rework, and reappear, reminiscent of a Glissantian trace. Alterations to the general rules they follow, or to
previously established tendencies, are therefore readily apparent and often disorienting. As Glissant writes, it is an “esthétique du continu-variable, du discontinu-variant.”[141] The shapes that resembled eyes previously—simple circles with simple dots at the center—have now been displaced. Rather than occupy the center of the round, crowned, headlike figures, they have been relocated to seemingly inanimate objects: a tall, jagged, totem-like pole in the first frame, a frequently repeated diamond shape in the second. By the third and fourth frames (numbered counter clockwise starting from the top left-hand corner), the eyes have disappeared entirely, replaced by the humanoid figure with its now blacked-out face. The last lithograph before the text compresses and conflates the relationship between image and space.

In some ways, these images can allude to the archetypal figures of the text, but the relationship is never clearly articulated. Rather, the images are allowed to exist in an undefined relationship to the text they “illustrate.” To illustrate itself is an uncertain word, with certain dependencies implied between text and illustration. Not only adornment, but improvement; not only understanding, but illumination. There is a longer study to be done on the relationship between the etymological roots and implications of illustration and opacity:

- 1526 W. Bonde *Pylgrimage of Perfection* iii. sig. OOviiiv, It dyd so illustrate or lyghten their vnderstandynge, that [etc.]
- 1530 J. Palsgrave *Lesclarcissement* 589/2, I illustrate, I bring to lyght or make noble or worthy.
- 1917 *Mod. Lang. Rev.* XII. 205, I do not desire to illustrate my version of ‘the Fause Knight’, but merely to claim that it throws new light on the subject matter of the original ballad.

The drawings do not shed light on the text, they do not illustrate it; rather, they deepen its essential opacities, its mysterious powers of evocation. Rather than defining each other, the

[141] *Poétique de la relation*, 156.
works evocatively exist next to each other. It is a relationship of affect rather than explication. As Michael Dash writes, “In Lam, Glissant senses the poetics of the American landscape.”

Glissant parses these poetics minutely and evocatively in an essay written for the Dapper Museum’s exhibition catalogue for Lam métis, a broad 2001 retrospective of paintings and drawings. For Glissant, Lam’s paintings represent a visual poetics of “La Relation: la variable fixe-démésuré de toutes les Cultures, et de toutes les sensibilités, dont nous avons désormais une conscience fulgurante, et qui nous occupe à une vitesse irrémediable.” This entering into relation, and this reading of the visual as poetic, (or guided by the same metaphorical, stylistic, and evocative mechanics that can undergird the written work), is an indispensable piece of comprehending the rich depths and fathomless waters in which these images operate. Glissant’s reading of Lam is a demonstration of the necessarily ekphrastic nature not only of the works themselves, but of any attempt at a coherent or cogent reading of them. Particularly illuminating is Glissant’s engagement with color, upon which I have scarcely touched, focusing mostly on the outlines of bodies and the figures they approximate. Glissant’s readings of La jungla, in which he sublimates the fields of sugarcane evoked by the repeated vertical shapes in the canvas into the opaque mysteries and African origins suggested by the word eponymous “jungle,” takes the crucial step of invoking color, so that hue becomes the affective, or semantic component of the image (where line and figure might function as grammar and syntax). Such a reading allows us to engage with the poetics of the text on its own terms, and using its own grammar and vocabulary.

Geographical and spatial concerns also inform Glissant’s readings (errancy, and by extension relation, are ultimately posited in distinctly geographical terms; we take our origins with us wherewever we wander, and we and they are transformed by the encounter, as are our

---

142 Lam métis, 14
interlocutors.” Touching on the alternately problematic and emblematic incorporation of African forms, Glissant ultimately locates in this vocabulary a visual poetics of multiplicity, as he explains, “Le peintre découvre aussi une autre multiplicité, qui vait pris corps dans la Caraïbe et s’était le plus souvent développée à partir du peuplement nègre. Réhabilitation des forms africaines saisies non pas dans une convention du représenté, mais à même ce movement qui les aura transmutés dans les terres nouvelles de leur diaspora.”143 The African forms, then, are invoked not in a simple hierarchy of representation—they are not simply used—but instead are reinterpreted and transformed, and, crucially re-located into the diasporic wandering of the Antilles.

If Glissant’s reading of Lam resists totalizing solutions, it nonetheless offers openings into the complexities of these visual poetics. As they resituate and reconfigure representational conventions, these figures gesture beyond the text, seeking out interlocutors who share a poetic vocabulary. Rather than a relationship of strict equivalency, these ekphrastic dialogues tend to find—in the space of relation—aesthetic affinities, expressive tendencies that reflect similarly nuanced relationships to the world. Errant, these works remain grounded in a distinctively Caribbean poetics, even as the multiplicity of such a poetics undermines its fixity and permanence.

The works of Lam and Césaire operate against multiple contexts, all massive in scope: the legacy of one World War and the experience of a Second; the explosion of new literary and visual strategies in the first half of the twentieth century, and the legacies of the Middle Passage, the plantation system, and colonialism in the Caribbean. Of this last, Lucien Taylor, in his preface to a famous 1997 interview with Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, writes: “What happened in the Americas was of an immense suddenness. In two or three centuries, Slap! Three,

143 Lam métis, 21
four, five, six, or seven different peoples, of different races, with different gods, different languages, were forced to create a future together in a context of extreme violence.”

If the authors of the Éloge created a literary and discursive space for negotiating this minefield of intertwining legacies within a modern context, they also created a language, grounded in a highly politicized concept of self-narration, that risks being too static or confining for the various currents it seeks to encompass. It becomes universalizing, a totality, which can only, in the end, be imposed. Thus, not créolité, but créolisation—the process, rather than the fixed state—becomes a more comprehensive, flexible, and effective prism for engaging with the works examined here.

The idea of the eternal process, of the expressive potential of the flux, is inextricably linked to, and deeply influenced by, Glissant’s poétique de la relation. By conceiving this expressive and discursive space defined by errancy and desire, as Glissant writes, “L’errant recuse l’édit universel..Il plonge aux opacités de la part du monde à quoi il acede. La généralisation est totalitaire…La pensé de l’errance conçoit la totalité, mais renonce volontiers à la pretention de la sommer ou de la posséder.” The poetics of Césaire and Lam each have universalizing tendencies, but they gesture outward, beyond the boundaries of their own artistic worlds, so that their particular experience becomes a universally evocative gesture.

If the historical, social and cultural contexts in which and through which Césaire and Lam worked are evocative of this state of errancy and relation as conceived by Glissant, the mechanics of their artistic modes follow a similar pattern. The ekphrastic dialogue between their work mirrors expressively what the role of their cultural backgrounds and personal trajectories reflects historically. If a process of créolisation is more appropriate to a fuller understanding of

---


145 Poétique de la relation, 33
the historical-cultural context than a state of créolité/antillanité/négritude, so, too, a mode of ekphrasis provides fuller picture than a practice of painting or poetry. Both processes, the historical/cultural becoming and the visual/narrative dialogue, require an interlocutor, another body to which the body in and of the work may speak, and which can speak back. These encounters provide a space of expression that escapes rigid, pre-conceived notions of being and self. As Glissant writes, undermining these simple, static states empowers the subjective self even as it questions the category of “self:” “Ainsi est-elle [la relation] idée de l’être, mais qui s’épar de l’être-comme-être et confronte la présence.” It is this space of fraught, expressive, laden presence, at which the modes of seeing—visual, historical, textual, corporeal—that we have seen here, coincide in their evocative, relentlessly subjective power. “La Relation, qui s’épar de l’être, affirme le sujet.”

146 Poétique de la relation, 200
Chapter 5

*The Body and the Blood: Severo Sarduy Unexiled*

The essayist, critic, novelist, poet, playwright, and (finally) painter Severo Sarduy represents the natural point of conclusion and continuation for the relationship of influence and regard between Cuba and France, a relationship colored, always, by the politics and implications of exile.

Born in the province of Camagüey, in 1937 Sarduy lived in Cuba until 1961. Despite sharing early sympathies with the revolutionaries of 1959, the revolutionary government quickly revealed repressive and homophobic practices that made a creative, dignified life impossible for Sarduy in his native country, and he left for Paris (ostensibly to enroll at the Sorbonne), where he spent the remaining three decades of his life. In Paris, Sarduy came into contact with the *Tel Quel* group that included Derrida and Phillipe Sollers (Sollers later translated several of Sarduy’s essays for publication in the journal), and his criticism is deeply informed by the postmodernist critical practices then exploding in France.

While in Paris, Sarduy continued to write novels, poetry and prose that reflected Cuban influences and literary traditions, as well as constantly addressing himself as exile/in exile both geographically, artistically, and, crucially internally. When Sarduy died, of AIDS, in 1993, it was revealed that he was also an accomplished painter. Few people were familiar with his painted works, which employed all manner of materials, both natural and synthetic, including tree bark and his own blood. This exile-within-the-self, coupled with the inter-genre expressive modalities, plays, as we shall see, an essential role in the ongoing development of his various poetics. As Julia Kushigian has written, “The ellipsis, hyperbole, intertextuality, superposition of texts,
superimposition of cultures, parody, and a variety of forms of simulation, such as transvestism and anamorphosis, all serve to reinforce in Sarduy’s work...the displacement of the one center to two, and the dissolution of concept of the one, the self, into at least a double.”

Sarduy is the logical ending point for this study for several reasons. First, he is the only artist I address here who willingly and explicitly lived and died in political exile, having rejected what Jason Weiss has called “the lights of home.” Secondly, his work is deeply grounded in a poetics of the body, in inscribing, reading it, touching it, memorializing, and translating it. Thirdly, he is concerned with developing a poetics that is ontologically and culturally relevant in informing the historical understanding of the Caribbean as well as being artistically expressive and unique. Finally, in occupying almost every major genre of artistic expression, as well as being an important figure in philosophical artistic circles in Paris in the twentieth century, Sarduy represents the crucial, internal dialogue that colors the processes I have sought to illuminate here: the impossibility of one genre to hold the writing, writhing body.

The line of influence begun with Moreau’s tattooed canvases and Casal’s yearning, transformative, ekphrastic sonnets finds its conclusion at the end of the twentieth century in an expressive and discursive body marked by a century of historical traces: the traces of other painters, the traces of other writers, the traces of intellectual history, the social and medical traces of the AIDS crisis and queer identity. If this is a logical point of conclusion, it is also a point of opening and continuation. Sarduy’s influence is wide and sustained, as is the continuing influence of Cuban artists working both within Cuba and errant in the diaspora. At a crucial historical point of waiting and transformation for the island, these poetics provide much to illuminate and inform.

---

Sarduy’s writing must be understood within a particular lineage of (primarily) French thought. This is a tradition with two key, and mutually reinforcing, aspects. First, it is distinctively and necessarily premised on the construction, organization, and experience of the physical body and its operations, and, second, it is concerned with transgression and with transgressing convention, accepted modalities, and reductive categories. Sarduy pays homage to this lineage in explicit and implicit ways throughout his oeuvres—in the novels it is often enacted, in the poems alluded to or revealed. In his essays, Sarduy, a critic always working through his own artistic queries and quandaries, addresses his predecessors and influences directly. Thus, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* articulates the influences of (among others) Sade and Bataille.

This text is divided into three larger sections with many smaller subheadings, interventions, and interjections. It is telling that the first of these large sections is entitled *Erotismos*, for the history of erotic representation is, necessarily (even obviously) embodied, and carnal, and tends (certainly in the case of France) towards the picaresque at the lighter end of the spectrum and the nakedly transgressive at the other. Sarduy’s interests and thematics are decidedly in the latter camp, as both Sade and Bataille are powerful influences on his subject matter as much as the deeper structures of power, semantics, and representation on which it is predicated.

Sarduy opens the collection of essays with a brief, but essential explanation of his view on Sade, writing that “El pensamiento de Sade se alimenta de ese devenir, de esa reconversión que no cesa, de ese ciclo en que florecimiento y disolución son como facetas de una franja torcida sobre sí misma: se suceden sin discontinuidad, sin que el recorrido que las siga tenga que
pasar del otro lado, franquear una faceta, conocer el borde.”” In this way, he lays the foundation for a critical framework that is in direct conflict with fixity and stability, but is rather in a permanent state of “devenir,” always influenced by and becoming itself.

Sarduy’s essays work in an almost photographic way: they are brief, tightly-bound snapshots that provide a few brief, key thoughts that explode outwork into a poetry of the baroque. Within the essay genre, for instance, he situates us within Sades thought, and conveys that he will be engaging with Sade as an important philosophical predecessor (he opens by invoking “las páginas, más discursivas que eróticas, más de pensador que de libertino, del Marqués de Sade”149), and then transforms his criticism, within one page, into a discourse on the Sadean theater.

Sarduy acknowledges both a debt to Sade and also to one of his intellectual heirs, Georges Bataille, in this chapter addressing erotism, the body, and the material and conceptual components of the transgressive. Bataille, like Sade, produces for Sarduy a philosophy in which “el pensamiento...fluye, monótono, errante, lineal, inconsciente de si mismo, en su puro ejercicio.”150

Sarduy thus elaborates a poetics predicated on instability; he diagrams for the reader his philosophy and its geneology, such that its implications may be parsed or left opaque, even as they inflect the text.

The Marquis de Sade and the philosophical implications of his indulgences, excesses, and transgressions represents the earliest point of literary, philosophical, and expressive influence in the lineage that informs this study. The 18th-century libertin, however, has a long reach, and finds interlocutors (not to say disciples, although Bataille came fairly close) throughout the

149 Escrito sobre un cuerpo, 2
150 Escrito sobre un cuerpo, 17
nineteenth century well into the twentieth. Because Sarduy occupied and participated in a high-
lied important and transformative moment in French thought, which in turn transformed his deeply Cuban poetics and thinking, it is important to touch upon this lineage, if only briefly, to fully understand the implications and context of the work he produced in his three decades in Paris. The sensual, transgressive poetics of a body always in flux, particularly as they are developed in the modernist and Surrealistic contexts in France, are directly connected to the work of the Comte de Lautreamont. Like all the artists here, he experienced international journeys and alienation from home, leaving his native Uruguay for French boarding school at the age of thirteen. He is supposed to have traveled back to Montevideo for one more extended stay in young adulthood before settling in Paris for the remainder of his brief life, but the details of this event are uncertain. Oren Moffet writes that, “since the poet’s return has been reported by several unrelated sources, it seems safe to assume that he did actually return.” While such a claim is highly speculative at best and simply specious at worst, it dose attest to the vagueness of Lautréamont’s journeying and geographic situation. If Lautréamont’s particular “exile” was that of privilege and education rather than a result of the vicissitudes of political upheaval, his poetics nonetheless remained informed and inflected by instability, journeying, and opacity. He represents, along with Nietzsche and Sade, a kind of philosophical and aesthetic precursor to the different vocabularies of poetic becoming that we engage with here.

Lautréamont’s masterwork, *Le chant de Maldoror*, presages the practices of transgression, transformation, and semantical undoing that characterize the work of all the artists here, and particularly influence the mid-twentieth century French philosophical side of Sarduy’s philosophy. Key figures of Surrealism, notably Breton, its explicit architect and therefore perhaps the
key figure, payed tribute to the influence and importance of Lautréamont). Breton’s esteem is but one of many testimonies to his legacy for twentieth-century modernisms and the works and philosophies that frame them. The word games, which repeatedly enforce and demonstrate the fundamental instability of the text (and, by implication, the impossibility of stability), as well as the hyper self aware-ness of the writing, demonstrate an early manifestation of exactly the kinds of critical questions Sarduy would address in his post-modernist Parisian context, and of the kinds of systems of meaning and representation that characterize his novels, plays, and poems. A full reckoning with Lautréamont is not necessary here, but only an acknowledgement. He serves as a demonstration and indicator of the rich relationship of influence and nuance that set the context for Sarduy’s poetic and philosophical interventions.

The body Sarduy engages and refashions in such complex and dynamic ways is coded by a particular set of operations. Queer bodies, queer identities, and queer theories both shape and illuminate his poetics; an added dimension of Sarduy’s complexity however is the nuance and elusive quality of this queerness. As a theorist, he deals with tangentially queer themes, like the transvestite bodies of La simulación, where bodies are transmuted and sublimated into a representative surface (what Sarduy has called an ‘exaltation of the surface’). Put another way, queerness, in the work of Sarduy, does not function to confer any kind of static, defining identity (politically and culturally radical or otherwise) but instead serves as another sign, another indicator, of his “new instabilities.”

Oscar Montero has subtly articulated the ways in which “Sarduy’s voice, written on a body, subverts polarized ideologies, forcing the reader to consider the fictitious nature of all human creations, forcing him or her to look both ways at once…”

---

151 Oscar Montero, “The Queer Theories of Severo Sarduy,” in Obras Completas, p. 1783
Within this voice, and the evocative space it opens through the subtle operations of its corporeal metaphorics, queerness becomes one (although certainly among the most powerful) of many indicators that transform the text-as-object, the viewer-as-subject, and the directionality of the experiential reading gaze.

The body, in the work of Sarduy ultimately, as in the other artists we’ve engaged here, is a vehicle (willed, willing or otherwise) that transcends its boundaries and reaches for a broader, less restrictive space of identity and discourse. If the skin is a boundary and a border, as Didier Anzou posits in *The Skin Ego*, it also provides something for the subject to transcend: the subject’s border is the means and method of his or her own liberation. It is in this spirit that the construction, and the implications of its correlation with any identity, queer or otherwise, must be understood to be informed by queerness, but not defined by it. As Montero writes, “Theory, however queer, trails its Cartesian baggage. It fears the babble of the confessional. Ultimately it points a guilty finger at it’s object: ‘there, but for the grace of Foucault, go I.’ As it drifts toward the subjective, theory may lose sight of its object; it veers inexorably toward self-portraiture.”

The bodies across which Sarduy’s poetics develop and transform are undeniably inflected by tropes and signs associated with “queerness.” It is part of Sarduy’s tremendous achievement that as a critic he retains awareness of his own theoretical drift (necessarily elicited by these theoretical poetics) into self-portraiture—in fact, queerness becomes a necessary and enriching component in a poetics of a rather extreme subjectivity. Rather than practice a kind of overarching Cartesian theory, that would negate such a subjectivity even as it sought to address it, Sarduy simultaneously turns this critical regard inward and outward, creating a highly expressive literary language constituted, as he writes in *El cristo de la Rue Jacob*, by an “archaeology of the skin.”

---

152 Montero, 1783
Sarduy’s essay *Nueva inestabilidad* provides a useful, illuminating, and subtle point of entry into his complex philosophical concerns. Because Sarduy performs the roles of both philosopher and practicing artist, it is both challenging and essential to understand the development of his thought in terms of, first his reading of contemporaneous artistic production, secondly, his own stated interests and concerns as an artist, and, thirdly, his critical understanding of himself as an artist within this context. Elaborating a modern reading of baroque ontologies and poetics, Sarduy situates himself in relation to art historical moments, gestures, and currents.

It is important to note that Sarduy begins this important component of his philosophical and critical interventions by couching his argument in spatial terms, writing, “El cielo organizaba la tierra.” This poetics, informed by the organizing principles of nature, is inescapable in twentieth-century Caribbean philosophy—it appears in Derek Walcott, the authors of the Éloge, Glissant, Casal, Lam, Césaire, and Benítez Rojo, to name but the few we have engaged with in depth here. An added dimension of intensity and poignancy is added by the context of exile, where reminders of geographical displacement, and of the many factors that, in fact, do code and organize the landscape, are experienced as a fundamental principle of daily lived experience.

Sarduy is deeply concerned with the historical and artistic precursors and signs that structure his current moment—for him, a reading of scientific and art historical discourses leads inevitably to the conclusion that he is operating within the context of a neobarroco. Sarduy takes as a definitive moment, foundational gesture, and point of departure Galileo’s insistence on reconceptualizing the organization and trajectories of falling bodies, identifying in it a subversive discursive strategy that leads to “la desintegración de una imagen coherente del universo.” Sarduy bases the opening moment for his poetic intervention in precisely this undoing of the
coherent image of the world: he operates in the spaces undone, in the fracturing of conceptions, in the clash of subjectivities.

For Sarduy, the baroque poetics with which he works stem from a primary moment, in the Italian baroque, in which the organizing, hierarchical principles in the generally-accepted conception of the world are undone. He describes this as a “pérdida simbólica del eje.” It is important to note, too, that in his articulation of a twentieth-century neo-Baroque, Sarduy relies constantly upon a French term “retombée.” In so doing, he situates the linguistic performance of his own philosophies and artistic paradigm squarely in the interstices of the cultures in which he operates, so that his condition as inter-cultural exile is represented explicitly, echoing throughout the text.

*Nueva inestabilidad* is also notable as an example of the corporeal metaphors Sarduy employs. Even when not explicitly enacting and parsing a hierarchy or taxonomy of his own or other bodies and their performative operations, Sarduy’s language is distinctly informed by embodied terminologies that straddle scientific and artistic discourses. Thus, we have the sixth section of *Nueva inestabilidad*, “Fórmulas para salir a la luz.” The homophony with the common Spanish euphemism for giving birth, “dar a luz” is echoed by the astrophysical examples he has used throughout the text, and particularly with the heavy reliance on Hubble, the optical explorer.

The interest in scientific discourse is also illustrative of Sarduy’s concern with unity, and with totality. This is a concern that echoes Glissant, of whom Peter Hallward writes: “Like that of Deleuze, Glissant’s later work begins and ends with the assertion of a single and unlimited ontological Totality, a wholly *deterritorialized* plane of immanence.” Sarduy, for his part,

---

153 *Nueva inestabilidad*, 1373
154 Hallward, p. 2
insists upon a rigorous scientific and philosophical process in which “[…] la nostalgia de la unidad, que la ciencia necesita para existir, encuentra constantemente su propia contradicción en la multiplicidad de cuestionamientos que, en su propio proceso, plantea.” Sarduy here reaffirms the central, and motivating tension of the baroque poetics both he and Glissant engage and perform. How to account for this ultimate Deleuizian “de-territorialized”, immanent unity or totality, while simultaneously valorizing, enacting, and respecting the “droit à l’opacité”—that is, the right to difference, to a resistance of interpretation—of specific, subjective experience? For Glissant, a necessary element that emerges from this dynamic tension is the experience, practice and existence of errance—a state of being that facilitates transformation by, exposure to, and movement through other, different geographies and experiences, while still maintaining the unique subjectivity of one’s own. It is in the bringing together of these seemingly disparate—even inchoate or contradictory—factors, in their paradoxical coexistence, that Sarduy identifies an opening into the sublime, writing, “Sigue pues abierto el diálogo entre los que encaminan cada uno de sus gestos hacia la unificación, y los que observan el espejismo, en la palabra, de ese deseo, y secretamente piensan en la imposible cohesion de todo lo aparente. O ven en lo discontinuo un imagen de la eternidad.”

If Sarduy parses, and relies upon, the quests and questions of scientific discourse in enacting and describing his own philosophy, he also refuses to accept a standard setting apart of the scientific from the artistic or the philosophical. He appropriates the varied terminologies, modalities and practices of various traditions and discourses to create something both original and capable of supporting the philosophical, affective, and aesthetic structures he erects. Sarduy emphasizes the metaphorical nature of scientific inquiry, bringing his discourse on cosmology

---

155 Nueva inestabilidad, p. 1364
156 Nueva inestabilidad, 1364
and physics into a *rapprochement* with his artistic concerns. As he writes, in the section entitled *Una maqueta del universo*, “[…] si bien el concepto final de la cosmología contemporánea corresponde con lo menos figurable, con lo irrepresentable puro, para llegar a ese concepto los científicos recorren un terreno metafórico poblado de recursos evidentes, de comparaciones que no pueden ser más figurativas, pintorescas incluso.”¹⁵⁷ With this assertion, Sarduy raises and clarifies a crucial point: that scientific discourse relies upon a “metaphorical terrain”, upon the language and symbols of painting and figuration, so that the *practices* of scientific discourse and artistic interpretation cannot be fully understood as completely separate or separable. We use imagery, and visual language, to imagine, posit, and explicate the unknown, even when operating under the deceptively objective guise of scientific rigor.

If Lam and Césaire hail new poetic possibilities and iterations, informed generically by the epic tradition and socio-culturally by the multi-faceted encounters of Caribbean history, Sarduy is situated squarely in the context of the Latin-American neo-Baroque of the twentieth century, which includes Carpentier and Paz, among others. It is important to note his position in this tradition and within this set of discursive and expressive practices, because they both frame and inflect his critical and creative work.

Much has been written about the Latin American baroque, a poetics or paradigm in which the traditional European art-historical and architectural term—that elaborate, dynamic, restive aesthetic of chaos and sublimity—is extrapolated into a new model for reading the New World.

Sarduy operates at a unique juncture of this model—where Glissant, Césaire, and the authors of the *Éloge* are indisputably products of the Francophone Caribbean, with all the attendant mixings and transformations, they remain, for all practical literary purposes, primarily monolingual in their creative expression. While Chamoiseau and Confiant have been vociferous

¹⁵⁷ *Nueva inestabilidad*, 1365
in defending Créole’s merits as a literary language, they have published and been recognized (with some notable, and important, exceptions) primarily in French and in France—a symptom, perhaps, of the state of prélittérature in which they argued Antillean literature in French finds itself. Glissant was fairly insistent that a written literature in Créole undermined its identity as a mode of spoken expression that had no roots in a written literature. Lam’s artistic language was undeniably inflected by the European painters he encountered in Paris and France, but he was generally at a distance from the more philosophical pursuits that occupied Césaire and the others. Sarduy, on the other hand, is both an artistic producer and a theorizer of that project. He scrutinized his own work as well as exhaustively, subtly parsing the gestures and implications of the contemporary art scene around him. He also straddles both his Antillean identity and the highly cerebral, intensely French theoretic fervor of the 1960’s in Paris (he is that elusive creature, a Cuban child of ’59 and a French child of ’68).

He brings, then, an added layer of interrelation and complexity to what César Augusto Salgado identifies as “particular instances of Latin American cultural alterity,” writing that, “Within this discourse, the baroque functions as a trope or adjective for the region’s complex ethnic and artistic mestizaje.” Sarduy is fascinating as a particularly heteroglossic and polyvocal voice within this already complex discourse. He adds additional strains of language, expressive genre, and critical vantage to a series of baroque practices that, as Salgado has it, “move from a hegemonic, diffusionist, and acculturating conception of the term, to an emancipating, authochthonous, and transculturating one.”

---

159 Salgado, 316
160 Salgado, 316
The philosophical and aesthetic gestures of the baroque are particularly important not only for how they affect and frame Sarduy’s work, but for the way in which this work responds to its demands of complexity and rich expressivity. Sarduy, in other words, is not only defined by the baroque, he is actively engaged in a baroque practice of remaking his own complex system of evocation, representation, and encounter.

Sarduy’s relationship to and situation within the lineage of the baroque are unique ones. Even Salgado, who correctly situates him in a kind of trio of intellectual primacy with Lezama Lima and Carpentier, does not parse the dynamic tension that this nascent, though deep-seeded, articulation of the Cuban baroque engenders when brought into contact with, and under the speculative gaze of, French postmodern theory. The experience of exile, and the practical as well as conceptual implications of errancy, wandering, and memory become components of the text, so that the new poetics he develops is directly informed by them. It is not only a question of how these more general—even universal—concepts inform the text, but of the particular strain and tenor of this influence. The texts require a unique and subjective approach to a unique subjective experience in a uniquely subjective text. This tension between identities (as a neo-baroque Cuban writer on the one hand and a Paris-based and –formed philosopher on the other) lie at the heart of Sarduy’s philosophical work as much as his artistic practices, and merit subtle analysis.

In the first place, it is essential to identify some of the key elements of the European baroque style, which was transformed in the 16-th and 17-th century creations of the New World and then again in the thinking and poetics of the mid-to-late twentieth century. By glossing some of the preeminent characteristics at play, I hope to provide some points of departure for understanding the components of this expressive and philosophical tension.
In painting, architecture, sculpture, and music, the European baroque is characterized by some well-defined tropes: excess, dynamism, motion, hyperbolic expressivity, and repetition. These elements are both absorbed into and transmuted in the poetics of Lezama Lima, Carpentier, and Sarduy. As Salgado writes in reference to Lezama Lima, baroque ontologies of the New World, although unarguably predicated upon the Spanish baroque practices of the counterreformation, seem to turn these on their head, such that, “the baroque in the New World has an invigorating healing capacity that runs opposite to a decadent dehabilitation of the Old; its assertive hybridity seeks to lessen the psychic wounds of the conquest and bridge caste divisions through a negotiation of cosmologies.”¹⁶¹

In this way, baroque poetics can be seen to be operating according to an art-historical kind of Glissantian errance, which remains based upon and inflected by its origin—the aesthetics and ideologies of the Spanish counterreformation—even as they are absorbed into, appropriated by, and transformed through a new and infinitely subjective series of practices and expressive modalities.

Sarduy, in his essay on the baroque, demonstrates simultaneously not only his own (re)conceptualizing of the baroque but its lyrical and semnatical operations into his own text. In other words, he conceptualizes and rethinks what he errantly performs and creates. In this practice, he brings to bear the deconstructive, post-modernist, and self-aware approaches at that time being developed by the Tel quel group, so that ideologies, fixities, and received notions frame and inform the text even as it, in turn, disrupts them.

Not only does Sarduy operate in various contexts and voices, but he maintains an explicit explanation and identification of the modernist roots of his flexible practices. His reading of the works and thoughts of Kandinsky and Duchamp, for example, lead to an active engagement with

---

¹⁶¹ Salgado, 323
the agency of the subject or object and the phenomenological operations and implications of painting. By articulating the philosophies and historical context in which his works are situated, and elucidating the premises under which it operates, Sarduy not only explains himself to himself as well as to us, but he performs a subtle and important structural operation: that of creating a philosophical frame that can be shifted from the immediate topic at hand to illuminate most of his oeuvre. In other words, Sarduy is explicitly historicizing his own poetics, a practice common throughout the Caribbean and to all the artists in this study. We can recall here Walcott’s assertion, much loved by Glissant, that “the sea is history.” The sea, in other, words, is the historical frame and context—yet another iteration of the kinds of destabilizing frames Sarduy elaborates in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*.

A crucial component of this work lies in the *style* of reading Sarduy proposes. Here, in fact, is the key that links him to Casal, Césaire, Lam, Glissant, and the other authors of this study. Although it may not be immediately legible or obvious as such, when Sarduy tells us what his artistic *propos* is, he situates himself squarely within this tradition of shiting, historically-nuanced flux. As he writes, upon observing the works of Tinguely, who he sees as Kandinsky’s aesthetic heir, “Lo que me interesa es que entre los cuadros con objetos cuadros con objetos y este objeto que pinta se extiende la dialéctica plastica del siglo.”162

This engagement with the visual is important for two reasons. First, the particular *way* Sarduy has of reading the text represents a particular historical, philosophical, and aesthetic confluence—one grounded in mid-century post-modernist readings of the modernist canon. Parsing the implications of the great abstractionist, like Kandinsky, is an exercise in pulling apart the new, and oblique modes of representation that visually emerged from and shaped the century. Secondly, Sarduy’s minutely detailed and considered forays into painting as *critic* (quite apart

162 *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, p. 107
from his practice as painter, with which this chapter concludes), support a school of reading in which the arts cannot be conceived or properly read (at least in the full range of their effects and implications) as separate from each other—a painterly discourse is useful in deepening the understanding of a read text. This ekphrastic mode of thinking becomes prevalent with these artists precisely because their journeys are grounded in the messes of history—because their phenomenological experience is one of journeying, transforming, and translating, they are not fully containable within a single register or discourse. In this case, Sarduy has used a painterly discourse to reveal a whole network of questions and implications to do with subject/object binaries, agency, and modes of expressivity. The painted, painting, object, by its very presence on the page, rejects a simple, transparent, or binary legibility. He might be speaking of his own history when he concludes his essay with the assertion that “esto merece una revisión de la pintura. A la luz de una revisión del language.”

Within Sarduy’s prodigious literary output, his last published work, El Cristo de la Rue Jacob comes closest to unifying his practices as philosopher, critic, and artist into one expressive modality. The essays, anecdotes and inventories that constitute the collection self-consciously narrate and describe his practices of creation, transformation, and memory, even as they perform these.

The title of the first section, “Arqueología de la piel,” sets up the ambiguities of the discourse. By using the word “archaeology,” with its connotations of scientific rigor, discovery of the past, and physical documentation, he outlines his project as both a scientific and a personal project. Archaeology undoes transparency; it is perhaps the most materially grounded, empirically oriented of the “soft sciences.” It seeks to explain the unexplainable—the long past of human experience—through the careful, slow painful uncovering of tangible proof. It takes the

163 Escrito Sobre un cuerpo, p. 108
inventory and residue of lived experience to construct a transparent, legible understanding of the past. The scientific, enlightenment-derived possibility of taking such an inventory is immediately called into question, if not summarily undone, by the subtitles of this first section. Each is the identifier of a scar (“una espina en el cráneo”, “cuatro puntos de sutura en la ceja derecha”) on Sarduy’s body, and each scar yields a story. Each scar, however, yields a different kind of story, with its own identity and its own style and aesthetic: the categories into which the archaeological findings would fit, the empirical measures of experience, are expanded and exploded by the subjective experiences they evoke. Una espina en el cráneo yields an almost Proustian recollection of an infantile closeness with his mother, captured in their intense physical closeness and framed by the memory of her body: “Por entonces, estábamos muy cerca, mi madre y yo; éramos casi la misma persona. Me sujetaba a su brazo para dormir, delizaba los pies, para sentir su peso, entro sus muslos y el sofá.”164 Not only does his archaeological practice become immediately translated into a deeply intimate, personal memory, it is a highly subjective remembering in which the unity or singularity of subjectivity itself begins immediately to unravel. His mother and he were nearly the same person, the boundaries between their bodies fluid and intermingled.

From the remembering child of this first vignette, Sarduy’s voice transforms, in Cuatro puntos en la ceja derecha to that of the confident writer. The experience of the four stitches in his eyebrow happens in the context of the writing of his novel Colibrí; the memory of this scar, above the writer’s speculative eye, is concerned now with actively producing rather than passively experiencing. Whereas the thorn in his skull—with its clear allusion to Jesus’ crown—is remembered only in terms of the mark it leaves (“no sentí nada cuando se me enterré la espina en el cráneo”), and is occluded by the intimacies surrounding it, the four stitches

164 Christ on the Rue Jacob (p. 52 in Obras completas).
constitute a moment of revelation, an “‘epifanía’” as Sarduy writes, insisting that, “así me empeño en llamar las frágiles viñetas que ilustran la lectura de mi cuerpo, como si en ella se vislumbrara el relámpago de una revelación.”

As in his poetry, Sarduy, in the essays of Christ on the Rue Jacob, accords an agentic power to landscape, scenery, and elements of nature. In the section entitled “Unidad de la figura”, he carefully parses the various elements of composition, using a particular and careful juxtaposition of art-historical and geographical terms to contemplate the “unity”—that elusive, shifting, totality—of landscape, affect and history. The section is divided into smaller sub-sections, on “La jungla,” “La casa de Raquel Vega,” and “El cielo y la tierra.” Each represents a literary and pictorial engagement with complex questions of composition and representation. Intriguingly, and fittingly, he concludes this section with a dialogue between himself and an imaginary or invented interlocutor, entitled “Severo, por qué pintas?”. Tellingly, the author’s name, vocatively used, is the first word of this last section, as well as part of its title).

The first of these sections begins nearly in medias res: it is an unsettling and undefinable moment of time, pregnant with expectation, a snippet of tropical life. Engorged leaves tremble in anticipation (of what?); large, disembodied feet stamp at the ground. This small section is highly evocative of Lam. The title, certainly, makes the connection nearly irresistible; this is strengthened when we realize, at the end, that we are in fact in a sugar cane field, which Glissant conflates with Lam’s jungle. If the images: “hojas hinchadas, verde y blanco….fuertes flores que gotean una baba transparente….”, then it is perhaps inevitable that the words evoke and echo (intentionally or not) Césaire’s visual evocations of Lam, with its evocation of Afro-Caribbean gods and the imagery of horns and horses.. Here in Sarduy’s poetics, manifestations

---

165 Christ on the Rue Jacob, 53
166 Christ on the Rue Jacob, 75-76
of gods appear, populating the jungle with their presence, and just as quickly depart, leaving nothing but networks of representation, their evocative traces. Writes Sarduy, “Son los dioses reidores, mascarillas con cuernos, agitando la pelambre…Los doies que se van, indiferentes al llamado de los hombres…S van pues, los sonámbulos, y no dejan en el cañaveral mas que sus firmas, sus emblemas de madera pintada y guano, simulacros vacíos.” By invoking, through the quiverings, tremblings, and echoings of nature, the presence of ambivalent or ambiguous gods, Sarduy has located the source of complex spiritual power, ritual, and flux, in the natural world, empowering the landscape with artistic agency—it is, in a nearly literal sense, his muse. He complicates this poetics, however, by creating gods that are sleepwalkers, that ignore the voices of men, that, ultimately, return to the landscape only their trace, and their image. The landscape seems to hold an elusive promise: it evokes the gods, effectively offering a communion with the divine, but these are proven to be empty traces, horned masks, merely the suggestion of a presence. The conclusion is ambiguous, for what is left behind are at once emblems and empty simulacra. Sarduy appears to hold the traces of the gods to be, at once, mere emptiness and icons that hold this divine power.

The workings of memory and affect, in other word, cannot be reduced, or caterogized, or rendered easily or uniformly legible.

The poems collected in Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, which at first glance appear to be elegant, classical sonnets in the modernista mode, engage and embody dynamics of transformation and transforming bodies. In short, spare verses, Sarduy addresses desire, death, and the structure of the text itself. It is important to note here that the title of the collection situates either the speaker or the reader in just such a position of doubled (looking at and being looked at simultaneously) as that which Montero pointed out. This fleeting and disguised witness

---

167 Christ on the Rue Jacob, 74.
resists and contradicts the key elements of its own reliability: presence and clarity. Fleeting, it destabilizes and renders uncertain the time of the event (whatever such an event may be). In other words, the witnesses’ very presence is called into question by its temporal brevity. Disguised, the witness obscures identity and intention: in this way, Sarduy underlines the unreliability and mutability of the text.

The fleeting nature of this witness, and its fractured, shifting gaze, are illustrated in the opening lines of the collection: “La transparente luz del mediodía/filtraba por los bordes paralelos de la ventana, y el contorno de los/frutos—o el de tu piel—resplandecía.” This is the frame through which we will read the poem, the geometrical frame (or “bordes paralelos”) by which we will enter the work. What at first seems a straightforward-enough opening onto the work of the poem, not unlike the picture windows of Italian mannerism, and cast in the transparent light of noon—seemingly fixed and stable—is immediately compromised by the confusion between skin and fruits. The clear light; the clearly-defined frame, nonetheless fail to produce a clear understanding of the objects with which the viewer is constructed. Even in the light of noon, the fruits and the skin may be indistinguishable from each other.

What Sarduy has spelled out and described in his essays he now enacts expressively in his poems, writing “La letra con sangre entra/Como el amor. Mas no dura/en el cuerpo la escritura, ni con esa herida encuentra/paz el amante.” The poetic syntax of these lines is constructed in such a way as to render dubious the situation of the subject or object in each clause. A common-enough poetical device in Spanish-language poetry, the situation of the verbs at the end of the clauses (“con sangre entra;” “herida encuentra” creates a CAESURA between the lines, connecting the actions to each other even as the subjects are separated. The ideas are
connected by the enjambment, which leaves the dangling verbs at the end of the lines to connect and suggest the subject of the following lines.

The poems of this collection are also notable for the explicit correlation between the body of the text and the physical human body. By the middle of the collection, as in the poem excerpted above, parts of the body now stand in metonymically for the body’s echoing presence throughout the text; by opening “la letra con sangre entra”, Sarduy establishes an equivalency between the metonymic expression of the text (the letter), and that of the writing body (the blood). The two are indissoluble—if the letter appears with, or through, blood, it is only through the body that the poetical world comes into being.

Of particular interest in these sonnets is the role that history and landscape play as active characters. There is a corporeal, possibly sexual intimacy established with a seemingly human human interlocutor ("Entrando en ti, cabeza con cabeza, pelo con pelo./boca contra boca"

168 Sarduy’s language here is rich—almost overwhelmingly dense, in fact—with nuance and implication. Telling us he is not moved by voices or reflections, he relies upon a distinctive vocabulary inflected by the visual arts—he sketches, his memory ("el trazo escueto"), framed by a colonial “paisaje”. In the brief space of two lines, he has abandoned strictly poetic devices for visual ones, using the operations of painting—the swift sketch, the landscape—to express his scene. Within this artistic framework (and, as he established with the “bordes paralelos de las ventanas”, it is quite intentionally a pictorial frame), he goes on to contain

168 Sarduy, Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, p. 201
169 Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, 200
personified time. The embrace of the lovers he seeks to recall, after rejecting several devices (the voice preceded by echo, the image itself of their entwined bodies), is communicated by a specific time, “el tiempo de la siesta/nos envolvía en lo denso de su oleaje.” Once the poet frames the moment, captures time by appropriating its operations into his text, he continues to personify natural elements, and only in this way is memory successfully invoked, embodied in the afternoon light moving inexorably across the orchard, reddened by a flamboyan: “cuando avanzaba por la huerta/la luz que el flamboyant enrojecía.”

The natural world is granted metaphorical agency in Sarduy’s poetry, with dynamic, active verbs: the light has the autonomy to advanced, in turn it is acted upon by the flamboyan, which, by its own agency, reddens it. Finally, symmetrically, Sarduy closes this impression with another pictorial device: the noonday sun is framed like a still-life, “abrimos entonces la gran puerta/al rumor insular del mediodía/y a la puntual naturaleza muerta.” This seeming conclusion is typical of the poetic operations of Sarduy’s texts: it is not really the end of the sonnets, but the end of one aspect or current of thought. These moments are decoded only by tracing a network of affectively and thematically related symbols, or moments of language within the language of the poems.

In an intriguing echo of Casal’s translational and ekphrastic practices, Sarduy includes, in Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, a series of tributes or generic translations to and of other artists, including José Luis Cuevas, Morandi, and Rothko. The tribute to Rothko is particularly engaging, for Sarduy had an abiding admiration for the painter and was deeply affected by his suicide. Structurally, the tribute to Rothko echoes and sublimates the workings of the painter’s famous red canvases, beginning with an affective narration of the experience of his oeuvre: “Ni los colores/ni la forma pura.” Sarduy situates the experience of Rothko’s painting first in terms

---

170 Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, 200
171 Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado, 200
of what it is not—neither pure color nor pure form, but an unnamed *other* as yet to be described or poetically enacted. This double negation at the beginning serves a doubled function: neither color or form is present, suggesting the defining absence of the painter’s passing. Sarduy creates an immediate rapport to aesthetic memory, by describing the experience the painting evokes: “Memoria de la tinta.” For Sarduy, the painting is an experience, one that exists not in the direct experience of pure color or form, but in the memory of a hue. These small, brief phrases convey the poet’s experience of the text, bringing his own subjectivity as critic and viewer ineluctably into play within the poetic description of the painting. As the painting progresses, Sarduy paradoxically evokes a very distinct experience of viewing the painting that is grounded in an attempt at describing what resists description. He rejects, as descriptors, not only color and form, but also “Las lineas no, si somber ni textura, ni la breve ilusión del movimiento; nada mas qué el silencio: el sentimiento de estar en su presencia.” By this double evocation of absence: the absente of reductive descriptors in experiencing Rothko’s painting, and the absence from life of the painter himself, Sarduy allows both poetics to express themselves, in terms of what they are not.

*Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado* is followed by a different kind of witness: *Un testigo perenne y delatado*. Sarduy unmakes even the subject’s identity as fleeting and disguised. Not even the unfixed, in other words, can remain fixed. The fleeting witness is transformed, now perennial, re-appearing. This is no more definitive, however than the earlier, fleeting witness, who compressed, accelerated and traveled in time. This perennial, everlasting witness, freezes time, so with its eternal presence; it is in the exchange between these two figures that the mutability of time is enacted: it is simultaneously fleeting and eternal, a chronology of mutability and flux. Similarly, the once-disguised witness is now revealed—or betrayed—but as what, we
do not know. A clue may lie in the semantic ambiguity of the word “testigo.” Because the word means both “witness” and “testimony” it simultaneously indicates, or identifies, the perceiving subject- the “witness”, and/or the text this subject generates—“the testimony.” Subject and text, in other words, become indistinguishable through the dual space occupied by the name given to both.

The collection begins with an approach to a corporeally-derived or –accessed sublimity grounded in Catholic physicality. Evoking the “cilice, sotana, y relicario”, Sarduy situates the poem within the context of the Catholic preoccupation with the body and with marking the body. His religiously-inflected metapysics are compromised immediately by the omnipresence of the body—the Catholic mythology, which would find ultimately a liberated soul freed from material constraints, is unsustainable. When Sarduy writes, “El alma liberada de su cargo: toda imprenta del cuerpo,” he seems to offer the initial possibility of transcending physical constraints.

*Un testigo perenne y delatado* is notable also for the incorporation of Catholic imagery (and, inevitably, the baroque aesthetics of Catholicism that are such a major part of the art-historical canon) that reappears again and again in Sarduy’s work and reaches its apex in *Christ on the Rue Jacob*, his last published collection of essays, “self-portraits” and impressions.

Where the sonnets of *Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado* are sectioned off from each other only by their networks of symbols and poetic meter (the structural syllabic break of the sonnet), each of the sonnets in *Un testigo perenne y delatado* is set off from the others by being titled for a particular saint, practice, or quality. That he begins with San Juan de la Cruz is notable, for the saint, like Sarduy, was a writer, philosopher and intellectual. His work coincided with the height of the counterreformation, and he would therefore have been framed, in life, by the baroque

---

172 Sarduy’s aesthetic connection to Catholicism reaches its pinnacle in *Christ on the Rue Jacob*, his final published work, with which this chapter concludes.
aesthetics that characterized that period. In neat ekphrastic moment, his priory was depicted by El Greco in his view of Toledo, unifying the themes of history, painting, writing, and memory. The way the sonnets interact with each other is both complex and nuanced—each is titled after a saint, quality, or practice, but often these derive or suggested by the sonnet that preceded them. *San Juan de la Cruz* is therefore followed by Teresa de Ávila; the two were the most important Spanish mystical thinkers of their time. Likewise, the sonnet titled *Teresa de Ávila* engages immediately with a representation outside of poetry, scolding a contemporary painter for producing a likeness of her that Sarduy deems “ugly.” The texts then, quickly reveal themselves to be more than poems—they are explicit acts of criticism, ekphrastic encounters, and structural experiments. It is also worth noting that Saint Theresa is both the subject of an iconic work of Baroque art, Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, and that that works is in turn inspired by her distinctively corporeal mysticism as represented in her descriptions of her visitation by Saint Michael. The absorption of these two mystical figures into his poetic text is representative of Sarduy’s broader poetics—a network of discursive and aesthetic practices wherein texts continually and mutually inform and transform each other. By evoking the image of Saint Theresa, and touching upon and critiquing a representation of her, Sarduy has opened the expressive and critical possibilities of his work, creating an artistic performance of criticism and philosophy.

History and landscape, as I mentioned earlier, play an important role in Sarduy’s poetics. In this series, Sarduy seems to be creating a kind of genealogy of religious, iconic influence—he situates himself not only within the art-historical canon, but in relation to his contemporaries and other writers and painters of his time, dedicating sonnets to Borges and Matta. Similarly, as a Cuban, he mimetically reproduces in his poetics the Cuban syncretization of Yoruba culture
with Catholicism: the mystic baroque icons that begin the sonnets give way to a series named for Afro-Cuban orishas: Ochún, Obatalá and so forth. From the broad pantheon of Afro-Cuban deities, the ones Sarduy has selected to include are telling. They are, certainly, among the most important and major ones—Ochún, for instance, is synchretized with the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, one of the most iconic of Cuban deities. As we shall see, however, the Orishas that are represented are notable not only for being major figures in the pantheon: each one represents an important theme in Sarduy’s poetics. Furthermore, the order in which they appear can be read as illustrating the development of particular themes in Sarduy’s life and writings. By structurally showing the cultural mixings and ambiguities of Cuba, Sarduy situates himself not only iconographically, but culturally and historically.

The section on orishas begins with “Olofi, Olordumare, Olorun.” This can be read as signaling a point of poetic genesis, a mutable and powerful place of creativity and flux. This three-named deity is the supreme god of the Yoruba traditions imported into Cuba with the Middle Passage: Olofi is devoid of gender and has three manifestations—which map synchretically onto the godhead of the Catholic trinity. In this way Sarduy conceptually evokes the transition—the uniquely Caribbean transformation—from the Baroque Spanish figures he evoked earlier to a new cosmology presided over by a non-gendered god with multiple names and a triplicate nature. This poetics of creative genesis is further underlined by its textual echoing of the book of Genesis, itself: like the Old Testament, Sarduy begins this new moment in the poem with the simple words “At the beginning” (“al principio”). Like the breath of the Old Testament god upon the waters, this opaque, beginning world, exists as the unlimited conscience of the divine, “la conciencia ilimitada y ardiente de Olofi.” From the beginning point of Olofi’s consciousness, Sarduy sets the scene for a poetics of a world becoming: “Del universo
la esencia va a surgir.” Essence, or totality, are not yet achieved, but are always on the brink of emerging, always in a process of coming into being. Furthermore, as we have seen in Glissant’s poetics and in Benítez Rojo’s theories, among many others (Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite), the echo of the ocean is always present. The verb “surge” is a particularly telling one: if, in Hindu poetics, the world is danced into being by Shiva’s body, the world of Sarduy’s Caribbean ineluctably surges—wavelike. The very stability of time is undone by this surging—if we have a world on the point of becoming, Sarduy immediately opposes it with another possibility: “O surgió dentro/de un tiempo sin tiempo.” By contrasting the emerging world—the pre-phenomenon moment in time—with a moment situated within a paradoxically timeless time, Sarduy echoes the surging motion of his cosmology and poetics—an unstable back and forth where the only fixed characteristic is impermanence—the lack of fixity. In this surging poetics we can read a world view premised on encounter—an aesthetic and conceptual affinity for, and proximity to, Glissant’s relation. Sarduy’s time without time, metered by the inexorably surging sea, is echoed by Glissant’s assertion, in Le sel noir, “c’est le temps de dénouer ce temps, d’avoir/pour balance la mer et pour mesure le sel noir.” This undoing of time frames the creative genesis of Sarduy’s world, which his poems enact. Furthermore, the time resolves not into stasis, but into encounter, as Sarduy writes, “Encuentro de opuestos.” It is towards this encounter between opposites that Sarduy’s poetic time moves, concluding with the simultaneous remoteness and intimacy of the natural landscape: “Aunque distante la llamarada es cegante del Sol. Un ojo en el centro.” The blinding but distant sun stands in for the godhead, who, metonymized into an eye, sees even as he blinds.

As I have mentioned, the order in which Sarduy invokes the orishas, and the orishas he chooses to invoke, are emblematic of key themes in his writing and life. One of the key themes,
the constant ekphrastic back-and-forth between painterly and lyrical, visual and verbal vocabularies, is in evidence in Sarduy’s treatment of the Orishas, who are brought to life in the poems by their visual iconography—associated colors, ritual objects, and so forth—as by the words Sarduy chooses to describe them. Sarduy constructs a highly complex edifice in which imagery, verbiage, and sequence rely upon a rich network of signification, history, and ritualized practice to echo or suggest the themes that concern him.

If the multi-faceted Olofi, fluid of name and gender, provides the overarching introduction to the genesis of Sarduy’s poetics, it is highly logical, within his symbolic order, that he be followed by Elegua, a deity strongly associated with roads and travel. Even if Sarduy often and emphatically rejected (for himself) the label of exile, insisting that he remained a Cuban through and through, who merely happened to live in Paris, travel and movement are nonetheless unarguably crucial factors in his life and writing. This geographic fluidity is echoed by a refusal of ontological stasis; just as, with Olofi, he called into question the notion of fixed or identifiable time, here Sarduy’s elegiac words are for a deity who occupies interstitial spaces, even as, paradoxically, he embodies and engenders both beginnings and endings: “Ni comienzos hay, ni fines/sin él, pues yace y vigila/tras la puerta, donde oscila un trompo de colorines.”

Situated in a doorway, observing, Eleggua’s iconography guides us—even as, for Sarduy, Eleggua is a guide (“guardian, mensajero, guía”), further into a space of oscillating, gaudy colors, of transporting aesthetic experience. In the conclusion to this sonnet, Sarduy introduces a fascinating detail that will appear again: that of identifying the orishas with the animals that ought to be given them as offerings, or with the colors to be worn when praying to them. For Elegguá, he offers “un ratón. O una jutía.” Invoking in this way the magical use of bodies in these complex rituals serves as a perfect juncture into the next sonnet, to Obatalá, who, tellingly,

173 Un testigo perene y delatado, 230
is, in Yoruba mythology, the creator of human bodies. He is, as Sarduy writes, “el dueño de las cabezas.” By setting up this particular sequence of associations with Orishas and their rituals and emblems, Sarduy sublimes their iconographies and their stories into compositional elements of his own poetic concerns: creation, geography, his body.

For Changó, as for Obatalá, Sarduy relies upon their associated rituals as modes of representation, and upon his painterly vocabulary to evoke, through color, the god of fire, lightning and thunder, repeating, almost liturgically, “rojo y blanco, blanco y rojo.”

Even as he evokes the orishas one by one, Sarduy remains concerned with encounters and parallels. Consequently, the Ibeyis appear, a twinned set of deities, sons of Ochún (who precedes them in the sonnets), and who stand in for the paradoxical unity and individuation of encounter. As Sarduy writes, “De dos en dos van las aguas,” and then, crucially, “iguales y diferentes.” In this way, Sarduy uses the image of the Ibeyis to suggest the entwining of subjectivities that is manifest throughout his work.

Babalú Ayé is, in the mythologies of Yoruba and Santería practices, associated with illness. Paralleling the decay of his own body, Sarduy uses brief, evocative lines and words to invoke the deity that would later come to be, fittingly, associated with AIDS, as though the figure can stand, in its iconic solemnity and solidity, for the “impure” decaying body. Beginning with all the markers of illness, Sarduy moves towards wholeness or purity (or, at a minimum, the possibility of redemption, writing, first “Tela zurcida y oscura/ Vendas. LLagas purulentas/que sudan sobre las cuentas de las suturas.” These lines would seem to reduce the body to the signs of its illness. There no longer seems to be any way of imagining the body outside of the markers of disease: “Ni otra forma, ni más pura/del cuerpo que se quebranta.”

\[^{174} Un testigo perene y delatado, 231 \]
\[^{175} 232 \]
suggest, no pure, Platonic form of the body remains, beyond the fragmented, decaying
deoeshadowings of death—the darkened cloths, the bandages, the festering sores. However, in
evoking Lazarus ("San Lázaro te levanta), Sarudy would seem to be, at least, hoping for a kind
of spiritual redemption for failing flesh.

This transformation finds its echo in the next transition between sonnets, for Sarduy
invokes Olokun. Two elements of Olokun’s mythology and iconography are important here:
first, that Olokun is a hybrid deity, half man, half fish; and second, that this hybrid being
occupies a hybrid space, serving as a transition between history and present and between the
human world and the spirit world. Fittingly, Sarduy does not describe Olukun explicitly, but
rather describes Olokun through a veil of deferred consciousness; “En sueño lo vi una vez.” In
this way, Olokun occupies a transitional space in the artist’s perception as well—not the hyper-
colored warrior-figure of Shangó, but a set of features perceived in a dream.

Fittingly, the section of sonnets dedicated to the Orishas concludes with an invocation of
Yemayá, goddess of moons and tides. This conclusion evokes, as do his beginnings, the
implacable movement of the sea, and its interaction with the moon. In a sense, this sonnet brings
us back towards a poetics of encounter, as Sarduy concludes, “contra marea y viento
remaré/hasta la otra orilla.” The test he must pass is the test posed by “el mar austero”— he must
placate, in other words, the sea-born implications of history, in order to reach the distant shore.
This engagement with the elements, and the ultimate authority of the sea, place the poet into a
perpetual dialogue with the other—with the opposing shore, which he must seek, against all
odds, and against the workings of the elements themselves, to reach.

Sarduy’s extensive, complex, and deeply resonant oeuvre merits an in-depth study unto
itself. As a critic, writer, and multi-media painter, he inhabited and enacted a fluid and
cosmopolitan artistic practice that illuminates important developments, tendencies, and philosophies in twentieth-art. Notably, he shares, with the thinkers and writers who make up this study, a deeply thoughtful and self-critical artistic practice, that evolves and transforms itself according to phenomenological and philosophical dictates—a series of attempts at reflecting, absorbing, and transmitting subjective and cultural experiences. The various facets of this practice are simultaneously rigorous in and of themselves, and inextricable from each other—as the philosophy transforms, so does the work.

In his practice and use of materials, Sarduy both derives from, and develops the strain of highly emobodied, physical, philosophical and aesthetic praxis I have examined in the course of this study. In his writing, the prevalent fascination with skin and scars recalls Glissant’s historical and physical traces, and the scarred, howling, dismembered bodies of Césaire. In his painting, the use of the interior and exterior components of bodies human and not—blood, bark—absorb the physical body into the visual vocabulary, enacting the impossibility of separating the artistic work from the embodied experience. In this way, he transcends genre yet again, verging nearly into the twentieth-century development of radical performance art, in which, to use Marina Abramovic’s memorable phrase, “The artist is present.” Sarduy’s body, and his blood, are permanently present in his visual work.

Sarduy also occupies a particular nexus in that he draws from and transforms both Cuban and French artistic and literary traditions. The syncretic evocations of the Orishas exist in a dynamic, generative tension within a critical discourse inflected by the radical reading and interpretive practices that developed largely in Paris between the 1960’s and the 1980’s. In this sense, Sarduy represents one of those particular strains, or channels, that provide a metonymic snapshot of the cosmopolitan, intercultural, interdisciplinary nature of twentieth century
modernist- and post-modernist artistic production, a strain that is evocative of both the crises and potential that the cultural and literary clashes and transformations of the twentieth century engendered.

If this work engages deeply with Sarduy’s experience—privileging the deeply personal, memorial, and subjective—it also metonymically expands that experience into the broader history of the Caribbean—which, ineluctably, is described by and inscribed in the economies and sociologies of globalization. Sarduy paints with his own blood, but he also paints with coffee—a lifeblood of both the physical economies of colonized countries, and the symbolic cultural economics of Cuban identity. Here we perceive the influence of Lam, who absorbed into his vocabulary, as Glissant pointed out, the vertical visuality of the sugarcane fields, the beating heart of the plantation economy, reworked after the revolution into a compulsory source of revolutionary pride, and another key component of Cuban cultural identity (who is not familiar with Celia Cruz’s cry of “Azúcar!”?).

The interdisciplinary nature of Sarduy's work is one of its most important and distinguishing characteristics. As a critic and writer, Sarduy wrote culturally- sociologically- and historically-dense essays and deeply lyrical literary analyses. This kind of transgressive, highly subjective critical practice both echoed the long strain of intercultural production I've examined here, and foresaw many of the installation and performance driven artistic practices of the late twentieth century. It is essential to recall, as well, that this generic instability doubled a kind of subjective instability— Sarduy dealt at the margins and intersections of histories, countries, and genres, and could never be entirely comfortable situated solely within a single one.

It is in this sense that the notion of exile becomes such a fascinatingly permeable and inescapable one for Sarduy's work, which has reverberations in interpreting the other artists
investigated here. If there is one word that has colored discourse about Cuba for the past 60 years, it is the idea of exile: a word, a group, a state of being, a force. And yet Sarduy, despite sharing many of the traits and experiences that drove so many into the state, and the identity, of exile--homosexuality, political heterodoxy--chose explicitly and emphatically to reject the label of exile. In this way, he remains a highly privileged subject, refusing the identity-based hegemonies of both the interior and exterior bodies: the Cubans in Cuba, and the Cubans outside.

A crucial element in the way Sarduy reworks notions of identity through the instability of exile is the juxtaposition of Cuban and French literary and visual traditions. As in the poems I examined earlier, the presence of the Orishas, the high archetypes or "African powers" in the Cuban religious syncretism of Santeria, shows a highly indigenous, specific, and deeply local vocabulary. If the Orishas have rough analogues in other traditions--the loa of Haitian vodou or the orixas, nkisi, and vodun of Brazilian candomble--they are nonetheless distinctively Cuban strains in the broader cosmology of Afro-American religions. This use of distinctively Cuban archetypal figures in his poetry maintains a rooted sense of place and culture even as Sarduy experiments with space, place, and content.

The deep localization of evocative figures is given an equally important treatment in Sarduy's mode of seeing images and practices from the Western tradition as well. The essential moment in Christ on the Rue Jacob, his last essay to be published and a work which is in many ways emblematic of his broader themes. As Sarduy views a paragon of European painting through the frame of Paris, he distills all the complexities of exile, belonging, travelling, and aesthetic experience that run through the works I've looked at here. Indeed, as a Cuban in his adopted city, experiencing a formal and canonical piece of European artistic production framed by a particular street in Paris at a particular point in time, Sarduy conveys the ineffable qualities
of exile. Unexiled, Sarduy's written experience of painting conveys the transformative shifts of body and blood across genre, time, and space.
Conclusion

The artists, practices, and tendencies addressed in this study are demonstrative of some of the key themes and currents in twentieth-century artistic production. The renewed privileging of the subjective, intermingling of genres, and fluidity of adaptation and reinterpretation that they share are all part of the greater discourses and concerns of twentieth-century art. They are also, in many ways, illustrative of a century in which critical theoretical approaches to art proliferated and became a privileged mode of discourse unto themselves. In many ways, the artists profiled and examined here are deeply cerebral--concerned with the nuances and interstices of the work, the implications of structure and praxis, and making explicit their own philosophies.

The implications that resulted from examining such complex modalities of artistic expression and cultural production were philosophical and political as well as aesthetically ontological. Because all of these artists engaged, probed, pushed, and negotiated deeply resonant, sensitive, and meaningful boundaries and power hierarchies--race, class, gender, mental “illness,” sexuality, it has been centrally important to find adequate and appropriate theoretical practices, approaches, and vocabulary to engage with and interpret their work. Because this is a comparative study, straddling languages and cultures, it has been imperative from the outset to avoid dominating one artist with philosophical or cultural implications alien, inappropriate, or contradictory to his or her work. Conversely, because the works are dense with nuance and rich with implication unto themselves, the first challenge was to avoid an excess of theoretical approaches or critical perspectives. The solution to this was twofold: first, I strove to find a representative theoretical approach informed by each language tradition, but firmly anchored in the Caribbean. The primacy of the Caribbean was important, for it is not truly the opposing
geographical points of discourse, but the traffic in, across, and through which they intersect that has been the guiding point and inspiration of this study.

It is for this reason that the critical perspectives furnished by Glissant and Benítez Rojo were so important, and necessary as a first chapter. Such critically nuanced, geographically specific, and historically informed approaches represent the best incarnation for my purposed of the radically open postmodern reading practices that proliferated from the middle to the end of the twentieth century. Glissant’s critical approach and position, as a writer born of the *département* with a *formation* completed in the highest enclaves of French education, illuminate and enact the central tensions, encounters, and dialogues I strove to undertake and describe. Similarly, Benítez Rojo’s approach is deeply inflected by European, and specifically French literary, anthropological, and philosophical influences, even as its nuances, history, and affect are distinctly and undeniably Caribbean (in general) and Cuban (specifically). The exercise of finding coherent and appropriate critical approaches and putting them into dialogue was structurally and conceptually important in maintaining integrity of both practice and interpretation. My goal in so doing was to put into practice the dialogic, translational, ekphrastic practices that drew me to these artists-- and often them to each other-- in the first place.

A particularly crucial element, and one informed the study throughout, was Glissant’s notion of a *poetique de la relation*. It is not only the states and movements of relation and encounter that were so necessary in theoretically and methodologically framing this study: the idea and possibilities of the Glissantian poetique, and the ways in which Glissant himself deployed them, proved critical in assessing and interpreting a wide range of seemingly disparate works in different languages and mediums. By expanding the mechanics and operations of poetics beyond the boundaries of the actual poem (as Glissant does, for instance, in applying
poetic structures and strategies of reading to the visual workings of Wifredo Lam’s aesthetics), I was able to move more fluidly, and clearly, through the ekphrastic, translational, and adaptive strategies of the artists whose work I examined.

Similarly, Benítez Rojo’s use of deeply carnal, embodied metaphors-- the Caribbean not as the cliched womb, but as vagina in the act of birthing-- supplied the ideal form of lyrical, literarily performative criticism that the works I addressed required.

If it was necessary to ground my approach in geographic and temporal specificity, it was equally important to understand the works being studied within a broader literary and art historical context. It is for this reason that what began as a study of twentieth-century artistic endeavors could not be strictly confined or understood by a strict timeline beginning with the year 1900. It quickly became clear that the roots of many of these practices, and some of the reasons for their emergence, extended much further back. At the same time, because the study encompassed so many complex artists, and was ambitious in both scope and concept, it required conscious and precise anchoring and framing-- a key beginning point that would provide both temporal and conceptual structure. In order to accomplish this, I researched extensively artists who met some key criteria. Some of these criteria are obvious-- I limited the research to Cuban and Francophone artists, rather than extending too broadly into the hispanophone Caribbean. I also sought, as much as possible, to engage with visual artists who were preoccupied by the dynamics of corporeality and physical, carnal, outlines, and practiced highly figurative representations-- bodies, abstracted or not, had to play an explicit role in their visual vocabulary. Finally, the artists had to have a documented correspondence or relationship with the writers in question-- because the nuances of communication were complex and often highly conceptual, the
nature of the correspondence or influence itself-- grounded, documented, and demonstrable-- had to provide a grounding, structuring influence.

It was for this reason, which yielded several other major considerations, that Julian del Casal’s correspondence with Gustave Moreau provided an ideal beginning point. First, Julian del Casal lived in Cuba at a pivotal moment in its history, and was a native of the capital, perfectly positioned to profit from the developing internationalism of the period and situated to receive correspondence, publications, and other material from abroad that was not likely to be available in the more remote provinces. Secondly, he occupied a complex social position-- born into, and educated as, a son of the ruling class, he was nonetheless marginalized by the loss of his family’s fortunes, and by his own long physical illnesses, sensitive nature, and homosexuality. This status as internal exile, an uneasy state of ambiguous alterity that would color his works and inflect his desire to look beyond the geographical, cultural, and conceptual boundaries of his situation, foreshadows and appears in all of the other artists I examined in the study. Finally, the complexities and nuances of his correspondence with Moreau, and the foundational ekphrastic gesture of transforming monumental history painting into deeply personal sonnets, set the stage for many of the major questions that I delved into in the later chapters. Particularly revealing was the fact that what had originally seemed a problem-- the one-sidedness of the correspondence and Moreau’s seeming disregard for the young poet made the relationship legible as problematically self-marginalizing and Eurocentric, was resolved by two key research insights. Reading Julian del Casal’s carefully crafted letters as part and parcel of his literary practice, rather than as merely functional documents, illuminated a broader range and complexity to his work, and a more complicated sense of agency. The superficial inequality of the relationship, rather than minimizing its significance or applicability, evoked a whole range of
iterations and implications for collaboration, dialogue, and adaptation that deeply informed, and were transformed within, the artistic practices that followed. Furthermore, as I demonstrated in the first chapter, Casal’s poetic relationship to Moreau’s painting went much farther than mere copying or adaptation-- rather it became a process of absorption and transformation, whereby Moreau’s visual poetics were rendered different, and wholly new, by being reworked and reborn in Casal’s literary language.

Working with Casal’s correspondence with Moreau provided an essential structural, thematic, conceptual, and historical anchor for addressing the incredibly diverse dialogues, collaborations, and correspondences that followed. In the way that Glissant and Benítez Rojo provided a necessary critical and philosophical approach, the relationship between Casal and Moreau yielded the first granular example of the modalities of practice and cultural production I traced in the chapters that followed.

Particularly striking was the central significance of Salome. While much has been written about the story itself, and about its prevalence and significance in the nineteenth century, current ways of reading, seeing, and describing culture and artistic production provide further avenues for study and interpretation. While mine has been primarily a textual, literary comparative study, there is much room for investigation in comparative cultural studies. In many ways, the structures underpinning nineteenth-century Salomania are more closely tied to patterns in cultural or economic, than strictly artistic production. Characterized by fascination, rapid proliferation, and hyper-replication (the qualities that are now generally grouped under the modifier “viral”), the cultural phenomenon of Salomania may closely linked to patterns guiding growth patterns in economics. In this way, some of the comparative, cross-cultural perspectives that have served to guide this research might have useful and usable implications, for gaining
broader understandings of the cultural, social, and economic implications and patterns of phenomena grounded in the visual arts. The structural, semantic, and practical similarities between spectacle and speculation could provide a fascinating matrix for investigating these connections.

The transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth is evident in the concerns and approaches of Antonin Artaud and Anais Nin. The challenge in framing their dialogue was that it was among the least explicitly captured. Nin was initially drawn to Artaud as a fetishized friend, and the influence of his work on hers is more nebulous--philosophical, conceptual, and inspirational, rather than strictly adaptational.

By returning to Artaud’s own interactions with figuration, image, and text, I was able to examine how his concerns, and practices, are morphed and translated, and re-emerge, in Nin’s unique artistic practice. Artaud himself is so wide ranging--not only as a producer of work, but as a physical figure unto himself, who inspired film-makers and painters--that it proved necessary to focus on very particular aspects of his work, and to examine the mechanics and structure of their composition. This task was both helped and complicated by the fact that Artaud developed, as did the others, his own poetics and his own philosophy. The concept of the nerve-meter, for example was crucial both in interpreting Artaud’s work and in informing the modalities that structured the interpretation.

Examining Artaud also added an interesting and subtle dimension to the question of exile, which reappeared throughout the study. Like Moreau, Artaud was a distinctively French artist who, with a few notable exceptions, spent most of his time on French soil. In this regard, his exile functioned internally--he felt, and often enacted in his art, a deep alienation not only from the culture that surrounded him but from his peers, fellow artists, and friends. In a Foucauldian
sense, the structures of his madness functioned in an analogous way to the structures of political
exile, creating in his life, and work, a sense of dislocation and alterity that appears and reappears,
both structurally and thematically. Reading the implications of exile and madness in Artaud’s text
provided a necessary background for the various nuances and readings of exile that pervade all
of these works.

In contrast to Artaud’s practice of figurative renderings and multi-media images and texts
to engage questions of subjectivity and self, Anais Nin, who claimed him as a major influence
and sometime lover, provided an evocative counterpoint. Nin’s central concerns in her diaristic
practice were her own body, identity, and construction or invention of selfhood. The inter-genre
experiments of Artaud find an elegant evolution in her work: by using different registers of
language, and choosing to work in a filtered second language that straddles memoir and
translation, Nin created a structurally appropriate practice for her project of identity and memory.
The notion of the *Diary* itself is a complicating and ambiguous one to begin with. The current
controversies regarding authenticity, truth, and memoir, as in the affairs of James Frey and other
prominent authors, are a powerful testament to the lasting relevance of these questions: the lines
not only between truth and fiction, but between truth and constructed language, remain highly
relevant.

If Artaud and Nin were not terribly far removed from Wifredo Lam and Aime Cesaire in
chronological terms, they were separated by a vast geographic distance and by questions of
identity that might have made it difficult, initially, to discern affinities or similar tendencies in
their practices. What joins them first and foremost, is the massively significant influence of
Surrealism, though it affected them in different ways. Lam and Cesaire were in many ways much
more explicitly involved with the Surrealist project and its concerns. Lam after all, illustrated the
work of Surrealism’s founder, Andre Breton; it would be difficult to manage a more direct connection to mainstream, continental Surrealism. At the same time, Lam’s extensive traveling, combined with his rootedness in Cuban traditions, concerns, and forms, prevented a full-scale, lifelong commitment of the type Breton was famous for demanding and seeking to enforce among other Surrealists, and enabled him to develop a cosmopolitan, idiosyncratic vocabulary that merged Surrealist practices with a Caribbean sensibility, iconography, and mythos.

The concern with reworking mythology, transforming it and making it appropriate, relevant, and organic to the Caribbean experience(s) proved an important defining facet in the artistic production of both Lam and Cesaire. Lam transformed into his own, unmistakably Afro-Cuban visual vocabulary the themes of Surrealized European mythology, as in Fata Morgana, and evoked new potential shapes through his reinvention of traditional portraiture. By creating distinctively Caribbean hybridized bodies, Lam created a new vocabulary for explaining the Caribbean to itself and to the world, in relation to itself and to the world.

Cesaire, in his poetics, similarly reworked images and themes from legend and myth. In the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, he offers a long-form, lyrical poem as a corrective to prescriptive European histories, with the bodies of enslaved Africans taken apart and reformed again and again even as the narrative stutters, shudders, changes course and begins again. In his dramatic and lyric poetry, this becomes ever more granular: subjects become individuated, the field of vision narrows. In his poem to (or for, or about) Wifredo Lam, Cesaire addresses not only a person, but that person’s work, adapting the composite elements of Lam’s visual practice (horses’ manes; wings) back into a poetic structure. By evoking sound and image, Cesaire generates a poetics of openness, where genres intermingle and are transformed across bodies and identities.
Among the collaborations I studied here, that between Lam and Cesaire was likely the most intimate. The two were lifelong friends and collaborators (in his poetry Cesaire referred to Lam as his brother in the “combats of justice”), and the shape of their rapport tends to be more balanced in tone than those between Casal and Moreau or Artaud and Nin. Whether the similarity of their origins is responsible for this merits for further study. Casal was separated by Moreau by space, age, and status, and sexuality and Nin from Artaud by gender and background. If Cesaire and Lam were able to form a closer rapport, it may simply be attributable to their alterity--states by which others might diminish them--being more roughly analogous. The full range of their collaboration merits extensive further study. Indeed, because this has been an investigation primarily of their poetic, aesthetic, and narrative practices, there is much additional to be done in examining, first, the convergences and divergences in their political projects and approaches, and, consequently the effects and implications of these in their artistic rapport. Additionally, as in the correspondence between Casal and Moreau, a lengthier study of their literary correspondence is justified and would likely yield compelling insights into the work, legacies, and implications of two monumental figures.

The multifold legacies of Casal and Moreau, Artaud and Nin, and Lam and Cesaire, with their resultant implications and applications, reach a culminating manifestation in the work of Severo Sarduy, whose multiple artistic modalities made him an artist in dialogue with his art and with himself. Born in Cuba, leaving the country, and landing within the fecund critical environment of mid-late twentieth-century Paris, Sarduy presents precisely the unique confluence of histories, currents, philosophies, and artistic concerns I set out to examine in this study. Working in the tradition of French literary criticism, and living in Paris, Sarduy nonetheless refused to be called, or to call himself, an exile. This recalls the uneasiness and
reluctance to embrace a fixed state that is responsible for the important differentiation between creolisation and creolite. By refusing such a loaded and static identity, Sarduy embodied in his life the dynamics and fluidity I have sought to describe across these various comparative studies. Like Cesaire and Lam, Sarduy used the materials, images, words, and traditions of his own culture in dialogue with French traditions, transcending boundaries of genre, space, and place to create his own vocabulary and his own narrative structure. The elements he used were thematic as often as they were physical: his textual poetics incorporated the mythology of santería; his visual poetics were composed of coffee and blood. Sarduy enacted the carnal concerns of the Caribbean artistic practices this study concerns, painting with his own poetic body.

The implications and applications of these visual and discursive practices for evolving twenty-first century art forms are vast, and provide a rich field for future study. Two genres and modes of artistic practice that emerged at the end of the twentieth century and are established modalities in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first are performance art and digital media.

The themes of new mythology, ekphrasis, dialogue, collaboration, and the role of the body take on entirely new significance and dimensions within these contexts. Globalization and the spread of information and technology present intriguing new possibilities for intercultural collaboration, conversation, and exchange. Throughout the world, digitized media practices have become outlets for both political protest (as in Iran’s Green Revolution, or in the massive media campaign around the Russian band Pussy Riot), and vehicles for artistic expression (Pulitzer-prize winner Jennifer Egan and critic, author, and novelist Teju Cole have both used Twitter as a medium, guideline and parameter not unlike the Oulipian constraint). Cuban artists, meanwhile, are often operating at an uneasy juncture, practicing and thinking these arts within a particular set
of parameters-- political, economic, and logistical constraints within the island itself, and the tangled dynamics of three generations of exile and uncertainty about the future within the diaspora community.

The flexibility, universality, and technological agility of these new mediums, combined with the global stature and adaptability of performance art, open extensive, unprecedented avenues for examining the implications of body, identity, and space.
Bibliography


Kemedjio, Cilas. "Glissant's Africas: From Departmentalization to the Poetics of Relation."


Adler and Pointon, eds. The Body Imaged

Bataille, Georges :
- Anus Solaire
- L’Erotisme

Chandler, “Butler on Bodies” in American Philosophical Quarterly

Chen and Moglen, eds. Bodies in the Making: Transgressions and Transformations

Hussey, Andrew The Beast at Heaven’s Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Trangression

Kemedjio, Cilas, “Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgean to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Édouard Glissant”(Research in African Literatures)

Kemp and Wallace, eds. Spectacular Bodies

Meijer and Prins, “How Bodies Come to Matter”: An Interview with Judith Butler, in Chicago Journals

Said, Edward “Vico on the Discipline of Bodies and Texts”

Tabares, Carson and Schechner, “Caribbean Bodies, Migrations and Spaces of Resistance”, in TDR

Batchelor, David; Wood, Paul; Fer; Briony. Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars

Baudrillard, Jean The Conspiracy of Art

Michel Leiris on Lam

Max Pol Fouchet on Lam

Fernando Ortiz “Las visiones del cubano Lam”
Suzanne Garrigues “Cultura y revolución en la eterna presencia de Wifredo Lam, in Plástica del Caribe (Havana 1988)

*Carpentier on Lam (see below)
*Fage editions Nantes Exhibition Catalogue) Wifredo Lam Voyages entre caraïbes et avant-gardes ("ce que vraiment élargit ma peinture, c'est la présence de la poésie africaine")

Carpentier, Alejo
“Un pintor de América: El cubano Wifredo Lam”.

Cabrera, Lydia:
- Cuentos negros de Cuba
- Refranes de Negros Viejos

Corticelli, María Rita, El Caribe universal: La obra de Antonio Benítez Rojo

Leotin, Terese Lespri Lanme –La génie de la mer, contes marins des Antilles

Lezama Lima, José:
- Paradiso
- Poemas

Montero, Oscar, “Casal and Maceo: Art, War and Race in Colonial Havana”

Mosquera, ed. Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America. Esp:
- Andrea Giunta, “Strategies of Modernity in Latin America” ;
- Pierre E Bocquet “The Visual Arts and Créolité;
- Gerardo Mosquera, “Modernism from Afro America: Wifredo Lam”

Sarduy, Severo Obra Completa

Schwartz, Marcy Writing Paris: Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction

Wakefield, Steven Carpentier’s Baroque Fiction: RetAbella, Alex. Santeria. Milano:


Barnard, Tim, and Nathalie Bondil. Cuba: Art and History, from 1868 to Today. Montréal:


