6-3-2016

Transatlantic Surrealisms, Imagined Homelands, and the Poetry of Paul Laraque

Maxine C. Anderson

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 Comparative Literature Commons, French and Francophone Literature Commons, and the Latina/o Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1324

This Thesis 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.
TRANSATLANTIC SURREALISMS, IMAGINED HOMELANDS, 
AND THE POETRY OF PAUL LARAQUE

by

MAXINE ANDERSON

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016
Transatlantic Surrealisms, Imagined Homelands, and the Poetry of Paul Laraque

by

Maxine Anderson

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Advisor Name

Thesis Advisor

Date

EO Name

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Transatlantic Surrealisms, Imagined Homelands, and the Poetry of Paul Laraque

by

Maxine Anderson

Advisor: Dr. Peter Hitchcock

Many theoretical treatments of Caribbean and Latin American surrealism(s), most notably Fredric Jameson and Alejo Carpentier’s foundational essays on magical realism, argue that the surrealism of the European metropole is a sophisticated avant-garde movement, in contrast to the blunt tool of Caribbean and Latin American surrealism which reaches back toward a precolonial past in order to bolster a nationalist project. Existing critical writing about Paul Laraque, a Haitian poet and surrealist identifies Laraque as Haitian first and foremost: as a political poet using surrealism solely in support of a nationalist project. This reading of Laraque’s work fails to reckon with Laraque’s literary and personal relations with French surrealists in the Caribbean, particularly André Breton, as well as his subsequent exile in New York and his close affective ties and correspondence with Beat poets and the American avant-garde. In this thesis, I propose a project that positions Paul Laraque’s work as not merely a Haitian nationalist project but as also embedded within a network of Atlantic and diasporic flows and counterflows. In doing so, I will consider existing theoretical work suggesting this cross-Atlantic network and will re-read Laraque’s life and poetry in support of this conceptual understanding of the avant-garde.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction..................................................................................................................................1

II. Surrealism and Nationalism........................................................................................................4

III. Paul Laraque in Haitian Discourse..........................................................................................15

IV. Haiti and the Atlantic................................................................................................................24

V. Laraque and the Avant-Garde....................................................................................................34

VI. *Les armes quotidiennes* and Laraque’s influence(s)...............................................................42

VII. Conclusion..............................................................................................................................50

Bibliography...................................................................................................................................54
I. Introduction

The intellectual history of surrealism(s) in the Americas is a tangled and thorny one, imbricated as it is with the history of colonialism and with the exoticizing and commodifying of the New World — not just of its resources but also of its cultural artifacts. Much academic and critical writing on the subject reflects this complicated and obfuscatory history, and takes care to distinguish the “surrealism” of the European or North American metropole from that of Latin America or the Caribbean. This is particularly evident in the broad (and, lately, critically contested) application of the term “magical realism” to any form of New World surrealism or anti-realism in order to drive home this distinction. Foundational essays on magical realism, particularly Alejo Carpentier’s “On the Marvelous Real in America” and Fredric Jameson’s “On Magic Realism in Film” emphasize this point, presenting Latin American and Caribbean surrealism as a blunt tool reaching back toward a precolonial past in order to bolster a nationalist project, in contrast to the sophisticated avant-garde project of European surrealism.

Existing critical writing (of which there is very little) about Paul Laraque, a Haitian poet, surrealist, and political activist, falls along these same lines; it identifies Laraque as Haitian first and foremost, and as a political poet using the tools of surrealism specifically for the purpose of supporting a Haitian nationalist project. Though Laraque was certainly political, and although a liberationist, Marxist, and anti-imperialist current runs through his work as well as in his life, this position gives a somewhat inaccurate picture of Laraque’s work, and is reflective of the larger trend implied in the critical conversation about surrealism. This erases a number of very real cultural exchanges among participants in these movements as well as failing to reckon with European Surrealism’s fairly significant debts to the work of artists and poets in the Americas.
Taking into account these trans-Atlantic currents, it is particularly interesting to note that the non-Haitian Carpentier originally published “On the Marvelous Real in America” as the preface to his novel *The Kingdom of this World*, which glorifies Haiti as a site which is exceptionally productive of surreal happenings.

Paul Laraque’s work is positioned within a context of international, cross-cultural, and trans-Atlantic exchange; and so too is it embedded within an existing network of Atlantic and diasporic flows and counterflows that shape both his work and the framework of Caribbean and Latin American surrealism as a whole. Avant-garde movements in the Old and New World may have distinct aesthetic and political features, but they have both shaped and been shaped by each other. This network of the Atlantic and of Atlantic exchange has been suggested previously, most notably by the work of Ian Baucom and Antonio Benitez-Rojo, but has rarely been applied to surrealism as a cultural movement and has even more rarely been used to consider surrealist texts rather than visual materials. Laraque’s poetry is a particularly apt site for pushing against existing narratives of surrealism and reconsidering how surrealist movements reciprocally inform each other across the Atlantic; his literary and personal affinities spread across the Atlantic to Paris and north to New York, and the length of his career as well as his experience in exile allowed him to form close connections not only with the French Surrealists but also with the American Beats, no strangers to surrealist aesthetics themselves.

In this thesis, I propose a project that positions Paul Laraque’s work as not *merely* a nationalist project but as *also* embedded within a network of Atlantic cultural exchange. In order to do so, I will engage with the critical and intellectual history of surrealism in the Caribbean as well as contemporary critiques of this tendency; I will explore Laraque’s current and historical
position in critical writing about Haiti, Haitian literature, and the avant-garde; I will identify archival and historical material linking Laraque to cross- and trans-Atlantic avant-garde movements and individuals; and, finally, I will read Laraque’s poetry — specifically his most explicitly political and surreal book of poetry, *Les armes quotidiennes / Poésie quotidienne* — for further evidence of the trans-Atlantic turn and the transnational affinities identified earlier. I hope that this project will contribute to a reorientation of Laraque’s work as well as the larger critical conversation around surrealism(s) toward the postcolonial, the trans-Atlantic, and the identification of networks and flows of resistance in a larger sense.
II. Surrealism and Nationalism

The critical tradition of an “indigenous surrealism,” though it goes by many names and encompasses a variety of aesthetic practices, can initially be traced back to Alejo Carpentier’s identification of lo real maravilloso. Carpentier’s use of the term is rooted from the beginning in an exceptionalist discourse of the strangeness of the New World, and this discourse takes the Caribbean as its geographical and cultural locus. In “On the Marvelous Real in America,” Carpentier traces a geography of the marvelous (as opposed to the marvelous real) through China, the Soviet Union, and Europe before concluding that “my first inkling of the marvelous real [lo real maravilloso] came to me when...I was lucky enough to visit Henri Christophe’s kingdom — such poetic ruins” (1995, 84). He additionally uses Martinique as a point of reference, referring to the Martinican jungle “with its incredible intertwining of plants and its obscene promiscuity of certain fruit” (1995, 85). Carpentier believes that there is something inherent in and unique to the Caribbean experience that is fundamental to the creation of the marvelous real.

It is interesting to compare this language of fruit and jungle and ruins to that of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, an early conquistador whom Carpentier quotes heavily in his essay. Díaz writes of his discovery of “a world of monarchs crowned with the plumes of green birds, vegetation dating back to the origins of the earth, food never before tasted, drink extracted from cacti and palm trees...” (Carpentier 1995, 83). Carpentier, in his critical work, is careful to distinguish his conception of the marvelous real from that of Díaz, and it is evident that he considers Díaz’s idea of Latin America to be limited and naive. He argues that Díaz “did not realize that in such a world, events tend to develop their own style, their own unique tragedies” (1995, 83). However,
when considering other aspects of Carpentier’s essay — and particularly considering the essay’s relation to the novel *The Kingdom of this World* — it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where (or how) Carpentier and Diaz diverge.

Perhaps the difference here is that Carpentier’s exceptionalism is inherently political — or politicized. Carpentier’s “first inkling” of what he calls *lo real maravilloso* is located at the site of Henri-Cristophe’s ruined kingdom, a location imbued with the weight of political history. Moreover, the climactic moment of marvelousness that Carpentier returns to again and again — the death (and subsequent un-death) of the magical Macandal — is political as well, in the sense that it inaugurates a liberatory uprising:

> [D]uring my stay in Haiti...I found myself in daily contact with something that could be defined as the marvelous real. I was in a land where thousands of men, anxious for freedom, believed in Mackandal’s lycanthropic powers to the extent that their collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution. (1995, 86-87)

This sentiment is characteristic of Carpentier’s view of the work of surrealism: it both creates and is created by the particular, marvelous reality of the Caribbean; further, it both produces and is produced by the political and politicized events of the Caribbean. Again, it is important to consider the implications of Carpentier’s focus on Haiti — the first black republic; the first independent Caribbean state — here. It is easy to read Carpentier’s politicized surrealism as part of an exceptionalist discourse, as it fits neatly into existing discourse concerning Haitian history, which so often emphasizes the political exceptionalism of Haiti.

Fredric Jameson, in “On Magic Realism in Film,” focuses primarily on Carpentier’s exceptionalist and political view of anti-realism when positioning Carpentier in the historical and
critical context of writing about Latin American (and to a lesser extent Caribbean) anti-realisms. Jameson makes the argument that “conceptual problems [with magical realism] emerge most clearly when one juxtaposes the notion of magic realism with competing or overlapping terms” (1986, 301). This is of course evident even within this paper — the English term “magic realism” certainly has a disjuncture with Carpentier’s real maravilloso, or “marvelous real.” The source of this confusion, perhaps, stems from an idea repeated but certainly not originated by Jameson: that magic realism is “a more authentic Latin American realization of what in the more reified European context took the form of surrealism” (1986, 301). Again, this way of thinking grounds the “magic real” in geography rather than in aesthetic principles or in any kind of aesthetic coherence.

The problem with this solution to the slippery “magic real” quickly becomes evident in the essay, as Jameson stretches the term “magic real” to its breaking point in order to include Carpentier, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel García Márquez — his three primary examples of the “magic real” — under one definitionally coherent term. Jameson identifies two particular “turns” in the genre: from the fantastic to the political, and from the political to the anthropological (in essence, these turns represent the generic shift from the work of Borges to Carpentier to García Márquez). He argues that where Borges emphasizes the narration of fantastic events, Carpentier produces “a certain poetic transformation of the object world itself,” again rooting Carpentier’s work in the materiality of the Caribbean experience (1986, 301-302). Jameson also grounds García Márquez’s work in material reality rather than in formal concerns, arguing that after García Márquez, “magic realism…comes to be understood as a kind of narrative raw material
derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village of even tribal myth” (1986, 302).

It is somewhat difficult to understand the distinction Jameson makes, in this essay, between the political and the anthropological — assigning Carpentier to the “political” realm and García Márquez to the “anthropological” world. One could just as easily argue that Carpentier’s work draws from popular myth; he quite literally centers his novel around the existing popular myth of Macandal and the rebellion his death inspired. Yet Jameson discusses only “the problem of the political or mystificatory value” of magical realism in relation to Carpentier, and makes sure to point out that Carpentier (and Miguel Angel Asturias) are examples of “overtly left-wing or revolutionary writers” within the tendency (1986, 302). For Jameson, an anthropological concern with popular myth is somehow distinct from the political or revolutionary aims of this concern — different enough to center a rupture in the magic realist tendency around this distinction, although it is unclear whether Jameson is identifying Carpentier and Asturias as overtly left-wing individuals, or as producing overtly left-wing work.

Again, this confusion reiterates and reemphasizes the fundamental flaw of this essay and of so much critical writing on magic realism: the fact that the term is so often identified with a geographic or cultural “authenticity” rather than aesthetic or formal coherence. This definition of the tendency, by its nature, stretches the term too thin to coherently address formal or aesthetic ruptures. But why is Jameson so focused on land and on authenticity, and why is he so insistent on Carpentier’s political rather than anthropological concern with the Haitian object-world? It may be useful, in this case, to set aside Carpentier’s dubious claim, as a non-Haitian, to the geographic “authenticity” with which Jameson credits him, and consider the work of one of
Carpentier’s contemporaries: Jacques-Stephen Alexis, who, like Carpentier, outlined a detailed manifesto of the “marvelous real.” This manifesto, “Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens,” makes a particularly interesting contribution to the conversation around the magic (or marvelous) real. Alexis’ nationalist assertion — evident even from the title of the manifesto — is that Haiti and Haitians have a unique claim to the marvelous real.

Alexis, though not mentioned in Jameson’s essay, could certainly be described as an “overtly left-wing” writer producing overtly left-wing work, and the political intentions of “Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens” are made clear in the first paragraphs of the essay, which serve as a call-to-arms for Haitian artists. Alexis boldly states that “[l’artiste…doit être un combatant [the artist…must be a combatant]” and that “[l’art] ne s'agit pas de témoigner seulement pour le réel et de l'expliquer, il s'agit de transformer le monde [(art) is not only about showing and explaining the real, it is about changing the world]” (247). It is evident, then, that Alexis is proposing his project of réalisme merveilleux as a hybrid aesthetic/political tool: the most authentic means of achieving the change he believes critically important. This is, of course, reflective of a Marxist impulse on the part of Alexis: compare his assertion to Marx’s, in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” And when reading Alexis, it quickly becomes evident that this longed-for change is not just political but specifically nationalist — Alexis specifically speaks from a Marxist but not internationalist point of view here.

In fact, Alexis’ entire view of art is centered around the nation-state — he argues that the production and consumption of art are national (and perhaps nationalized). Artists, according to Alexis, develop their perspectives on “les tâches présentes de l'art national en fonction de
l'histoire de leur peuple, de ses traditions…de ses espoirs, de ses rêves, de ses certitudes et de ses combats [the present role of the nation’s art according to the history of their people, their traditions…their hopes, their dreams, their struggles]” (247). As one might expect, Alexis emphasizes the weight of history — and not just any history, but the particular history of the artist’s people and of the artist’s nation. Alexis is speaking, in this manifesto, not of the present role of art but of the present role of the nation’s art or national art. So what exactly does Alexis believe about the history, the traditions, the dreams and struggles of Haiti? Despite being Haitian (and not an outsider looking in like Carpentier) Alexis seems to romanticize and exceptionalize Haiti in much the same way as Carpentier does in “On the Marvelous Real in America.”

In fact, Alexis grounds his assertions about the Haitian national character (and, by extension, Haitian artistic and literary production) in reverential references to an indigenous, pre-Columbian past — recalling not only Carpentier’s line of argument, but particularly his citation of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who described a pre-Columbian “world of monarchs” (Carpentier 1995, 83). Alexis comments that “on minimise souvent l’apport taïno dans la culture haïtienne: c’est un tort [the Taíno contribution to Haitian culture is often minimized: this is an injustice]” and proceeds to assert Taíno influence in artistic technique across realms including food, music, festivals, and the decorative arts, particularly pottery and textiles (252). Alexis explicitly links this pre-Columbian world to the modern production of art, clarifying that this is not just a historical connection but is carried through to the present, stating that “en art comme en tout autre domaine nous continuons toujours nos ancêtres et nos héros [in art, as in every other domain, we always carry on the work of our ancestors and our heroes]” (261). Note here that
Alexis is not simply making a link between the Taino and the work of the present day, but glorifying indigenous artistic and cultural practice as both heroic and ancestral.

How does this nationalist political project relate to the aesthetic and formal concerns that Alexis identifies as being fundamental to marvelous realism? The two are intrinsically linked; and, again, Alexis and Carpentier share a similar view of the marvelous real as being culturally and geographically dependent — fundamentally linked to Haiti-as-place. Compare Carpentier’s assertion of legends (particularly those of Henri-Christophe and Macandal) as the most important site of the marvelous real in Haiti with Alexis’ argument that the marvelous real is necessary because “la vie moderne…ralentit la production de légendes et d’un folklore vivant [modern life…slows down the production of legends and of a living body of folklore]” (265). The marvelous real is pressed into service as a tool to struggle against the imposition of the modern (and, as Alexis argues elsewhere in the essay, the European) — but it is not only a revitalization of folklore: it is critical to (and indicative of) Haitianness itself. Alexis argues that because “la réalité n’étant pas intelligible dans tous ses aspects aux membres des collectivités sous-développées, [l’Haitien] transpose naturellement ses notions de relativité et de merveilleux dans sa vision de la réalité quotidienne [reality is not intelligible in all its aspects to members of underdeveloped groups, Haitians naturally transpose their notions of relativity and the marvelous in their vision of everyday reality” (265). Thus, Alexis’ conclusion is that marvelous realism is the best (and, perhaps, the only) way for Haitians to authentically express themselves in the formal, aesthetic realm, precisely because, he argues, their perception of reality is already imbued with the marvelous.
But what, exactly, is so marvelous about Haiti — why does the critical conversation around magic or marvelous realism keep returning, again and again, to this point? Michel-Rolph Trouillot speaks to this concern in his essay “The Odd and the Ordinary.” Though he doesn’t refer to magical or marvelous realism specifically, he presents a brief and thorough history of writing about Haitian strangeness and exceptionalism that may be helpful for untangling Haiti from perhaps reductive suggestions of marvelousness. Trouillot begins his essay by quoting Robert and Nancy Heinl’s “sensationalist” account of Haitian history, *Written in Blood*:

> How does one explain Haiti? What is Haiti? Haiti is the eldest daughter of France and Africa. It is a place of beauty, romance, mystery, kindness, humor, selfishness, betrayal, cruelty, bloodshed, hunger, and poverty. It is a closed and withdrawn society whose apartness, unlike any other in the New World, rejects its European roots. (1990, 3)

This description seems to resonate both with Carpentier’s depiction of Haiti from the outside and Alexis’ depiction from the inside — that of Haiti as exceptional, of Haitian reality as strange, as cruelly beautiful, as unlike any other place both in its mystery and its forms of expression.

Trouillot devotes a section of “The Odd and the Ordinary” to Blair Niles’ writing on Haitian dance in *Black Haiti* — and this critique is particularly relevant for examining Alexis and Carpentier’s claims about Haitian cultural and artistic practices. It is important to note that Trouillot believes the tendency toward Haitian exceptionalism is “not the privy of non-native writers” and is also perpetuated from within, because “the reality is that this fiction is as convenient to the Haitian elites as it is to many foreigners, even though for different reasons” — and certainly his critiques are as applicable to Alexis as they are to Carpentier, even though
Alexis, as a Haitian writer, lays claim to a certain national authenticity (1990, 7). In his essay, Trouillot quotes Niles:

I have watched the head-hunting dance of the Dyaks of Borneo. That was savage enough; primitive enough…but savage as it was, that too had been in a way sophisticated” compared to the dances of Haiti, which “went further back than the hunt [of Borneo]; back to the beginning… (1990, 5)

Trouillot deconstructs Niles’ ambivalent feelings toward the Haitian people, pointing out that while “no one can accuse him of disliking Haitians” — elsewhere in the book, he speaks in defense of the Haitian people and against those who denigrate them — he is nonetheless “attracted to them the way one can be attracted to a sexual fetish or a taboo” (1990, 5).

Niles is an outsider, writing his complicated (and exoticized) admiration for the Haitian people from a foreign perspective — but his description recalls Carpentier’s argument that “whereas in Western Europe folk dancing, for example, has lost all of its magical evocative power, it is hard to find a collective dance in America that does not embody a deep ritual sense and thus create around it a whole process of initiation” (1995, 87). Carpentier is politically and culturally self-aware enough to avoid calling the cultural history of the Caribbean “savage” or “primitive,” as Niles does. But where Niles privileges aberrance and primitivism via a perceived savagery, Carpentier focuses his praise of the marvelous in folk expression on the presence of faith — in essence, a softened version of savagery; and this particular line of inquiry extends beyond dance to other aesthetic practices.

A notable example is Carpentier’s obsession with the miraculous “collective faith” of the Haitians at Macandal’s execution, with the citadel of La Ferrière (“a work without architectural
precedent”), and with Henri Christophe, “more surprising than all of the cruel kings created by
the Surrealists” (1995, 87). For Carpentier, there is “no excuse” for poets and artists who are not
“able to conceive of a valid mysticism or to abandon the most banal habits in order to bet their
souls on the terrifying card of faith” (1995, 86). And Alexis also returns to the question of faith
again and again in “Le réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens” — repeatedly associating Haitian
national art and Haitian national cultural practices with the specific practice of vodou. He writes
that in order to demonstrate the “particular sensibility” of the Haitian

nous citerons le fait que le possédé de notre religion vaudoue arrive parfois à prendre
un fer rouge dans ses mains sans se brûler et le lèche: il grimpe allègrement aux
arbres même s'il est un vieillard, il arrive à danser pendant plusieurs jours et nuits
d'affilée...

[we cite the fact that the person possessed by our religion of vodou can hold a hot iron
in his hands without burning himself, and can even lick it: he can climb trees even
though he is old, he can dance for days and nights in a row…] (265)

This is, of course, a romantic, romanticized, and exceptional view of vodou practice — it turns
the practitioner into spectacle, and spectacle into the Haitian national condition. (And, of course,
Alexis’ entire essay turns on the idea that the marvelous real, as aesthetic practice, is reflective of
the Haitian national condition). But, as Trouillot points out, “[t]he majority of Haitians live quite
ordinary lives. They eat what is for them — and for many others — quite ordinary food. They
die quite ordinary deaths from quite ordinary accidents, quite ordinary tortures, quite ordinary
diseases” (1990, 5). This simple statement has the power to destabilize myths convenient for
both those inside and outside Haiti — particularly the idea of the real maravilloso or réal
merveilleux as authentic nationalist project, folk movement, or tool to be deployed explicitly in the service of popular struggle, set up as particularly Caribbean against the specter of a less-authentic European surrealism.
III. Paul Laraque in Haitian Discourse

This background of critical writing around Caribbean surrealism(s) informs much of the existing writing around Paul Laraque — both in the sense that the tradition and trope of Haitian exceptionalism remains common, and also in the sense that the political realm (and Paul Laraque’s political activity) receives a focus that nearly excludes all formal or aesthetic concerns. (This is, of course, the same issue that persists throughout Jameson’s writing on magic realism, and renders the term itself difficult to define and engage with.) This focus, of course is symptomatic of a great deal of the conversation around Haitian poets, academics, and novelists; this may be due to the tendency for public intellectuals to become politically involved as well as the aforementioned concerns about the Haitian critical conversation as a whole. Regardless, it is evident that Laraque is viewed primarily as a political or a politicizing figure — and specifically as a Haitian nationalist figure — a view which, in a sense, decontextualizes his work and removes it from a larger critical conversation around surrealism(s) in the world rather than surrealism(s) as national (or national artistic) practice.

Specifically, most mentions of Laraque in academic writing (contemporary or otherwise) position him not as poet but as spectator or commentator on a specific historical event: André Breton’s visit to Haiti in 1945 and the role this visit played in the subsequent Haitian revolution. Matthew J. Smith, in *Red and Black in Haiti*, introduces Laraque into his Haitian narrative as a soldier rather than an academic or a writer, commenting that black consciousness was not the only ideology that influenced officers. A few young light-skinned members of the army, most notably Paul Laraque, who
graduated with [Robert] Bazile in July 1941, were fired by socialism, remained
close to their radical peers, and resented elite control of the economy. (67)

This perspective on Laraque presents him not just as a member of the army but particularly as a
politically/ideologically motivated soldier — someone ready to struggle against elites for
“control” of Haiti.

Smith’s description of Laraque’s encounter with Breton similarly foregrounds his view of
Laraque as political rather than intellectual figure. In his account of Breton’s visit, Laraque is
described in similar language as a “young Marxist-influenced soldier and poet who was close to
the members of La Ruche” [a radical student journal] (75). Smith does not lose sight of Laraque-
as-soldier even when presenting him as a poet among poets — and, in fact, considers Laraque a
sort of hanger-on to the community of students and poets of the La Ruche group. Moreover, the
group as a whole is presented as a naive revolutionary effort first and foremost: Smith comments
that “the La Ruche writings were often bold, defiant, and idealistic, driven by a revolutionary
zeal and naive optimism in Marxism” and that “the majority of this group had a narrow and blind
view of surrealism and were unfamiliar with the critical writings of Breton’s contemporaries or
the limitations of the movement” (75). This account of the group seems to diminish their literary
and intellectual contributions — strange for a journal whose editorial board, according to Smith,
included important Haitian critics and intellectuals including Réné Depestre and Jacques-
Stephen Alexis, among others — in favor of presenting them as naive radicals waiting excitedly
for Breton’s intervention into their primarily political project.

Breton’s own description of the event, however, seems to contradict this account. It is
perhaps to be expected that like his contemporaries, he falls prey to the romanticized and
romanticizing language of botanical profusion in his discussion of Haiti, commenting in his “Speech to Young Haitian Poets” that “so many curtains made of the luxuriant foliage of your country were unfolded before my eyes” and that “the very profusion of nature’s gifts to Haiti is bewildering” (What is Surrealism? 258-259). However, it is difficult to untangle how much of this is the sort of exceptionalizing of Haiti that Trouillot critiques in “The Odd and the Ordinary” and how much is typical of Breton’s speech about any location. In fact, Breton quotes a Rimbaud poem which uses similarly expressive botanical language as an introduction to his commentary about “nature’s gifts” to Haiti: “Find the downy thistles / which ten ember-eyed donkeys / Seek to knot! / Find the flowers that will be thrones!” (259). This kind of language — certainly not about Haiti or the exceptional, untamed wildness of the Caribbean — confounds Breton’s intentions. It is not clear here whether he is deploying Rimbaud in service of his exceptionalizing of Haiti or to draw upon a perceived common heritage of Francophone expression.

However, Breton’s account of his arrival in Haiti clearly contradicts Smith’s assertion that Laraque and his Haitian contemporaries were unaware of the movement; in other words, that they “had no idea of surrealism” until less than a year before Breton’s arrival (Smith 75). Breton recounts a particular encounter with the Haitian poet Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude shortly after his arrival in Haiti, as quoted in Michael Richardson’s Refusal of the Shadow:

By singular good fortune, the definition I proposed of the word surrealism has gone around the world, and on the very day of my arrival in Haiti, I listened with intense emotion to the great poet Magloire-Saint-Aude quoting it by heart to some of you. (219)
As Richardson points out in his commentary on the event, this “welcoming speech” or “poetic profession of faith” from Magloire-Saint-Aude “was none other than the definition of surrealism formulated by Breton some twenty years before” (218). This interaction certainly complicates the notion of the naivety of the La Ruche group, as well as the power dynamics present in dominant narratives of Breton’s visit to Haiti.

A closer look at Breton’s own thoughts on surrealism — both in his speech to the Haitian poets and in his thoughts on the purpose and praxis of surrealism as a large movement — does even more to undermine the idea that Haitians’ view of surrealism was “naive” and “primitive.” As stated earlier, Breton is certainly not immune to the temptation to use the language of indigenous exceptionalism to describe Haiti; for example, he references vodou in his speech to the Haitian poets as a point of commonality between the Haitian poets and other surrealists. However, it is clear that both within and outside of the context of Breton’s visit to Haiti, he is fully committed to the idea that “human emancipation…remains the only cause worth serving,” as he writes in Nadja (What is Surrealism? 5). This perspective — as Breton emphasizes repeatedly — is not simply humanist but also internationalist in the Marxist sense, and this sort of project aims to move beyond (or entirely abolish) international borders and, perhaps, the entire concept of the nation-state. For Breton, surrealism is not a project undertaken to challenge the French elite or the art world, though as a matter of course it does (and did). It is something larger entirely: a project undertaken “to transform the world, to change life, and to remake human understanding from scratch” (What is Surrealism? xv). This proposition may be hyperbolic, but its vastness and ambitiousness, by necessity, transcends borders and nationalist projects in favor of revolutionizing the practice of human-ness.
There is also the matter of the French Surrealist group’s documented anticolonialist tendencies and involvement with anticolonialist movements — for an example of the language used in support of this project, see the *Open Letter* of the Surrealists composed in response to a public denunciation of the movement by Paul Claudel, who is described in Franklin Rosemont’s introduction to *What is Surrealism?* as the “archreactionary Catholic litterateur and French ambassador to Japan” (36). Breton and his fellow Surrealists speak particularly vehemently in this letter, expressing that

> We profoundly hope that revolutions, wars, colonial insurrections, will annihilate this western civilization whose vermin you defend even in the Orient…We take this opportunity to dissociate ourselves from all that is French in words and in actions. We assert that we have found treason and whatever else can harm the security of the state more reconcilable with poetry than the sale of ‘large quantities of lard’ to a nation of pigs and dogs. (*What is Surrealism?* 37)

This letter rejects the state on a number of levels, choosing instead to bolster an internationalist (or post-nationalist) approach to civilization. Of course, the Surrealists reject their own nationality and citizenship in “[taking] this opportunity to dissociate ourselves from all that is French” (37). But at the same time, they express a hope for rejection of nationality all over the world — for “revolutions, wars, [and] colonial insurrections” to demolish the state (colonial and otherwise) in any number of nations. (37) And, finally, Breton rejects the state as abstract concept: asserting the primacy of treason “and whatever else can harm the security of the state” as the surrealists’ most important value. (37)
Moreover, this rejection of the state is at every level concerned with words, and particularly with the production of poetry — it is certainly anti-state and non-nationalist, but it is also not a dissociation of the poetic rather than the political. The *Open Letter*, though it may not specifically refer to Haiti, inverts the ways in which Haitian and Caribbean surrealism is spoken of: as a movement in which political interest subsumes aesthetic concerns within itself. This argument for internationalism is, of course, a wide-angle view of the surrealist movement and of Breton’s thoughts — but much of the language he uses elsewhere resonates in his “Speech to the Young Haitian Poets.” In Haiti, he speaks against race as divisive force in much the same way as he speaks against the state as divisive force in the *Open Letter*:

> The *historical* process has been dominated by a conception tending to array the races against each other: it is fully demonstrated that this conception is fallacious and tends to mask…the always-open conflicts of a purely social order, conflicts that more than ever must be resolved. (What is Surrealism? 259)

The arraying of races against each other is, for Breton, as fallacious as the state, and is, perhaps, a product of the same system. He argues that total annihilation of the state — of the “always-open concepts of a purely social order” can only happen with total annihilation of racial subjugation or conflict (259). Of course, racism is not fictional or fallacious to those who suffer from it — an important point with which Breton, as a white man from the French metropole, fails to reckon — but it’s nonetheless notable that his anti-racist rhetoric stems from an anti-state argument.
The conclusion of Breton’s speech reiterates and reemphasizes the links between internationalism, surrealism, and the practice of poetry unbounded by the nation-state. He encourages and calls on the poets who have welcomed him to Haiti (emphasis mine):

But you know the greatness of all that, carried by a current too powerful to be confined within your country’s geographic and ethnic limits. I salute you, gentlemen, in the example of Jacques Roumain that stands for Haiti and for the world. (What is Surrealism? 260)

The powerful current to which Breton refers in his speech — implied to be current Haitian poetic practice and/or Haitian surrealism, coming as it does after a litany of praise for the books of various poets in the audience — is so powerful that it specifically cannot be limited by the borders of the nation-state. Moreover, it is possible that the strength of this power is specifically drawn from its inability to be “confined within…geographic and ethnic limits” (260). Breton’s reference to Jacques Roumain — a notable Haitian writer and communist — as standing “for Haiti and for the world” is also reflective of his internationalist turn (260). It would certainly have be easy for Breton to deploy the example of Roumain in the service of bolstering Haitian nationalism, particularly in Haiti and while speaking to young, political Haitians. Perhaps a commentator like Alexis or Carpentier would have done so, but Breton is consistent in his insistence on an internationalist revolutionary and literary practice.

Incidentally, Paul Laraque’s own account of Breton’s visit to Haiti (which, notably, Matthew J. Smith appears not to consult in his gloss of the event in Red and Black in Haiti) seems to support the internationalist reading and transmission of surrealist thought suggested by Breton’s speech and his encounter with Magloire-Saint-Aude. Laraque’s account begins by
recounting the story of Magloire-Saint-Aude’s repeating Breton’s definition of surrealism to him upon his arrival in Haiti, and reiterates that Breton, upon hearing this, was “visibly overwhelmed by emotion” (Refusal of the Shadow 220). This, of course, supports the notion that surrealism was already known to Laraque and the La Ruche group in advance of Breton’s arrival. Laraque confirms this explicitly in the first paragraphs of his narrative, indicating that his contemporaries were aware of surrealism and excited for Breton’s visit due to what he calls “the luminous breach opened by Césaire” (Refusal of the Shadow 218). This means that — even according to a conservative estimate that the young Haitian poets only became aware of Césaire upon his return from France to the Caribbean — they had at least six years of familiarity with his work. Césaire’s travels themselves also disrupt the model of ‘reified,’ sophisticated French surrealism as being necessarily in opposition to a ‘primitive,’ indigenous Caribbean surrealism. Césaire’s movement from Martinique to France and back, his production of Caribbean-identified work in Paris and work receiving the approval of French surrealists while in Martinique, and the similar migratory paths of other Caribbean surrealists (including, notably, Wifredo Lam, who was also present at Breton’s lectures in Haiti) are fundamental to the identification of a new model for understanding Caribbean surrealism.

Laraque’s narrative — both in his own words and in the portions of Breton’s speeches, lectures, and conversations that he quotes at length, supports the internationalism that Breton identifies as the basis for surrealism’s liberatory potential. Laraque quotes Breton, in a lecture to the Haitian literary community, as giving a history of surrealism (and, specifically, of surrealism’s congruence with the Marxist aims and ideals of the La Ruche group) and emphasizing that “it is now that we arrive at dialectical materialism as the only rampart against
national selfishness” (*Refusal of the Shadow* 221). This is clearly an example of both Breton’s Marxist-internationalist tendency and his tendency to speak against the nation-state, and Laraque’s endorsement of this comment brings his own interpretation of the theory and practice of surrealism together with Breton’s. He also relates the story of Breton’s visit in a way that renders the experience as one of literary exchange. Laraque is familiar with Breton’s work (and Breton is familiar with the work of several of the Haitian poets) even before Breton’s arrival, and in the course of his visit Laraque introduces Breton to the work of others, commenting that he “brought Breton the collection of poems by my friend Hamilton Garoute” and that “[t]he introduction I had written for *Jets lucides* pleased Breton” (220). Breton is not ‘bringing surrealism to the natives’ or enlightening young Haitian poets existing in a state of ignorance: it is clear that the transmission of knowledge travels both ways. Laraque also makes repeated references to the Haitian poets themselves. His description of Breton’s lecture — the same lecture that allegedly started a revolution (!) — emphasizes that “the audience was made up above all of young people: students, poets, artists, nonconformist writers” (221). This doesn’t necessarily depoliticize the lecture — or depoliticize surrealism — but it certainly deescalates the oft-seen insistence that Laraque (or Breton’s visit, or Haitian surrealism, or Haiti itself) is primarily militant and insistent on nationalist liberation.
IV. Haiti and the Atlantic

It is clear, then, that discourse around Haitianness and surrealism — including the work of certain Haitians — has historically failed to take into account certain historical and cultural realities. This is true not only of theoretical framings of surrealism as an aesthetic and/or political practice, but also of writing about particular moments important to surrealism as a world-historical mo(ve)ment, as is clearly evident from the examination of various accounts of André Breton’s visit to Haiti and, particularly, the nature of his encounter(s) with Paul Laraque. But the fact remains that, as Fredric Jameson argues, Latin American and Caribbean anti-realist tendencies “[retain] a strange seductiveness”; therefore, it is critical to build a framework for effectively coming to terms with these tendencies in an era of postcolonial (as opposed to anticolonial) discourse (302). Perhaps some answers can be found in Trouillot’s call-to-arms for scholars in Haitian studies. He argues that “the more Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West,” (1990, 7) and also that “we learn much less about Haiti if we read it as an aberration that defies any explanation than if we learn to place it in a comparative framework” (1990, 9). Perhaps by reframing the literature of Haitian surrealism and the literature of Paul Laraque in a more fully-realized historical and cultural context we can reread this kind of work not as a literature of exceptionalism, but as a literature of exchange.

Despite both Alejo Carpentier’s emotional reaction to the “marvelous” exoticized Haiti, and Jacques-Stephen Alexis’ militant insistence on an indigenous Haitian national character as key to the production of literature, these leftist and transnational intellectuals must have to some extent been aware of the historical and ongoing patterns of exchange integral to the
creation of the modern Caribbean. These patterns of exchange are the point of departure from
which to begin a rereading of these texts as Trouillot rereads Haiti: to foreground the threads of
history and exchange, colonialism and European domination that have always already been a part
of Latin America and the Caribbean. This, in turn, will allow for a rereading of the anti-realist
literary tendencies striving for a genuine depiction of Latin American and Caribbean experience.
One of Laraque’s quotations from Breton’s visit to Haiti provides a particularly apt locus for
beginning this work of rereading:

But some of you already know that…here surrealism verifies one of its
fundamental propositions, namely that the first condition of a people’s
persistence, as of a culture’s viability, is that both can endlessly re-immerse
themselves in the great affective currents which bore them at birth, without which
they rapidly collapse. (Refusal of the Shadow 221)

Laraque seems attracted to the language of water, and he lingers here on Breton’s use of
‘immersion’ and ‘currents’ as fundamental to surrealism. Elsewhere in his account, Laraque
describes a moment in which Breton praises Jacques Roumain’s book Gouverneurs de la rosée
“in that magisterial language whose key he alone held: a fire sprung from that dark transparency
of waters” (220). This is perhaps Laraque’s most effusive praise of Breton in this narrative, and
the “watery” language used here seems intentional: Laraque seems to suggest that Breton’s
thoughtfulness and care in alluding to Romain’s text is representative of an affinity with or an
ability to relate to Caribbeanness or Haitianess.

The idea that water or “wateriness” is somehow fundamentally related to Caribbean
identity has been discussed in the field of Caribbean studies, perhaps most notably by Antonio
Benítez-Rojo in his book *The Repeating Island*. Compare Breton’s “affective currents” or Laraque’s “dark transparency of waters” to Benítez-Rojo’s lyrical assertion in the introduction to his book that the Antilles are

a discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagull squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescences, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification. (2)

At first glance, it seems as if Benítez-Rojo is repeating the commonly-deployed trope of romanticizing or exceptionalizing the natural world of the Caribbean, while merely substituting water for the lush green jungle or the colorful birds of other commentators. This is not exactly the case. Like Breton, the occasional excess of his language makes it difficult to tell what is exceptionalizing and what is merely a formal affectation — but, reading onward, it becomes clear that Benítez-Rojo’s aqueous language is the basis for a Caribbeanness that does not exceptionalize or isolate the Caribbean (or any island in particular) but instead attempts to situate it in a world-historical context.

Benítez-Rojo argues that in examining the Caribbean, “one can sense the features of an island that “repeats” itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth” (3). This expansive way of thinking about the Caribbean by definition is linked to the idea of borderlessness, which (like revolutionary ideology) is a rejection of the state. These dual and interdependent ideas of expansiveness and borderlines are fundamental to his understanding of the Caribbean writ large. Not only do these ideas apply to the more abstract realm of Caribbean
identity or subjectivity, but also to the Caribbean as concrete, geographical place. Consider the following comments on mapping (or unmapping) the Caribbean onto the world:

the Caribbean flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance, and its *ultima Thule* may be found on the outskirts of Bombay, near the low and murmuring shores of Gambia, in a Cantonese tavern of circa 1850, at a Balinese temple, in an old Bristol pub, in a commercial warehouse in Bordeaux at the time of Colbert, in a windmill beside the Zuider Zee, at a cafe in a barrio of Manhattan, in the existential *saudade* of an old Portuguese lyric. (4)

This is not merely a logic of expansion but also a logic of connection: the sea creates distance but the currents of the sea are able in turn to close that distance. Benítez-Rojo attends to these sorts of connections explicitly, pointing out that “the Antilles are an island bridge connecting, in ‘another way,’ North and South America” (2). This form of relation is rooted in geography, of course, but Benítez-Rojo also expands it to include more abstract notions of relation.

Benítez-Rojo suggests that this expansive logic of the Caribbean applies to cultural experience as well as geographical experience. His assertion that the Caribbean can be geographically located in disparate places — and that this is largely a result of colonialism — is reflected in his writing about cultural phenomena. For example, he locates the Caribbean in “the unforeseen relation between a dance movement and the baroque spiral of a colonial railing” (4) and argues that in the Caribbean “the ‘foreign’ interacts with the ‘traditional’ like a ray of light with a prism…they produce phenomena of reflection, refraction, and decomposition.” (21).

In other words: the Caribbean is located in (and between, and because of) the relationship between the indigenous and the colonial. In a certain sense, the argument (and the related
argument that the Caribbean “in its most distinctive aspect…is not terrestrial but aquatic”) positions the Caribbean as exceptional for being-between-worlds (11). But Benítez-Rojo seems to anticipate this criticism, making sure to emphasize that when it comes to being a site of exchange, “there is nothing marvelous in this” (4). This assertion, whether consciously or unconsciously made, reads as a rebuttal of not only potential critics of Benítez-Rojo but also to the language that commentators like Carpentier and Alexis use to describe the Caribbean; that is to say, the same language that Trouillot sharply criticizes in his takedown of Haitian exceptionalism. Benítez-Rojo’s commentary on why Caribbeanness is ‘nothing marvelous’ is certainly compatible with Trouillot’s view of Haiti. He suggests that “the Atlantic is the Atlantic…because it was once engendered by the copulation of Europe…with the Caribbean archipelago” (5). Compare this with Trouillot’s assertion, quoted earlier in this paper, that “the more Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West” (“The Odd and the Ordinary” 7). If the Caribbean is to be exceptional — moreover, if Haiti is to be exceptional — it is because of the sheer force of (neo)colonial violence brought to bear upon it.

Ian Baucom, in “Charting the Black Atlantic,” takes an approach to the Caribbean that seems to synthesize Trouillot’s instruction to “place [Haiti] in a comparative framework — in the appropriate cultural and historical context of (neo)colonialism — with Benítez-Rojo’s focus on wateriness. Where Benítez-Rojo generalizes or waxes lyrical about the wateriness inherent in Caribbeanness, Baucom is brutally historically specific, linking Caribbeanness with the Atlantic and, by extension, with the violence inherent in the Atlantic slave trade. In fact, Baucom’s
thoughts on the Caribbean almost eerily parallel Benítez-Rojo’s in many cases. Baucom locates the Caribbean in

a photograph by a British photographer who was born in India. A snatch of text from a novel published by an author who once described himself as "a Polish gentleman soaked in British tar." A second textual snippet drawn from the American translation of a Martiniquan intellectual’s book of essays. (4-5)

This commentary, like Benítez-Rojo’s, identifies the Caribbean as borderless and expansive, and specifically locates this borderlessness in a marine geography. Baucom, like Benítez-Rojo, is occasionally tempted to sing of the "surges," "meanders," "slicks," "spills," "sprays," "ripples," and “currents” of water in order to render the oceanic lyrical (9). And, also like Benítez-Rojo, he connects the legacies of European and African exchange or syncretism in the Caribbean to his idea of Caribbeanness. He makes the argument that the Atlantic (specifically, the Atlantic as gravesite for bodies subjected to the Middle Passage) is fundamental to this exchange, pointing out that the drowned bodies of the Atlantic

link the waters washing the coast of Martinique with an eighteenth and nineteenth century history of the Caribbean, with the past and present legacies of the triangular trade, with the Victorian and Edwardian underdevelopment of Africa, Rastafarian and Pan-Africanist narratives of return, the poetry of Aimé Césaire, Afrocentric curricula, and the commodification of Kente cloth. (5)

Baucom’s line of argument is perhaps even more useful for reconsidering the history and legacy of Caribbean surrealism than Benítez-Rojo’s — Baucom’s historical and geographical specificity, for one, provides a more precise (or more apt) answer to the critiques raised by
Trouillot. And his focus on a pan-Caribbeanness rooted in the experience of blackness is perhaps more applicable to the experience of Haitian identity and history.

Perhaps most importantly, Baucom manages to bridge the troubling connection between cultural identity and cultural production. Though the descriptions of Caribbeanness quoted at length here mirror those of Benítez-Rojo quoted earlier, there is one critical difference. Benítez-Rojo refers to the Caribbean as being located in Bombay, in Gambia, in taverns and pubs and cafes, whereas Baucom locates it in a photograph, a snatch of text, a book of essays. One perspective of the Caribbean — Benítez-Rojo’s — claims to be un- or uprooted from geography, but all of its referents are geographical, whereas Baucom’s work follows through on his inclination to decouple the Caribbean from geographical reality by instead coupling it with cultural and artistic production. Yet this could also, perhaps, have been said of Alexis’ focus on cultural production and Caribbeanness — he decouples (to a certain extent) lived experience from identity in order to link identity and cultural production. However, Baucom’s idea of cultural production is distinctly removed from the kind of nationalist boosterism that Alexis engages in; for him, the submarine — and the cultural/aesthetic productions drawn from the concept of the submarine — are

a conceit which … allows us to identify the Atlantic as the nervous system of empire, and to describe the submarine currents tumbling Glissant's drowned slaves as the synapses coupling the neural densities of metropole and colony. In this description the submarine emerges as neither European nor Caribbean, neither metropolitan nor colonial, neither within the "West" nor without it. (7)
This is an aesthetic of total rejection: of the metropole and the colony, of the European and the Caribbean, of both the potential to be completely removed from empire or completely dominated by it. This rejection is, perhaps, a more sophisticated iteration of earlier ideas such as Breton’s rejection of the nation-state and the West. Baucom is as insistent on the necessity and totality of rejection as Breton, but unlike Breton he grounds his ideas more concretely in the reality of colonial and postcolonial experience.

But what does this outlook on cultural production as a whole mean for the examination of specific cultural moments, movements, or artifacts? Baucom provides at least one path forward: a suggestion that since “this is an age of cartography” we are called to engage in acts of mapping (or, more precisely, re-mapping) the shifting, liminal spaces carved out by art or poetry or criticism or insurrectionary acts in the rejected, expansive, connected world of the (post)colonial (1). “Charting the Black Atlantic” closes by examining and reevaluating J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* in light of this conception of the Black Atlantic and the wateriness and drowned violence of Caribbean space and artistic production. Baucom, recalling ideas proposed by Derek Walcott and others, suggests that this reexamination serves to offer “a map of one current within that cultural expanse I have been calling the postcolonial submarine” (10). This leaves open the opportunity (and perhaps the invitation) to map the innumerable other currents, flows, and counterflows of the lands whose shores are washed by the Black Atlantic.

It is clear that the work of both Benítez-Rojo and Baucom speaks to many aspects of the complex and intractable debate around Caribbean surrealism and Haitian exceptionalism. Even though each of them only brush against the particularities of the conversation — Benítez-Rojo in
his rejection of the “marvelous,” and Baucom in his inclusion of Césaire’s poetry as part of the “postcolonial submarine” — the metaphors and language used are particularly relevant to the larger conversation at hand. The existing work on Caribbean surrealism struggles with the interrelations of three fundamental questions: the question of identity; the question of politicization; and the question of cultural production. Benítez-Rojo clearly applies the language of wateriness to the question of identity; Baucom extends the metaphor to trace the currents of Caribbean cultural production (including cultural production about the Caribbean); and, clearly, both of them take up the question of politicization. Their views of the politicization of Caribbean identity and cultural production are particularly useful, as they strike a balance between the argument that Caribbeanness is inherently politicized (an allegation so frequently made about Haiti) while pushing against any suggestion that Caribbean cultural identity can be stripped of the political and historical context(s) of colonialism and of Atlantic trade.

Considering all this, it seems as if a “submarine” reading of surrealism in the Caribbean is particularly apt — France, of course, certainly does not have an unproblematic relationship to the Caribbean and, likewise, French surrealism does not have an unproblematic relationship to that of the Caribbean. Yet both French and Caribbean surrealisms are characteristic of the submarine as Baucom suggests it: shifting, liminal, moving in mysterious and surprising ways, expanding beyond their borders and reciprocally informing each other, and springing forth in unexpected places. Consider Breton’s definition of surrealism. It seems as if it was carried on an Atlantic current separate from Breton himself: hence his surprise at hearing it repeated back to him immediately upon his arrival in Haiti. If, as both Benitez-Rojo and Baucom suggest, the Caribbean can be found in any site of Caribbean cultural production — in Africa, in Britain, in
Bombay, in Manhattan — then why not in Martinican students at the Sorbonne? Why not in Laraque’s meetings with Breton? In Wifredo Lam’s travels from France to Haiti to Cuba and back? In this reading, surrealism is both parent and child of the Black Atlantic. It isn’t inherent in or indigenous to Caribbean experience or Caribbean botanical profusion, but it also isn’t an outside imposition: surrealism is neither European nor Caribbean, neither metropolitan nor colonial, as Baucom so aptly suggests.
Dredging up the life of Paul Laraque, literary figure and freedom fighter, Haitian and internationalist, is a particularly productive starting point for a remapping of Caribbean and Haitian surrealism as submarine. Laraque’s interactions with André Breton (in addition to his encounters with Césaire and Lam mentioned in the myth-making of/about the Breton encounter) are only the starting point for a life marked by cross-cultural and trans-Atlantic encounters. In fact, Laraque, despite being viewed (and frequently described) through the lens of his Haitian army service and nationalist political activity, spent a great deal of time outside Haiti, somewhere in the liminal space between exile and diasporic experience. This experience of exile recalls the claims made by both Benítez-Rojo and Baucom about Caribbean experience emerging or being present in locations geographically outside the Caribbean. Benítez-Rojo and Baucom suggest that these geographically-diasporic loci of Caribbean experience are marked as sites of exchange, much as the Caribbean is. As one might expect considering the history of colonialism and the Atlantic, it is clear that these sites include locations of both free and coerced cultural exchange. The unstable or destabilized relationship between cultures and individuals in these sites both includes and is reflective of the experience of exile — an experience which seems to have had a significant impact on Laraque.

In fact, Baucom speaks more directly, if still somewhat obliquely, to the experience of exile in “Charting the Black Atlantic.” In a particularly powerful passage, he speaks to the dislocation of the postcolonial subject, commenting that while his reading of the submarine invokes a temporally dispersed subject, it equally implies a model of spatially-disseminated identity, a rhizomatic dislocation of the subject, a self which
manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering … this subject finds itself wanderingly-grounded not "in some primordial spot" but in the uncertainties of imperial water. (4)

The experience of exile is certainly an experience of temporally-dispersed identity, and the idea of “meandering” seems particularly applicable to Laraque. A brief biographical summary of Laraque’s life on the site Île en île is essentially centered around Laraque’s “meanderings” — the language of the biography serves to divide Laraque’s life into segments based on his migrations and exiles. His experience is divided into the following moments:


[Paul Laraque (Pòl Larak) was born in Jeremie (Haiti)…Laraque was exiled in 1961 to New York, Spain, then again to New York…After twenty-five years of exile, Laraque returned to the country…In 1991, after the overthrow of President Aristide…Paul Laraque was subjected to a second exile.] (“Paul Laraque”)

The article presents a narrative of birth-exile-return-exile-death; Laraque’s life, in this account, is mediated through migration. And his decision to live in New York while in exile is notable as well. What is New York — center of global capital, point of entry for generations and generations of immigrants, host to an unusual (and unusually militant) diversity of diasporic communities — if not a city lapped by the uncertainties of imperial water?
Baucom, in “Charting the Black Atlantic,” identifies in the work of Edouard Glissant, another Caribbean poet, a confrontation with a “cultural ‘current’ setting ‘unceasingly this way and that’” — “but rather than discovering an unrepressable object of dread at the heart of this tidal wandering, [Glissant] encounters a liberating principle of briny metamorphosis” (4).

Laraque’s life-as-exile is similarly mediated not only by spatial meandering or “spatially-dispersed identity” but also by the unceasing push and pull of nationality. As stated in Île en île, Laraque lost his Haitian citizenship in 1964 (“il lutte dans le cadre d’organisations progressistes, perdant sa nationalité haïtienne en 1964”), regained it in 1986 (“en 1986…sa nationalité lui est alors restituée”) and then was presumably stripped of it again in 1991 prior to his return to New York for a second time (“Paul Laraque”). The function of nationality or citizenship is an interesting one, especially considering Laraque’s imbrication with the countervailing notions of surrealist discourse such as Breton’s encouragement to destroy the state and all it stands for (not to mention conceptions of the Atlantic and the submarine).

Laraque is described as a Haitian poet both in this biography and in extant critical writing, despite having spent most of his adult life outside of Haiti. The “liberating principle of briny metamorphosis” Baucom identifies seems, in this way, to possess the power to sustain Laraque (and maintain the narrative of Laraque’s life) despite the experience of exile. Removal of citizenship or exile is not sufficient to strip him of his Haitianess; however, Baucom might point out that the restitution of Laraque’s citizenship is also not sufficient to strip him of any non-Haitianess. This is not to say that the poet, once in exile, is forever contaminated by the West or by imperial waters (as Alexis might argue) — but merely to suggest that Laraque’s removal from his native land serves to underscore the uncertainty and liminality of his position with regard to the nation-state. This uncertainty plays a critical part in an accurate
reconsideration of the narrative of Laraque’s life and the place of Haitian surrealism in the literary world, and an examination of Laraque’s life while in exile supports the concept of a marine, pan-Caribbean poetic network.

For example, see Île en île’s summary of Laraque’s accomplishments while in New York, most notably being the first Francophone recipient of the Casa de las Américas prize in 1971 for the book Les armes quotidiennes / Poésie quotidienne, his co-founding of l’Association des Écrivains Haïtiens à l’Étranger, and his organization of festivals celebrating Jacques-Stephen Alexis and Charlemagne Péralte. The Île en île biography points out that


[His activities led him to meet — in Havana, in New York, and in Washington, D. C. — other literary and political figures, such as Fidel Castro, Nicolas Guillén, Langston Hughes, Ramsey Clark, and C.L.R. James.] (“Paul Laraque”)

This information underscores a reading of Laraque’s life as being positioned not merely as Haitian, and supports evidence for a pan-Caribbean sensibility. His recognition (and acceptance) of the Cuban Casa de las Américas prize speaks to shared political notions, of course, but also to a more expansive view of Caribbeanness along the lines of what Benítez-Rojo suggests in The Repeating Island: the Caribbean as chaotically coherent despite (or perhaps because of) its being “suspended in a soup of signs” (2).

Furthermore, the array literary and political figures Laraque encountered in the course of his work should not be read as random encounters. Laraque — as a leftist and as a member of a black diasporic community — entered into a preexisting network of migration and unsettledness
that counted many of the above figures as participants. Carolyn Fowler, in “The Shared Vision of Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain,” begins to sketch out the nodes of a network spread from Haiti to Cuba to New York. She points out that “in 1931, Hughes ‘went to Haiti to get away from [his] troubles’” and, notably, that his route there took him “by car through Florida…by boat to Cuba, finally landing in Haiti” (85). While there, Hughes “did not use the letters of introduction provided him by Black American intellectuals,” stopping only to visit the home of Jacques Roumain on the day he was to leave Haiti (85). This encounter precipitated a personal and literary relationship between the two men, and eventually Hughes' migratory path was traced almost precisely in reverse by Roumain. Fowler comments that Roumain

was tried and convicted under French law in December of 1938 of public offense against a chief of state…With the help of American friends, he was able to come to live in New York in September of 1939. He remained until the winter of 1940-1941, when he left for Cuba at the invitation of Nicolas Guillén. (86-87)

Though these encounters she traces occurred before Laraque’s exile, it seems that the paths laid by Roumain, Hughes, and Guillén were also traveled by Laraque. In doing so, he participated in a network developed by earlier exiles and Caribbean intellectuals — not to mention a network representative of the “spatially-dispersed identity” of Caribbean experience and radical Caribbean cultural production.

And, of course, New York itself is an important node in this spatially-dispersed network: both the city and this network share an uneasy relationship to colonial power. Laraque, Roumain, and Hughes were certainly not the only New Yorkers in exile, temporary or otherwise, and Cuba and New York are linked not only through Guillén’s facilitation of migration or, indeed, through Haiti. Of course, it is difficult to untangle causality here: did the intellectual network of Harlem
and of diaspora draw participants from around the Caribbean, or did historical realities (shaped, of course, by colonial power) draw disparate individuals to New York, thus creating the network? On the one hand, it seems that Roumain was drawn to New York by preexisting relationships with American writers and the American left; but, on the other, Laraque’s biography suggests a more common migrant narrative, pointing out that Laraque moved to New York “où vit déjà son frère Franck et la famille de celui-ci…l’épouse de Paul Laraque l’y rejoint en 1961, et leurs trois enfants en 1962 [where his brother Franck and his family already lived…Paul Laraque’s wife joined him in 1961, and their three children in 1962]” (“Paul Laraque”). Perhaps the answer is that both are possible, perhaps even for the same individual.

In any case, it is clear that Laraque both maintained and at the same time moved beyond these preexisting community ties. He became involved with projects specific to Haiti and Haitians, like the aforementioned Association des Écrivains Haïtiens à l’Étranger and literary festivals celebrating notable Haitian writers. However, he also maintained (or, at least, attempted to maintain) correspondence with André Breton: at least one exchange of letters between the two writers is alluded to in explanatory material to Laraque’s book *Ce qui demeure*, which points out that

le manuscrit de *Ce qui demeure*, gardé longtemps dans les tiroirs, fut envoyé pour publication à André Breton qui ne le reçut jamais. La correspondance de Paul Laraque, officier de l’Armée a l’époque, était censurée par la Junta Militaire. [the manuscript of *Ce qui demeure*, hidden away for a long time, was sent to Andre Breton for publication, but he never received it. The letters of Paul Laraque, an Army officer at the time, were censored by the military junta.] (77)
The book was eventually published in 1973 — after Breton’s death and well into Laraque’s first period of exile to New York — but it included a postscript by Breton, indicating that some kind of literary relationship was maintained between the two after Laraque’s departure from Haiti.

Laraque also formed ties with members of the American avant-garde, which speaks not only to the submarine nature of Caribbean experience and the experience of exile, but also suggests that surreal literary tendencies themselves, and the movements they inspire, have a similar mutable flow and submarine character. Laraque’s correspondence has not been collected in one place; these connections, like those of Laraque to Breton, are therefore necessarily mediated through the archives of the Americans in question. However, it is clear that Laraque’s work shows up in a number of places that might be unexpected for a Haitian poet, even a Haitian poet exiled in New York. For example, the Allen Ginsberg papers contain a letter from Laraque, in which Laraque writes, in response to Ginsberg’s invitation of Laraque to a reading at Brooklyn College, that “when you called me up…you said my travel expenses would be covered, but I told you it was not necessary since I’d be in New York at the time” and goes on to suggest that the money set aside for travel expenses be donated, although “because of the political instability and social insecurity” he asks to be put in charge of the logistics of the donation (“Letter from Paul Laraque” 1) This is a particularly poignant example of the delicate maneuvering a writer must take part in to navigate the literary world from exile.

It is perhaps unexpected that Ginsberg, a white New Yorker and a Beat poet, might have invited Laraque to read. Yet as a New Yorker and as a member of the avant-garde, Ginsberg is able to both facilitate and become caught in the diffuse, submarine paths in which Laraque is also entangled. There’s also the matter of Ginsberg’s own politically-motivated migratory path: Jose Quiroga, in Tropics of Desire, recounts that “Allen Ginsberg came to Havana and said he wanted
to sleep with the *comandantes*. Ginsberg was summarily kicked out of the country…” and returned to New York (125). And Ginsberg is not the only Beat poet that Laraque became involved with. In a biographical note on Jack Hirschman (a poet certainly inspired by and connected to Ginsberg) originally published in the *San Francisco Call*, Matt Gonzalez mentions a connection between Laraque and Hirschman:

In 1984, [Hirschman] founds the Jacques Roumain Cultural Brigade with Haitian poet Boadiba… Among the members of the Cultural Brigade are Rosemary Manno and Paul Laraque. Hirschman begins a relationship with Haitian poet Paul Laraque, who lives in New York City, whose works Hirschman translates from French and Creole. (“Jack Hirschman, Poet Laureate”)

In fact, this relationship seems to have been long-lasting, as Hirschman translated Laraque’s work for many years as well as coediting *Open Gate*, an anthology of Haitian poetry, which was published shortly before Laraque’s death. Incidentally, this connection returns Laraque’s literary and affective network to where it initially started — Hirschman was the publisher of Antonin Artaud’s work in America, linking the Beats to French surrealism. It seems evident that shared literary interests — the displaced currents of surrealism — linked Laraque’s literary and personal life to Haiti, to New York, to Cuba, and back again to André Breton, no matter where the waters of exile carried him.
VI. Les armes quotidiennes and Laraque’s influence(s)

Les armes quotidiennes / Poésie quotidienne is Paul Laraque’s most internationally well-known (and perhaps most well-regarded) poetic work, having received the Casa de las Américas prize and having been translated into Spanish and English. It is also a particularly productive site for considering Laraque’s uneasy relationship to Haitianess, identity, and the submarine. Laraque’s militant language, particularly in the introduction, means that at first glance it is tempting to read the work as primarily political (and primarily nationalist) — as part of the poetic tendency identified and valorized by writers and critics like Jacques-Stephen Alexis and Alejo Carpentier. However, reading this work in light of later critics of the Caribbean, in addition to reconsidering Laraque’s literary work itself in much the same way as the previous section of this paper reconsidered his literary life, allows for a more nuanced perspective. It is undeniable that Laraque has a close connection to and affinity for his nation of birth, and this is reflected in his poetry. However, this is by no means the only important thematic element of his poetry: most prominently, he returns again to humanist and internationalist themes, devoting his most militant and violent language not toward oppression in Haiti, but toward imperialism and state oppression across the world.

This concern, supplemented by Laraque’s mediation of concern for Haiti and concern for the world, is present even in the preface and introductory materials appended before the poetry begins, particularly in Laraque’s invocation of Jacques Roumain as figurehead. (This invocation, of course, recalls Breton’s invocation of Roumain as standing “for Haiti and the world” as well as Roumain’s migratory path from Harlem to Cuba to Haiti.) Laraque dedicates the book to Roumain, among others, calling for “une avant-garde révolutionnaire…sous la double bannière de Charlemagne Peralte et de Jacques Roumain” [a revolutionary avant-garde…under the
double-banner of Charlemagne Peralte and of Jacques Roumain]” (Les armes quotidiennes 9).
Peralte and Roumain, here, are certainly nationalist symbols, but the revolutionary avant-garde Laraque calls for seems to be larger than Haiti. He uses a similar construction elsewhere in the dedication, writing that the book is for “toutes les victimes du “macoutisme” indigène / instrument néo-colonial et folklorique / de la grande barbarie des temps modernes: l’impérialisme [all the victims of macoutisme / indigenous, superstitious, and neo-colonial instrument / of the great barbarism of modern times: imperialism]” (9). This rhetoric connects the persecution and repression of macoutisme, a particularly Haitian concern, to the larger issue of imperialism. At the same time, Laraque seems to harshly reject indigeneity (or at least Haitianess-as-such) and folklore or superstition, those two points of exceptionalism upon which Alexis builds his concept of the Haitian marvelous real.

What does Laraque identify with instead, given that he has an unstable and uncertain relationship to Haitianess? He turns instead to a pan-Caribbeanness that identifies strongly with blackness and/or pan-Africanism, and the figure of Jacques Roumain rises again to lay the groundwork for this identification. In the first section of the book, “Africamour,” (which has, of course, a revealing title in itself), Laraque quotes Roumain extensively by way of introduction. He reprints a selection from Roumain’s poem “Bois d’ébène,” beginning with the lines “Afrique j’ai gardé ta mémoire / Afrique tu es en moi [Africa I have guarded your memory / Africa you are inside of me]” and closing with “Je ne veux être que de votre race / ouvriers paysans de tous pays [I don’t want to be anything but of your race / peasant workers of every country]” (12). Even in this explicit identification with Africa and with a pan-Africanist viewpoint, Laraque’s selection from the poem seems to defer to internationalism. The final line is ambiguous as to whether Roumain (and by extension, Laraque) is suggesting racial or class solidarity, or perhaps
both at once; further, it is unclear whether “your race” is directed back at Africa, the subject of the poem, or at “peasant workers of every country,” suggesting an identification with class.

In any case, Laraque is clear about both his internationalism and his identification with Africa and blackness in a number of poems in the collection, most notably “Paroles nègres.” Again, Laraque strategically deploys introductory material, in this case in the form of an epigraph drawn from Aimé Césaire: “Ceux qui n’ont inventé ni la poudre ne la boussole [We who invented neither gunpowder nor the compass]” (18). Laraque patterns his poem after Césaire’s line, responding to it with his own statements of identity:

Nous qui n’avons pas colonisé l’Afrique
Nous qui n’avons pas découvert l’Amérique
nous qui sommes couleur de Satan
nous qui ne sommes pas les fils d’Adam
[We who did not colonize Africa
We who did not discover America
we who are the color of Satan
we who are not the children of Adam] (18)

This statement is characteristic of the ambiguity Laraque deploys so frequently. In the initial lines of the poem he seems to be speaking to anyone oppressed by colonial or neocolonial experiments, but at the same time his references to skin color and Biblical allusions to verses used to justify anti-black oppression are specific to race, if not to nationality. Even his use of the epigraph functions in this manner: Césaire is certainly a fellow Caribbean writer, but also one of the founders and initiators of négritude.
Laraque continues this pan-African internationalism in his poem “Renaissance,” one of the longest and most explicitly political poems in Les armes quotidiennes. In this poem, he specifically speaks to a non-nationalist concept of political and revolutionary struggle that is particularly reminiscent of Breton and the French Surrealists’ hope that “revolutions, wars, colonial insurrections, will annihilate this western civilization whose vermin you defend even in the Orient” (What is Surrealism? 37). Laraque seems to share this desire to pursue and destroy Western neocolonial tendencies, no matter how distant from the West they may be; he recalls

le rappel des communards de Paris de survivants
de la guerre d’Espagne des vétérans de la longue marche
des soldats de le Colonne d’espérance des cacos
machettes au clair de tous les nègres marrons des îles

[the memory of the communards of Paris the survivors of the Spanish Civil War the veterans of the long march the soldiers of the column the hope of the last rebels machetes in the light of all the maroons of all the islands] (32)

This is an uncommonly wide net of solidarity: encompassing escaped slaves and hopeful Communists and militant ones, Europe and the Caribbean and China.

Holding to account all this talk of wateriness, it is no accident that Laraque’s net of solidarity stretches in exactly the direction one might expect: across the Atlantic, from one point to the other of triangular trade. In fact, he alludes to this specifically in “Renaissance,” painting a vivid picture of the sea and struggle:

et la haute vague d’ombre les a emportées à jamais aux
fonds des mers où elles reposent parmi les coraux
qui s’ouvrent comme des roses la danse rutilante
des poissons les débris féériques de navires l’opulence
dérisoire des sables
[the wave of shadow dragged them to nothingness to the
bottom of the sea where they rest among the corals
which open like roses the red sparkling dance
of fish the rusting remnants of ships the derisory
opulence of the sands] (18)

This vision of the sea dragging multitudes down to the the bottom, of the “nothingness” of being undersea, would not be out of place in Baucom’s vision of the Atlantic. Writing about Glissant, Baucom argues that “he returns the time of drowning to our present time not as that which terrifies or outrages but as that which continuously transforms the contemporary” and that memory “does not haunt, it translates, it fuses the time of remembrance with the time of the remembered, it joins a ‘now’ to a ‘then’ through the mutating wash of a sea-change which is also, always, a ‘yet-to-be’” (4).

Laraque does precisely this in “Renaissance.” His drowning is certainly not haunted; one could even argue that it is marvelous in an eerie way, recalling the opulence and sparkle of a drowned empire and those who had to drown to sustain it. And it is also always grounded in a sense of transformation through violent struggle. Compare this maritime language from later in the poem, in which Laraque summons “le flux des luttes quotidiennes dentelé de l’écume sans / cesse renaissante de l’espoir nous a faut gravir / soudain la montagne [the tides of daily struggle
serrated in the foam the unceasing foam / born and reborn foam of hope have made us rush
suddenly / up the mountain]” (18). This link between the sea and struggle, between memory,
dredging-up, and the transformation of the past, is perhaps Laraque’s most important poetic
device in Les armes quotidiennes.

This trope appears throughout, including in the more intimate, lyric poems (many of
which are devoted to personal memory, whether of childhood, of falling in love, or of sexual
experience); but it seems to be most prevalent in Laraque’s more historical or political poems.
Even when the linkage between sea and struggle is not explicit, it could certainly be said that
Laraque deploys Baucom’s “submarine metaphors of ‘surges,’ ‘meanders,’ ‘slicks,’ ‘spills,’
‘sprays,’ ‘ripples,’ and ‘currents’” mentioned earlier in this analysis (9). Les armes quotidiennes
is packed with this language. In “L’enfant et la femme” Laraque describes “la femme [qui] s’èbat
dans l’eau des rêves [the woman who frolics in the water of dreams]” (17) and in “Silhouettes
sur l’eau du temps” he depicts “Mer des yeux où tangue une nef…Je suis confondu du riche
abandon / Je vais de flot à flot [Oceanic eyes where a vessel runs aground…I am baffled by your
rich abandon / And float from wave to wave] (20-21). Similarly, in the political poem “Tam-Tam
d’Haïti,” Laraque writes of the tam-tam: “ton chant assemble les soldats de la liberté / qui font
sauter les ponts du passé [your song musters the soldiers of liberty / who blow up the bridges of
the past]” and, further, of the “fleuve dont la colère trouve enfin le chemin de la mer [river in
which anger finds again its path to the sea]” (42). And in another poem about the tam-tam, “Le
Nouveau Tam-Tam,” he is even more explicit, writing of the journey “des côtes africaines aux
rives antillaises (et l’imaginaire / voyage du retour) [from African coasts to the shores of the
Antilles (and the imaginary / return voyage)]” (70). This language of waves and rivers, of sunken
ships, and above all, of the regenerative power of waves and of rage positions Laraque solidly as a poet of the oceanic and of the submarine Caribbean, particularly in his identification of the ocean with liberation from any and all forms of oppression: slavery, anti-blackness, capitalism, and (neo)colonialism included.

In addition to reflecting the aesthetic and the metaphoric language of the submarine Caribbean, Laraque also refers specifically to his own personal submarine Caribbean in *Les armes quotidiennes*: that aforementioned network of literature and life, laid over the Atlantic and linked by France, by surrealism, by New York, and by a life in exile. A notable example comes (again) in Laraque’s use of an epigraph; he begins his long poem, “Poème pour la paix” with an excerpt from Paul Eluard’s “Cours naturel” — again linking his own work with the work and expressive tendencies of French Surrealists despite being Haitian. In this poem, he connects an internationalism of popular struggle with an internationalism of poetry, commenting that

entre l’opulence des neiges que la voix de Neruda couvre des
vignes d’une prodigieuse aventure
et la fleur tropicale qui éclate dans les poèmes de Dépestre
Guillén ton vers est une danse populaire…

[between the opulence of the snow that Neruda’s voice covers
with the vines of a tremendous adventure
and the tropical flower which bursts from the poems of Dépestre
Guillén your verse is a popular dance] (50)

These are the points of reference — geographical, political, literary — among which Laraque situates himself, his work, and his struggle. These points of reference accommodate Neruda in South America, Guillén in Cuba, and Dépestre between Haiti and Paris and Cuba, covering the
route traveled by Langston Hughes, by Jacques Roumain, and by Laraque himself, pushed about by the currents of history that are also the currents of the Atlantic.

This reading of *Les armes quotidiennes*, as an exemplar of Paul Laraque’s poetic work, serves as a useful microcosm of Laraque’s place in literary history and aesthetic tradition, as analyzed earlier. The work’s context must be taken into account: Laraque’s uncertain relationship with Haiti; the fact of his writing the book from and in New York; his influences and relationships to his contemporaries and predecessors; and the text itself. Any one of these points of departure, when unclouded by unhelpful cultural and critical myths of Haitian exceptionalism and, specifically, of Laraque as Haitian nationalist first and foremost, suggest that Laraque’s work has a complicated relationship to identity, the nation-state, surrealism, empire, and the (post)colonial. Taking them all together, and viewing them in the context of more nuanced and corrective critical writing about the Caribbean and about Caribbean cultural production, allows for a fully fleshed-out perspective of Laraque. Considering Laraque’s own life and words rather than relying on others’ incomplete understandings is the most important part of this process. Reading *Les armes quotidiennes* alone is one thing; but a reading of *Les armes quotidiennes* must be informed by Laraque’s biography, correspondence, and thoughts on Breton and surrealism in order to accurately represent the Atlantic totality of Laraque’s experience, identity and poetic work.
VII. Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to make several interrelated arguments about the history and production of surrealist work in Haiti and the Caribbean. First: to examine the cultural and critical myths that still shape a great deal of writing about the Caribbean in general and Haiti in particular, and to examine those myths’ common heritage with writing about (or conceptions of) surrealism or anti-realism more generally. (In fact, “common heritage” may somewhat elide the ways in which “marvelousness” or “anti-realism” are seen to be inseparable from Caribbean experience for those writing about the “magical” or “marvelous” real, including but not limited to Alejo Carpentier, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and the subsequent metacommentary of Fredric Jameson.) Second: taking into account the criticisms of Haitian exceptionalism presented by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, to attempt to identify a way of writing in a more nuanced way about Caribbean surrealism in order to avoid inaccurate impositions from outside the paradigm. In doing so, I considered particularly useful writing on Caribbean identity (by Antonio Benítez-Rojo) and cultural production (by Ian Baucom). Although neither of these authors touches on surrealism specifically, they certainly brush up against it in a way that makes their work particularly apt for identifying an as-yet-unexamined tendency of “Atlantic surrealism” — that is, a way of thinking about surrealism writ large as well as the particularities of Caribbean surrealism in a more nuanced way, and perhaps also in a way more reflective of the lived experiences of those participating in the surrealist experiment.

I turned to the life and work of Paul Laraque as the main locus around which I centered my reevaluation of Caribbean surrealism for several reasons: most notably the breadth of his literary and life experiences and the dearth of useful writing about his life and work. Having read Laraque and studied the little easily-accessible knowledge about his life, I was struck by his
journey: from a young poet writing subversive work pseudonymously, to his outpouring of emotion at meeting Césaire and Breton, to decades spent as an exile in New York with a young family, to the experience of winning a notable Cuban literary prize as a Francophone writer. (I only later discovered his connections with the Beat poets and the American avant-garde.) And yet the extant writing about Laraque has almost nothing to say about his poetry, and essentially dismisses him as a Marxist army officer, exiled due to Haiti’s exceptional political turmoil, and (if anything) a minor poet on the fringes of the La Ruche movement. This ill-treatment comes in spite of his connections, his multiple publications in exile, and his involvement with editorial projects, festivals, and readings in multiple literary communities both in Haiti and abroad. It seemed evident that incomplete or misguided writing about Haiti came from much the same place as incomplete or misguided writing about Laraque: critical writing producing exceptionalism and dismissal as two sides of the same coin.

I believe that the dismissal of Paul Laraque has a great deal to do with the unavailability and incompleteness of existing examinations of his life and work. Because of this, I believe a reexamination of his work is a particularly productive case study for a reexamination of Haitian surrealism from a stateless, pan-Caribbean Atlantic surrealism. Laraque is a stateless, Atlantic subject (or, at least, a subject whose relation to the state and nationality was constantly in flux) whose life was deeply imbricated with several literary movements that can also quite easily be read as stateless and Atlantic, particularly French/ Francophone Caribbean surrealism. And, of course, his poetic work reflects the obsession with both the language of water and the lived reality of water that Benítez-Rojo and (especially) Baucom identify as fundamental to Caribbean cultural production, particularly black Caribbean cultural production. This revisiting and reimagining of Laraque’s work dredges him up, in a sense, from the forgotten backwaters to
which he has so often been relegated, and places him afloat in the currents of a network of Atlantic migration and cultural production — currents in which his life, his work, and (also important) the historical and cultural realities shaping his life and his work can be more readily, accurately, and completely examined.

I hope that the information and critical reconsideration of Laraque that has been brought to light as part of this project can be a starting point for new scholarship about the Caribbean. Even in this case study of Paul Laraque, it seems clear that any number of Atlantic surrealist writers could be identified and their narratives reimagined in order to build a corpus of writing about Atlantic surrealism. Baucom, of course, speaks to various forms of cultural production, but not to surrealism or even really to the marvelous, so there is room for critical writing to develop a more rigorous understanding and definition of the term as such. There are brief art historical treatments — of Breton’s travels to Mexico and his interactions with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, for example — that gesture in a productive direction (toward undoing the same narrative of the imposition of Breton onto an indigenous tendency presented here). Surrealism, being resistant to academic divisions between literature and visual art, renders the synthesis of this sort of work difficult but also necessary. And even the figures that recur again and again in this text, like drowned ghosts — Guillén and Roumain and Lam in particular — could certainly serve as subjects of their own radical reimagining. But for Laraque, this reimagining seemed to be the most immediate and the most necessary project for the current moment. Laraque’s experience and corpus, in many ways, still seem utterly relevant and contemporary (even among those listed above), and yet they have been obstinately dismissed, disregarded, or simply ignored. Laraque’s work, in a certain sense, has been cast to the bottom of the Atlantic that birthed it, and I hope this
paper serves as a first step to dredging this work (and other remnants) up from the forgotten sands of history and criticism.
Bibliography


