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Turning Around Caliban: Jimmie Durham's *Caliban Codex*

WENDY HARDING

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Abstract

L'artiste Cherokee Jimmie Durham, créateur de *Caliban Codex*, est un bricoleur et un "trickster" dans la tradition indienne qui joue avec le personnage de Caliban pour mettre en crise les représentations culturelles dans lesquelles son personnage est englué. Le *Caliban Codex* souligne les contradictions du colonialisme à travers les tentatives malhabiles de Caliban pour s'y conformer. Les efforts de Caliban pour maîtriser le système de représentation par l'écriture, le dessin et la sculpture révèlent les failles et la violence qui s'y dissimulent. La naïveté et les errements de ces productions, manipulées par l'artiste, montrent que le dominé ne saurait trouver sa place dans un système qui se fonde sur son exclusion. Pour contourner ce piège, Durham déploie les stratégies obliques ou antiphrastriques du "trickster." L'artiste a recours à la subversion pour briser les cadres de la pensée traditionnelle. Le *Caliban Codex* suggère que c'est la notion même de représentation qui enclenche la mécanique colonialiste. Elle doit être abandonnée pour affranchir et révéler les hommes, les lieux et les objets et leur permettre d'entrer dans des relations nouvelles.

Index terms

Keywords : Jimmie Durham, trickster, Caliban, The Tempest, mimicry, representation, objects, Caliban Codex

Full text

- 1 Jimmie Durham's creative practice is characterized by his engagement with people and places; ideally for him production is interaction. The *Caliban Codex* is one of several pieces that the Cherokee artist created in response to the quincentennial

anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the American continent. If 1992 was a year of self-congratulation for the descendants of the colonizers, for the descendants of the indigenous or enslaved peoples of the Americas, the occasion recalled five centuries of despoliation, exploitation and genocide. It demanded counter-celebrations that interrogated history and included the colonized peoples' collective memories. Durham's *Caliban Codex* was first shown at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, in New York in 1992. Its capacity to continue to provoke questions in new contexts is attested by its inclusion in the *Blues for Smoke* exhibition currently touring in the U.S.A.,¹ a pluri-disciplinary gathering that includes film, music, sculpture and painting centering on the blues aesthetic. Including this piece by the Cherokee artist in an exhibition that focuses predominantly on African American culture is a new way to challenge colonial categories of race. The curator's choice is both audacious and appropriate. In this reply to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play that offers an ambiguous re-imagining of the colonization of the Americas, Jimmie Durham addresses fundamental issues concerning the subaltern's potential for identity formation and artistic autonomy. Taking my title from another of Durham's exhibitions *Ni' Go Thunh a Doh ka' (We are always Turning Around on Purpose)*,² I will argue that the *Caliban Codex* is a way of turning around Caliban in several senses. As Durham explained in the catalogue to the 1986 exhibition: "turning around on purpose" means "acts and perceptions of combining, of making constant connections on many levels" (Durham 1986, 2). True to this description, the creator of the *Caliban Codex* is a bricoleur and a trickster³ who circulates around the Shakespearean figure in order to explore its dimensions, to invert or reverse it so as ultimately to transform the system of representation.

2 The museum visitor strolling through the exhibition space discovers a series of pages displayed on the wall accompanied by several other artifacts. The title attached to the display—*Caliban Codex*—immediately evokes the Shakespearean hypotext and offers another version of the narrative of colonialism dramatized in *The Tempest*. The term "codex," denoting a manuscript volume, implies that the hand-written text has been discovered and conserved for the museum visitor's contemplation. The etymology of the term, from the Latin "caudex," tree trunk, would certainly please Durham the sculptor. Against Prospero's powerful but absent book and the whole system of oppression for which it stands, Jimmie Durham presents Caliban's crude but eager efforts at self-representation assembled in the *Codex*. The master's book—at once Shakespeare's and Prospero's—does not need to be represented since the standards of that high art have been interiorized by those under its spell. The rules of the dominant culture dictate their every action, and, like Durham's Caliban, they may even strive to follow them.

3 Though all colonized peoples have a forced kinship with Caliban, the relationship is especially problematic for the would-be artist, since in *The Tempest*, Prospero stands for the creator and Caliban for his creation: "This thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine" (V, i, 275-6). This line resonates well beyond its immediate context at the end of the play, where rebellious servants are being returned to their masters in the dramatic turn from disruption to a new order. Not only is Prospero claiming Caliban as his property; in his role as the European colonizer of the island, he is also tacitly admitting that he has created an indigenous Other as the negative image of himself. His enlightenment opposes Caliban's darkness; his subjectivity depends on relegating the first inhabitant to the status of object. Prospero's power does not derive simply from his magic, after all, the deposed witch Sycorax, was also a wielder of spells. What distinguishes the new ruler of the island is his control of the means of representation, figured in the books that Caliban wants destroyed:

Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him,
 I' th' afternoon to sleep: there thou mayst brain him,
 Having first seized his books; or with a log
 Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,
 Or cut his wezand with thy knife. Remember
 First to possess his books; for without them
 He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
 One spirit to command—they all do hate him
 As rootedly as I. Burn but his books. (III, ii, 85-93)

4 Shakespeare's Caliban chooses frontal attack against the symbols of Prospero's power as the first step to taking back his island. Nevertheless, in responding to oppression by plotting libricide and regicide, Caliban only confirms the authority's characterization of him as an uncultivated and murderous subject that demands to be repressed. When Prospero chooses to forgive all the rebels, exercising "nobler reason" and "virtue" rather than "vengeance" (V, i, 26, 28), he demonstrates his right to rule. Having proved his superiority, he can dispense with the symbols of his rule, breaking his staff and drowning his book (V, i, 54-57). The colonizer no longer needs the tools of oppression because he has bequeathed a poisonous gift to his subjects: his semiotic system. As Durham has stated in an interview, "English is not just a language, it is a politics and a form of colonisation" (1994: 439). Caught in his master's sign system, a prison more enduring than the "cloven pine" in which Sycorax imprisons Ariel (I, ii, 280), the subaltern can no longer identify himself beyond the roles assigned to him.

5 The *Codex* appears as the naive product of Caliban's activity, comprising pages from his diary (humorously misspelled as "dairy"), drawings, and a montage of miscellaneous objects. Of course the attribution of the work to Jimmie Durham immediately complicates the viewer's response. For the *Codex* is obviously not to be read as Caliban's expression, but as Jimmy Durham's playing with the Caliban persona in order to critique the mechanisms of colonial oppression. Durham's Caliban responds to the colonial "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 122). The *Caliban Codex* is thus an example of mimicry in Homi Bhabha's sense. A crack opens up in the façade of colonial authority; the master's will to see a system of values replicated contradicts his insistence that the subaltern remain inferior. The "Chapters" of the diary, numbered non-consecutively through a crude system of strokes, reveal Caliban's quest to please his master and Prospero's refusal to be satisfied. For example, Chapter IIIIIII relates Caliban's unsuccessful efforts to adequately sketch his nose:

*Today I asked Dr. Prospero if my nose
 looks like his.
 He can be so mean sometimes!
 Then he said I didn't know how to
 draw anyway.⁴*

6 In this one-sided account of their interaction, the master's criticisms are filtered through the emotional response they provoke in the servant. The diary thereby exposes Prospero's lack of magnanimity. Instead of the righteous anger that the lordly magician of *The Tempest* displays toward his recalcitrant inferior, Durham's work exposes the contradictions fissuring the master-servant relation. The series of objects on display includes what appears as Caliban's numerous attempts to fashion a recognizable nose. It ends with a letter in which Caliban presents Prospero with a mask sculpted out of mud (Fig. 1).⁵ The humble material, rather naively fashioned like the rest of the *Codex*, suggests that the colonized subject has internalized the lessons of Prospero's book. At the same time, the mask is compellingly human. It demands the viewer's attention but

defies definition.

- 7 In fact, the whole of Durham's *Caliban Codex* is a mask fashioned for the purpose of creating a complex two-edged irony. It promotes "the double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 126). From the first pages of the diary the viewer should begin to measure the distance established between Shakespeare's Caliban and Durham's as well as between Durham the artist and Caliban the apprentice. In making the *Caliban Codex* Durham mimes the character of Caliban, but he is also the archeologist who assembles the work, exposing the artifacts produced by a vanished native in the museum space. This double mask offers the Cherokee artist an oblique way to approach the problems of identity and artistic creation.
- 8 Durham has said that Shakespeare "made a savage that really at the time was too absurd. ... And therefore he made a believable savage, in some strange way. ... I have to be his brother" (Durham 1995 51). The formulation "I have to be" is intriguingly ambiguous: it suggests compulsion, the imposition of a pre-constructed identity, and at the same time, the urge to play the role of the savage. This ambivalence comes from America's peculiar history of colonization. In the narrative inscribed in the dominant culture's book of the Americas, the indigenous peoples are lumped together and renamed as Indians, labeled as savages, and denied a history of their own. On one hand, they figure simply as a barrier to Euro-American progress that has to be assimilated or eliminated; on the other hand, as the Other of the dominant culture, they are the repository of many of its repressed fantasies. Either way, they are defined and deprived of both history and self-determination. Reflecting on what it means to be a descendant of one of the continent's first inhabitants, Jimmie Durham declares:

One of the most terrible aspects of our situation today is that none of us feel that we are real Indians. But each of us carries this 'dark secret' in his heart, and we never speak about it. ... For the most part we just feel guilty, and try to measure up to the white man's definition of ourselves. (Durham 1983, quoted in Fisher 164)

- 9 The "real Indian" has been defined by the dime novels and Hollywood movies that have reduced the complex past of America's indigenous peoples to clichéd racist scenarios. Durham's thoughts on this problem measure the extent of the theft:

How can we think of ourselves and our history instead of someone else's given narrative? That sounds like a little first step but over the past ten years we have been thinking about 'who we might have been'. Who could we possibly have been before Columbus, before the Pilgrim Fathers and how would we be able to know who we were? We have come to the conclusion that we were probably pretty much normal human beings, much like other human beings. This is pretty revolutionary for us because of this 'noble savage' thing. (Durham, 1994: 442).

- 10 The traumatic effect of colonization is a forfeiture of cultural memory so total that it is experienced as a loss of humanity. What it means to feel human can only be guessed at; it is the lost state that precedes "discovery." To make matters worse the United States does not recognize itself as an imperial power. Its founding texts declare that the continent was empty when the settlers arrived.⁶ Native Americans are caught in the bind of choosing between performing the spurious, projected identity that corroborates the white man's fantasies about them or mimicking the colonizers. Either way the outcome is a sense of inauthenticity. Indian identity is so hyper-defined that no individual can become the type, but Indians can only offer unconvincing performances as white men.

- 11 Since the colonizer's system of representation is a trap, Jimmie Durham's *Caliban Codex* works to expose it as such. Instead of attempting the impossible task of producing a counterhegemonic discourse, Jimmie Durham has Caliban follow the advice given by the narrator's grandfather in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.' (16)

- 12 Durham's Caliban overcomes with yeses. As the apparently willing follower of his demanding master, he exposes the mechanisms of colonialism. His *Codex* reminds Americans of the violence that they repress in their national narratives of "discovery."
- 13 The re-contextualization of Durham's work within the frame of *Blues for Smoke* exhibition insists on the broad scope of that protest, opening it up to express solidarity with all oppressed minorities. Jimmie Durham has refused to be pigeonholed as ethnic artist, since it means being assigned to a pre-determined slot. For Durham claiming identity as an Indian artist is a kind of trap, for it forces him into an institutional situation created by the dominant culture.⁷ In creating expectations in the audience about authenticity and tradition, the designation is potentially limiting. So while Durham is clearly proud of his Cherokee heritage, he has refused to make it official even though it has meant his exclusion from exhibitions of Native American art. His work refuses the narrow identity politics that uphold dominant categories of race. Both the *Blues for Smoke* exhibition and the *Caliban Codex* demonstrate that protest does not need to be just reactive and derivative; the creative strategies of the subaltern can redeem modern and postmodern culture. The works on display offer a possible answer to Spivak's intriguing question, "Can the subaltern speak?" The subaltern might be imprisoned in language, but s/he can find a response that lies beyond the limitations of speech.
- 14 In exposing Caliban's supposed productions, Durham seeks to create an impact, establish a rapport with the viewer. His method is assemblage or bricolage. He puts things together in order to create new significations. Meier uses the term "articulation," borrowed from communications theorist Jennifer Darryl Slack, to describe the ways in which Durham works to transform structures of hegemonic knowledge "into a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be entities" (Slack quoted in Meier 3). Appleford chooses the term "carpenter," inspired by Durham's explanation that: "The word in Cherokee that is used for carpenter means a 'fixer'—someone who joins things together in a clever fashion. The word is also used colloquially to mean a married couple. And also to mean a poet—someone who joins words together" (Durham 1998; quoted in Appleford 92). Appleford points out that in this definition, "carpentry is as much about a relationship (between a married couple or between things) as it is about a facility with tools and materials" (Appleford 93). Durham's aim is not so much to create a new structure but to make new sense out of what is. The components he brings together in the *Caliban Codex* are not found, but they are presented as such so as to call into question the hegemonic power represented by both Prospero and Shakespeare and to create a distance from which to consider the problem of creating art in the colonial situation. As is often the case in Durham's production, each element is not to be considered in isolation from the rest of the installation;⁸ instead, viewers can examine each piece up close and connect it in their own ways to the other pieces. The viewer is

also invited to become an assembler or bricoleur.

15 The double distance that the installation marks from a prestigious author and from a naïve doodler functions as a double prism working in synchrony yet affecting the reception of the *Caliban Codex* asynchronously. The reference to the Shakespearean hypertext tends to promote ironic detachment from the canonical text, while the pages from Caliban's diary demand sympathetic engagement; yet that relation can be easily reversed: finding Caliban's naïve productions in a museum can evoke disapproval and an affirmation of the high art whose standards are upheld by Prospero and Shakespeare. The cumulative effect can be either a confirmation of racist preconceptions or a redoubled condemnation of imperialist practices. Durham's montage is knowingly arranged as an ideological trap. It aims not so much to expose and correct prejudices as to allow viewers to experience the situation of prejudice mongering, both as perpetrator and victim.

16 This perplexing play of conflicting interpretations is in fact a necessary conditioning exercise engineered by Durham. Against the certainty of hegemonic knowledge he champions confusion: "It's the time to be confused, but not in an inactive way: to see there are complexities and to investigate more, to investigate more constantly, to not be satisfied with some little piece of something that makes you feel like you are powerful, that you've got the answer so you can move ahead" (Durham 46). With the *Caliban Codex* the artist seeks to upset viewers' prior convictions about art and identity in order to induce reflection. This conditioning is the ploy of a trickster (Prospero's antithesis), an apprenticeship in double entendre.

17 Many, even the best commentators, although well aware of Durham's subtle tortuousness of address, nevertheless revert to traditional categories like satire, humor or irony to explain his work. Indeed, it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to extract oneself from one's conceptual framework. Yet those categories refer to tonal inflections of discourse destined to induce a certain connivance with an audience beyond the ostensible content. These rhetorical effects can have a deeper function such as social criticism. When issuing from minorities they procure a form of protection. Yet these familiar rhetorical categories fall short in getting at the subversive import of Durham's trickster action, since they fail to acknowledge the ways in which the *Caliban Codex* denies viewers the comfortable complicity afforded in the ironic compact. Some critics even voice a certain form of very revealing indignation: "I am left with the feeling that what is actually interesting here is in fact elsewhere and I wonder what would happen if the artist chose to accept his knowledge as his own, within his art, rather than something that must be continually staged and disavowed and theatrilised into something twice remove and only then, perhaps, considered legitimate" (Irvine 184). The disappointment is perceptible, together with the suspicion that things could be said in more explicit terms and that, if they were, they might ultimately prove to be disappointing.

18 The misprision concerns the nature of "what is actually interesting," which is not for Durham something to be stated in words and showcased in artwork, but a style of address and an approach to meaningfulness. The style of address is based on disorientation: not the "order of misrule" of the medieval feasts of fools or the bacchanalian spirit of Roman saturnalia that ultimately confirmed the established order, but a coruscating vision practiced by the aboriginal trickster figure that is more akin to Nietzschean laughter or to Dadaesque explosive nihilism. The trickster's derision is a constructive principle; it creates through destruction by recombining the fragments of preexisting systems. Construction is a personal quest that everyone must undertake and for which the trickster is but a conduit. It is never an acquired,

transmissible knowledge since it must be empirically adapted to every upcoming situation.

- 19 In the *Caliban Codex*, the colonial complex is clearly derided through the master/servant structure already used by Brecht in *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti*. Using an artistic technique comparable to Brecht's alienation effect, Durham denounces the stereotypes and racist preconceptions implied in Euro-American hegemonic domination. An example of this technique is the piece entitled "Small Action Painting" (Fig. 2). The title, together with the splatterings of red paint and specks of dirt, recall Jackson Pollock's renowned works. Yet the red splashes on the paper suggest a different impression that seeps through this citation. Whereas the modernist artist sought to use gesture in order to produce abstraction and to evacuate references to the human, Durham's action painting leads us back to the human context, paradoxically emerging through its erasure. Underneath the splashes, one discerns the traits of a rather sad looking clown face and the suggestion of a body drawn by a child's hand. In the lower right hand side of the paper is a text printed in block capitals:

ONE TIME DR. PROSPERO WAS GOING TO
SPANK ME BECAUSE I WAS PLAYING WITH
MUD. WHEN I RESISTED I CAUSED HIM
TO ACCIDENTALLY HIT ME IN THE NOSE.
CALIBAN

- 20 In association with the text the red paint appears as blood, and the painting exposes the violence in Prospero's relationship with Caliban. Still, the parodic connection with Jackson Pollock complicates our potentially empathic response to that violence. The viewer is troubled by this image that mutates into a kind of Rorschach test of his or her own attitudes. For example, Mark Alice Durant sees "a kind of monkey-faced figure. The elements suggest various hierarchies (social, material, biological); the mud brings associations of the child and of earth, both with which Native Americans are associated. The supposed accidental violence suggests that the victim is complicitous in the accretion of deceptions that become his history" (83). This response says as much about the viewer's internalized values and categories as it does about the painting that calls into question colonial mentalities.

- 21 Clearly the *Caliban Codex* does not quite conform to the traditional template in which the satiric object demands a reading that draws on values that the receptor shares with the emitter. In its oblique revision of Shakespeare's plot, Caliban is not a brutish monster, but rather a naïve, eager, well-intentioned student. The powerful Prospero is only marginally referred to as a sometimes brutal but generally benevolent and antiquated master. In the diary entry numbered as Chapter III, Miranda appears not as the beleaguered virgin of the play, but as a playmate who has been complicit in dealings that have been sanctioned by the domineering father:

*Miranda says we can't do that
anymore, what we used to do.
I think she must've told something
to Dr. Prospero. Because she always
used to say oh what if daddy saw me.*

- 22 The diary entry represents Caliban as rather innocent and modest in his inability to name the things he has done with Miranda, while Miranda seems more knowing than he. The characters have been extracted from the high drama or romance of *The Tempest* to figure in a mild and vaguely ridiculous vaudeville.

- 23 Durham's strategy is at the same time unusual and brittle, subtle and perilous, naïve

and radical. Caliban's diary details his childlike activities and suggests deranged, perhaps Oedipal, obsessions. Pages that seem extracted from his sketchbook show the repeated attempts at self-portraiture that founder when he tries to draw his own nose. Murphy associates this with:

the Freudian view that the nose, as both a protuberance and an opening, symbolised genitalia. Caliban lost his nose, so to speak, when he failed to 'violate the honour' of Miranda, as he has claimed, which explains its small size and why he cannot fully 'see' it. Indeed, emasculation, as psychological violence, is a long-established part of the colonial process, a point that is not lost on Caliban, who obsessively tries to recreate his nose. (Murphy 230)

24 The spectacle of Caliban's comical mistakes (such as dairy for diary), his pathetic attempt at aping his master, and his piddling artistic production places viewers in the de facto position of the comprehending but censorious judge or psychoanalyst. Moreover, Caliban's cringing goodwill and his naïve confessions make it easy to distance ourselves from his plight. Though not a monster, he is deformed version of the European and might only deserve our compassionate condescension. We may even feel justified in occupying the master's seat, but that is one of the trickster's scenarios that Durham organizes through this piece.

25 Another possible reading of the *Codex* is to see Caliban as epitomizing the oppressed minority and Prospero as exemplifying the violence of Western supremacy. Most commentators feel comfortable with this interpretation. In another interpretation of Caliban's preoccupation with his nose, Appleford declares: "The nose signifies a person's ethnicity, yet the nose's possessor is unable to negotiate what this signification means. (Ethnicity is only as plain as the nose on the other's face.)" (103). Murphy links the noses to the racist pseudo-science of physiognomy: "Durham's decision to focus on this protuberance is best understood as a response to important nineteenth-century scientists' endeavours to create racial profiles—literally—in which noses are among the most salient features" (229). Indeed, the discriminatory history of physiognomic profiling is well documented and has been applied to Native Americans.⁹

26 An additional example of the tyranny of the colonial mentality is Caliban's attempt to organize his world into opposites. An essential part of his education involves shaping his words and his mind into binary structures:

... its
Dr. Prospero who taught me to speak right and to write,
as he says, his language is marvelously subtle and
complex. Every day I learn a new set of words.

27 What follows is Caliban's list of "opposites." On the left side of the page, under the heading "HEAVY, OR DARK" we find a column of steadily deteriorating epithets, beginning with "EARTH LAND GROUND," descending through "MUD MUCK MIRE" and finishing with "SHIT CACA DOODOO." On the right side (the spatial placement having evident moral weight in the Western consciousness) is the column headed by the word "LIGHT." Here the ethereal elements and concepts are lined up in opposition to the material ones. So nouns designating the earth contrast with "SKY HEAVEN CELESTIAL BODIES"; "FILTH" opposes "PURITY"; finally, words denoting excrement confront the more ethereal "GASES," "FIRE," and "ULTRA VIOLENT LIGHT." The orthographic slip in the final term reveals the cruelty informing the mental structures Prospero tries to inculcate in his pupil along with the terms of his language.

28 Nonetheless, because of the lacunae in the *Codex* Prospero's position remains somewhat fuzzy; moreover, the reticence in Caliban's disclosures and the amateurism

of his work may make him appear too puerile to merit viewers' compassion. This is another of the trickster's topsy-turvy scenarios: somehow all responses seem to miss the mark. Viewers are left up in the air, exposed and disarmed amidst their contradictions, for Durham that is the refreshing position of tense disengagement described by Meir in connection with Durham's *Self-Portrait* (1987): "Attempting to decode the *Portrait* then, is not a simple task, for the viewer is presented with crisscrossing tensions, inconsistencies, and instabilities of meaning or signification. Fraught with contradictions these free-floating signifiers are not blowing around in a vacuum or void of context of reception; instead much like the dispersing operations of colonialism, they are reverberating and bouncing off each other" (Meier 29). Our disengagement from the personae evoked in the *Caliban Codex* is also a reengagement in the lures of the colonial system. The work has the disorienting function of making us swallow the bait and then reject it; the ensuing confusion provokes further reflection. Of course as Durham observes when questioned about the parodic nature of his show entitled "On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian" (1985), this kind of subtlety is not anticipated from Indians. Euro-Americans expect them to act according to colonial preconceptions: "And the stereotype is that we are the Savages in the sense that we are very straightforward, very stoic, that we love America, that we are simpleminded, and that we are very spiritual, which, in real language, means that we are not sophisticated" (Canning 49).

29 The viewer's uncomfortable shuttling between conflicting interpretations can trigger the realization that Durham does not put into question simply a class, a social system, or a mode of thinking. These factors of oppression are obviously malignant, but the aim of the artistic communication reaches beyond those objectives. What is in question goes beyond the subaltern's capacity to represent himself to strike at the concept of representation itself and its underlying assumptions. The *Caliban Codex* targets the binaries of Western thought, the insistence on marking a distance between object and subject, the analytical principles that ensue from this division, and the exigency of clarity. Caliban's efforts to master the system reveal not only how it is warped, but also how it is biased to serve the interests of the dominant and to imprint the principles of domination into our mental condition. Moreover, in depriving the dominated of the capacity to represent themselves, it leaves them with only one possibility—to attack the system and trigger the mechanisms of repression. Yet this is what the trickster refuses to do. He places himself sideways in an oblique strategy. He shows that the system malfunctions and hence that it is only a system. Through his bricolage Durham attempts to elude the ready-made, imported conceptual structures that we inherit; the trickster/assembler takes them apart and offers the pieces for inspection in order to liberate us from them.

30 Caliban is trapped in the constricting mirror of representation. In Chapter IIIIIII of his diary, he struggles with the irresolvable predicament of wanting to draw a self-portrait when he has no image of himself:

Dairy guess w what?! I've decided to be an artist! Don't worry, Dairy, I'll still write you. But I want to make a ~~true~~ complete portrayal of myself. And I'm good with my hands so why not?
I don't know what I look like. Since Dr Prospero came theres nothing here that reflects me.
I don't know what my nose looks like, for example. I can't touch it because Dr. Prospero says it's not nice to touch

yourself.

31 Caliban is caught in the impossible position of wanting to conform to the Western art tradition of self-portraiture, yet being barred from the knowledge of his own image because of Prospero's interdictions. While the naïve enthusiasm relayed in the exclamation marks may strike viewers as laughable, and Prospero's prohibitions will seem repressive, cumulatively, it is the act of self-representation that comes to seem derisory. Significantly at the end of this entry is the sketch of a wavy serpent that looks like an afterthought or the desire to find some relief from the constraints of writing but which is in reality an escape into unfettered artistic and cultural expression (Fig. 3).¹⁰ This and other doodles at the bottom of his chapters are deviations from the codes of the dominant, as is his punning play with his signature in other entries. After the list of opposites, Caliban signs himself "the heavy dude," turning Prospero's pejorative category into a meliorative one in the American vernacular. In the entry where Caliban speculates that if he doesn't recognize his nose, then perhaps he is free of it, he signs himself "Calibanos," omitting the "e" that would spell "nose" and opting instead for a flourish that augments his name. There are the anagrams at the end of Chapter II that stop short of becoming cannibal: "BACILAN LIBANCA CANILAB ~~CANIB/~~." There are the attempts to merge his name with Miranda's at the end of Chapter III: "Calibanda Calimir." In these moments, other, repressed modes of being and of doing art surface in the *Codex*.

32 Caliban's diary relates the would-be artist's struggle to master the art of perspective demanded in Western portraiture. This is another possible explanation of his intriguing obsession with drawing his nose. Commenting on the *Florentine Codex*, the treatise on the Aztecs written by the sixteenth century Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagún, and illustrated by indigenous artists, Todorov remarks that:

any idea of linear perspective, and hence of an individual viewpoint, is absent. ... European linear perspective may not have originated from the concern to validate a single and individual viewpoint, but it becomes its symbol, adding itself to the individuality of the objects represented. It may seem bold to link the introduction of perspective to the discovery and conquest of America, yet the relation is there, not because Toscanelli, inspirer of Columbus, was the friend of Brunelleschi and Alberti, pioneers of perspective (or because Piero della Francesca, another founder of perspective, died on October 12, 1492), but by reason of the transformation that both facts simultaneously reveal and produce in human consciousness. (Todorov 121)

33 Perspective offers artists and viewers the illusion of being able to detach themselves from the world, to stand back from it and admire it, and thereby to imagine that they can possess it. This is, of course, as alien to indigenous peoples' relation to their world as it is conducive to the colonists' incursions into others' territories. The individuation and differentiation of members of classes and communities permitted by this modern artistic technique also paradoxically foster the standardization of beauty and normality that serves to promote European supremacy.

34 Instead of achieving the illusion of the real afforded by perspective, Caliban's efforts recall some of the artistic experiments of the twentieth century, from Picasso to Pollock. Other dimensions in representation progressively surface. For example in "Small Action Painting" the outlines of a bloody face, staring back from the page suggest that the painter's work explodes back at his aggressor. A new form of expression is thus hinted at: not actively intended but reactive, not formulated but resulting from suffering. In one of the last sketches in the nose series, Caliban hits upon one of his vital processes—breathing. The drawing consists of two series of wavy lines, marked "LEFT

NOSTRIL, RIGHT NOSTRIL" above the inscription "I BREATHE OUT, I BREATHE IN" (Fig. 4). The drawing abandons attempts at perspective and instead mimics the pulse of life, presented (not re-presented) as the trace marked by a living being, in the most basic act of existence. The pages of the *Codex* introduce another dimension displaced or occulted by the exigencies of the dominant codes—the unguided yet infinitely creative possibilities of existence; the act of living and transforming like the serpent, and the playful exercise of the artist's hand.

35 The failure (or the refusal) of representation does not mean the end of art, on the contrary. The fragments assembled in the *Caliban Codex* constitute a new form of artistic production. The trickster's subversion is not provocation for its own sake but a necessary therapeutic exercise that involves disorienting viewers so as to prepare them for a new experience. Durham explains:

We seem to want to approach everything with the knowledge of it already. We don't want to come as a stranger to anything. We want to know that if we buy a ticket to a play, it's going to be a play. We don't want to see something else. We don't want to be confused. I suspect we all do this too much. So I want to jumble up expectations. People think, 'I'm going to see Jimmie Durham's work. He does socially responsible, political, Indian art'. And I want to say, 'Ha ha, that's not what I do. You made a mistake'. (Durham 1993 119)

36 The trickster eludes the categories of the already known, creating confusion, turning the viewers around, so that they lose their accustomed bearings. According to Durham, artists should resist the temptation to make their work vehicle their own social or political pronouncements: "If I make a piece, I don't want it to say what I would say, because then it becomes me talking through the piece" (Durham 1993 119). Elsewhere, Durham has called the artist's desire to communicate a message "just a different variation of the old missionary attitude" (Durham quoted in Meier 2). To disengage himself from the dialogue between his audience and his artwork, he wants "to see if I can *make* the object talk, on its own, with me, and with the audience. Not to have a pre-recorded speech for the audience, but to engage in a kind of conversation" (Durham 1993 119). In order to return to the vibrant materiality that Jane Bennett has rediscovered in objects, their insistent "thereness," Durham has to liberate them from their usual functions and significations. He has to free them from language and its associations:

Language is the immediate past. It is the past of a split-second ago. When I say, 'I am speaking', in fact I have just spoken. When I read a sentence I have just read it. When you tell me something I just heard it that split second ago. ... Objects are the immediate future, in the sense of reaching out for something (or trying to avoid it)—of desire. (Durham 2002-13)

37 The display of various drawn and sculpted noses in the *Caliban Codex* permits an escape from the racist appropriation of the nose. The nose becomes both more and less than the sum of its culturally ascribed associations. It becomes an occasion for play, for creativity. The nose indeed stands for the imaginary distinctiveness (be it sexual or idiosyncratic) that Prospero's western ethos tries to impose on his servant. Yet Caliban's bric-a-brac of noses, humorously pinned in rows like insects in a museum display case, shows that this is pure fantasy, just like his representation of an exaggerated pink nose apparently made of what looks like marshmallow, or the shiny brass nose with a mud nose-shape extruding from it. Durham's trope is ambivalent and double-edged. If the nose obsession points to the emasculation and stultifying influence exerted on Caliban, it paradoxically also indicates another way of accomplishing oneself

by "following one's nose"—trusting one's instincts—instead of being a slave to dominant frames of reference.

38 The artwork is clearly not to be taken as a beautiful object, viewable museum piece, or static collectible; this interpretation is a symptom of the modern split between subject and object, mind and matter against which Durham militates: "The deadening problem for artists is the poisonous myths that our society perpetrates about their social role. We are expected to 'create' instead of participate. The importance of art is nullified while art is placed on a silly pedestal. This is historically a recent and minority view about the purpose of art" (*A Certain Lack of Coherence*, 72). Instead art is an action involving the artist, the audience, and the things assembled. Durham has a special regard for discarded objects; he is a habitué of town dumps.¹¹ Once rejected for human purposes, the object can become itself: "As we now see it in the vacant lot or garbage dump, its brave, confessional honesty shines" (Durham 2002-13). Released from their servitude to humans, objects begin to communicate.

39 Hence, Durham organizes assemblages, palimpsestic pileups and multimedia montages in which the important thing is not unity or congruence but the relations induced among objects, places and people. In Mulvey's words, "The process then becomes a social process that puts the object into dialogue with its audience. Durham's pieces create openings for thought and possibilities for the viewer to ask the question 'why?'" (Mulvey 49). Indeed, Durham's assemblages work against closure or completion. The fragmentary, elliptic nature of the *Codex* is a case in point. Nothing is fully stated, so everything is possible; nothing is finished, and much is potentially envisaged. The artwork is an invitation to reform, to transform and to engage in a dialogic situation, the "conversation" that Durham seeks (Mulvey 119). Objects are the starting point in the deconstruction of representation and of the reformation of perception, and the *Caliban Codex* is first and foremost an odd assemblage of objects that have to be taken collectively in the manner that Duchamp inaugurated. They are found objects that together begin to make correspondences and connections that turn around hegemonic structures.

40 Yet that perspective leaves unresolved the problem of self-definition in a post-representative universe. Who *are* we outside of pre-constructed schemata? How do we define ourselves, if at all, after representations are invalidated? Who is the "I" interacting with the objects? Is he manipulating or manipulated? Durham aptly reframes the question, "Objects present themselves, and I therefore have a responsibility (in part) to present myself in return" (Quoted by Meir, p. 76). This is the contrary of a modernist statement like Williams's "No ideas but in things" (Patterson Book 1). For Durham things are not apart from us and available for our projections; instead they participate in life and summon us to chance encounters opening opportunities. If such a thing as the self is still a thinkable proposition, it emerges somewhere in the web of reversible and conflicting interpretations in which viewers engage in encountering the *Caliban Codex*.

41 At one point Caliban ingenuously wonders: "So here's my new idea: if my nose doesn't look like anyone else's, and I myself don't recognize it, aren't I free of my nose?" In this parody of a logical syllogism, where two negative propositions—he is not like any other and not recognized by himself—lead to a positive conclusion, Caliban emancipates himself from all attempts at self-definition. It is the contrary of the putatively self-evident cogito that cuts the subject from the object; it points the way out of the trap of representation. From that point onward, Caliban recognizes himself as an artist, not of course in an epiphany that demands we identify him with Durham, the assembler, but a change of orientation in Caliban's narrative of his life. Instead of

continuing to submit to Prospero's instruction, Caliban (re)addresses a representation of himself to his master.

- 42 Caliban's mask is the crowning piece in the assemblage. The letter that accompanies it is a beautiful example of mimicry being turned against the master:

*Dear Dr. Prospero,
May I, with great humility, please
present to you, as an embarrassingly
inadequate small token of my extreme
gratitude for the constant encouragement,
extreme patience and inspired friendship
(I hope!) which you have so generously
employed to show me a Better Way,
this self-portrait? I hope you will
always remember me. (But I still wish
I knew what my nose looks like! ha, ha!)
Your grateful student,
Caliban*

- 43 The letter reads as Caliban's valediction to Prospero. Clearly, he has mastered the complex phrases of polite address, patently insincere in their exaggeration. It is mistaken, I feel, to conclude that "Caliban begins and ends as a willing subaltern to Prospero, with little effective resistance" (Appleford 102). That is an overly literal reading of the text, since the parenthetical "I hope" opens the way to irony. The chapters of Caliban's diary and especially his "Small Action Painting" have made abundantly clear that Prospero's attitude is far from patient and friendly. The second parenthetical remark, with its imitation of laughter—"ha, ha!"—also alerts us to antiphrasis. The "token" Caliban offers Prospero is made from mud, PVC pipe, and glue and adorned with two unmatched glass eyes and a button for the nose (Fig. 1). It is a low relief sculpture whose material is fissured; its eyes are mismatched, and its nose is disproportionately small. We would be misguided to take the humble materials of the mask simply as a sign that Caliban has internalized the negative image projected onto the subaltern. Appleford terms it "ugly and sad" (101), but this is a one-sided and ideologically inflected interpretation that fails to reckon with Durham's special fondness for discarded materials.

- 44 True to the artist's ironic strategy, the mask is an ambivalent object, pathetic and strangely compelling at the same time. The mud has a lustrous shine and its fissures endow it with an intriguingly tactile quality. On the one hand its features appear defective: it is wall-eyed, with one dark, human-looking pupil and one amber-colored, pupil-less cat's eye; the small white button set in the black face looks like the result of a mutilation. On the other hand, the amber eye gleams like a semi-precious stone and seems somehow oracular. Durham has used mis-matching eyes in other sculptures. His *Self-Portrait* (1987) has one dark eye and one turquoise stone set in the socket. The animal skulls that he worked with in the 1970's have mismatched eyes made from semi-precious stones, and one of Durham's poems suggests an interpretation that revalorizes physiognomic asymmetry:

*I painted the armadillo's skull bright turquoise and orange,
Blue and red, black, green, like tiles and Aztec flowers.
Where his old eyes had been I put an agate
and a seashell;
For seeing in all directions. (Mulvey et al. 101)*

- 45 The mismatched eyes of Caliban's mask may indicate a different way of perceiving

things that rejects dominant categories of thought; they may permit one to look beyond the rigid dualities, "in all directions." Caliban's problematic nose has been facetiously replaced by a tiny button, a pun whose irony Meier points out (64). In Durant's reading the irony works against Caliban as "an absurd demonstration of language internalized; he is mud, he is animal, he is dark and ugly, yet he does have that cute button nose" (Durant 87 q. Meier 64). But the irony can easily turn against the master; the nose could be the reflected image of the white obsession with the featureless yet inscrutable native face. Besides, the mud mask is fashioned from the forbidden, sensual (a sensuality without sexual organs?), hence dangerous substance. It is a malleable, plastic, indestructible substance—the material of creation in various aboriginal myths (Purdom 175)—not a "death mask," "anti portraiture" or "an imperfect imitation of himself" (Appelford 102), but the site of permanent self-erasure and self-rejuvenation, flux or constant, necessary renewal.

46 Finally, there is an irrepressible energy in the things assembled in the *Caliban Codex* that outreaches repression. Though unquestionably traumatic and tragic, the colonizers' violent destruction of indigenous culture and their withholding of the means of representation (both political and artistic) are ultimately turned to comic ends in Jimmie Durham's work. The way to creative freedom lies not through imitation, but through fracturing the oppressive mold of representation and building something new out of its fragments. Durham both turns Caliban around, and turns around him. By circling around the colonizer's creation the artist avoids falling into the trap of simply replicating it. Though not disengaged, he manages to remain at a distance. Viewers should adopt the same attitude. If the *Caliban Codex* lures us into reacting in terms of the stereotypes transmitted by the dominant culture, its teasing, humorous play with those stereotypes also invites detachment. The experience turns from a consideration of Caliban to a reflection on Prospero, and from a reaction to the Cherokee artist to an examination of one's own ingrained preconceptions and prejudices. The viewers and the artist circle the *Caliban Codex*, engaging in a dance around each other that distances the assemblage as simply artwork in order to produce the relationship that is Durham's ultimate goal.

Bibliography