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# RE-STAGING COLONIALITY IN THE AMERICAS

Frédéric Lefrançois

## PROLEGOMENON

1492. The year looms large on the timeline of modern history. After more than five hundred years, it is still mentioned in academic circles as a pivotal moment in the long march of human evolution. Today, the echo of the biggest traumatic cultural shock in mankind's history is still audible. Its memory is not lost. Like a silenced actor, waiting in the backstage to resume its place on the wishful yearning still lurked in the corridor. Rehearsing the initial scene of conquest and forceful yoking to European desires is not a pure fancy. As we will see in this paper, *aesthetic coloniality* is a *sociality of knowledge* – either conscious or unconscious – which continues to influence New World *aesthesis*.

### I. ACT ONE THE CLASH OF TWO WORLDS

#### SCENE 1

##### 3 AUGUST 1492, PALOS DE LA FRONTERA

The Pinta, the Niña, and the Santa Maria set sail off the coast of Southwestern Spain. Ahead, the Genoese commander-in-chief of the fleet has bid farewell to the Old World. After months of protracted negotiation, the triumphant Spanish Crown, exhilarated by the *reconquista*, has accepted to finance his expedition. Now, that he is on board, looking out to the edge of the known world with his crew, an anxious Columbus, convoyed by a revengeful and greedy Spain, is eager to reach the Indies, the land of wealth and spices. As the three prows cross the Ocean slowly, but surely, the curtains of Black Atlantic history are gently pulled apart.

#### SCENE 2

##### 12 OCTOBER 1492, SAN SALVADOR, BAHAMAS

After two months of tiresome crossing,

deliverance is finally at hand. A small island in the vicinity of San Salvador, Bahamas, described by Bartolomé de las Casas as “an islet of the Lucayos, which was called Guanahani in the language of the Indians”<sup>1</sup> comes into view. The Pinta, the Niña and the Santa Maria are moored on the beach. The first act of symbolic appropriation then occurs, the planting of a long staff connecting the royal banner of Spain to the white sand of these pristine, yet “heathen”<sup>2</sup> shores:

*The Admiral brought out the royal banner and the captains two flags with the green cross, which the Admiral carried on all the ships as a standard, with an F and a Y [for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella], and over each letter a crown, one on one side of the ⚔ and another on the other*<sup>3</sup>.

The rest of the story is well known. It was turned into a major blockbuster for modern audiences. The film directed by Ridley Scott, *1492: Conquest of the Paradise*, which was released in 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the “discovery”<sup>4</sup>, is in this respect, quite helpful in appraising the general idea of Spanish conquest. After the first voyage, Spain will send more troops to enslave the natives thanks to the *encomienda* system, and exploit the land's natural resources at hand.

### II. ACT TWO THE COLONIAL MATRIX: A TROPICAL MELTING-POT

Irony has it that gold – a metal that mainly served sacred and cultic purposes in the native's world – became the main target of economic and aesthetic interest of the Europeans, thereby causing the methodical extermination of Amerindian peoples and cultures. Leaving the beauty of the tropical forest aside, the fascination for all that glitters and pleases the senses turned into fetishist

1. Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus* (October 11-15, 1492), transcription by Bartolomé de las Casas, online resource, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/diarioofchristophercolumbus.html> [accessed 30 May, 2018].

2. It should be noted that the expansion of Christian faith, in its most rigorous form – the Inquisition – also played a great role in the perception of Indians by the Catholic explorers. After the expulsion of Jews and Muslims, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand set out to eradicate the heathen peril, often by way of religious persecution. At that time, the use of natural medicine could constitute a sufficient offence to qualify an unlucky neighbour for the crime of heresy. Likewise, public nudity was generally associated with witchcraft, as the famous Malleus Maleficarum explains in its severest chapters. This may be one of the reasons why the Tainos were quickly likened to heathens, in spite of their docility.

3. Columbus, *ibid.*

4. Ridley Scott (dir.), *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, Gaumont, 1992.

obsession, hence the unquenchable thirst for possession of more lands, more gold, more sugar, and more suffering.

This tropical transmutation of humanity into materiality, this reification of the sacral essence represents the supreme act of colonial *counter-alchemy*. The luxurious nature, the wonderful beauty of the “copper-skinned” people, though being the object of admiration in colonial chronicles, had in this respect a very limited impact on the economic formation of the *coloniality* of taste which soon spread itself on both sides of the Atlantic and all over the world.

The experiences of conquest and colonization, and their subsequent narration with the help of art constitute the primordial scene of *traumatic seduction*. For all the fascination that these scenes may generate in modern consciousness, their artification has been actualized and rehearsed over and over again, making the New World a constant object of rapture and subjection by the Western markets, “increasing organisation of population and welfare for the sake of increased force and productivity” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986: 8).

### SCENE 1

#### SETTING THE STAGE OF CONQUEST IN THE AMERICAS

There is a famous engraving which expresses the mixture of attraction, fear and abhorrence which inhabits the “Eurocentric gaze”<sup>5</sup> of the *conquistadores*. It is entitled *America*. The picture, which stages the first colonial encounter, has a very long history. Its author, the Flemish draughtsman and painter Jan Van der Straet actually never visited the West-Indies, but he created an artwork which for a long time impregnated the colonial aesthetic discourse by its narratival character.

*America* is pregnant with a powerful scenography. Its dramatic expressivity relies on a masterful use of spatial contrast and



Fig. 1: Jan Van Der Straet, *America*, ink on paper, 200 x 269 mm, British Museum.

perspective. It contains many worlds within one: the exotic animal world constrained to the right side, the space of human interaction in the foreground, and the diagonal axis of opposition between civilization and barbarism linking the Spanish vessels to the cannibals picnicking on the beach.

The viewer's attention is funnelled towards the main stage in the foreground where tragic tension is concentrated. On the left side, an older Amerigo Vesputi holds an astrolabe in his left hand and a staff with a banner of the cross in his right hand. He scornfully looks down on a young naked female incarnation of America reclining on a hammock. Her head is topped by a feathered hat which stands in opposition with Vesputi's Venetian outfit. He is fully clad, she is almost completely naked. To intensify the dramatic tension, an upcoming conflict is suggested by the proximity of these antithetical worlds. The shore line separates the background in two antagonistic spaces: on the left, a sailing caravel is about to anchor near the beach and, on the right, a party of feasting cannibals devour barbecued human flesh. As usual, the animal sphere occupies a marginal place evidenced by the position of wild animals who roam in the surrounding landscape. All these elements represent the constituents of a catalytic reaction which will occur in the tropical melting pot.

5. The African-American feminist bell hooks conceptualized this gaze in relation to the reception of Jean-Michel Basquiat's art in the United States. She defines it as « the Eurocentric gaze that commodifies, appropriates and celebrates » the work of the artist and which « can value him only if he can be seen as part of a continuum of contemporary American art with a genealogy traced through white males ». Cf. hooks (bell), “Altars of sacrifice: re-membering Basquiat,” 1993, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 35–48.

**SCENE 2****CASTING THE COLONIAL STEREOTYPE**

Though archaeological evidence has proven that the Tainos were anything but man-eaters, the Flemish draughtsman chose to narrate through his picture the most controversial aspects of indigenous life in the Caribbean. Regardless of their actual lifestyle, they are portrayed as mindless cannibal tribes who hardly pay attention to the distinctiveness of European civilization.

The motto included in the graving reads "*Americen Americus retexit, & Semel vocavit inde semper excitam*", a sentence which can be translated as follows: "Americus rediscovers America; he called her once and thenceforth she was always awake." In other words, America should be *grateful* to Europe for having awakened her to the reality of the Western trauma. Spain, herself, has just woken up to the charms of freedom after chasing off the last Moorish colonizers from her territory.

The appeal of revenge, conquest and possession must find an innocent scapegoat to be satisfied. And there she is: the strong, almost man-like America who just sprung from her hammock hardly has time to realize what is happening to her. She was asleep. From now on, in compliance with the diktat of novelty and productivity, she will become the stage of a Sisyphean coloniality that never sleeps.



Fig. 2: Francisco Pradilla Ortiz, *The Capitulation of Granada*, oil on canvas, 330 x 550 cm, 1881, Palace of the Senate, Spain.

In this alienating process, the Americas fall into categories of subservience and colonial topicality generating recurrent stereotypes: the inherent torpor of the tropical nature, the dependence of the native on the master-narrative, the need to wring productivity out of colonial subjects by dint of violence.

**III. ACT THREE****THE CONCEPTUAL LIMBO OF AESTHETIC COLONIALITY****SCENE 1****LIBIDINAL LIMINALITY**

The first encounter between the Old World and the New occurred on a beach. It did not happen in the Bahamas only. It was repeated on each coastal area of the West-Indies with the same intentions, as it was on the West-African coast. Acquiring a systemic dimension over centuries, the iterative scene of penetration, claiming and seizure was rehearsed many times over until a somewhat stable status was reached in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when sugar ceased to be an exclusively Caribbean luxury item.

This is to say that colonial aesthetic moment has a structuring role in the collective unconscious of Caribbean populations. It has a symbolic force. From an insider's point of view, it shapes behaviours and attitudes towards the territory and its appreciation.

The aesthetic moment of coloniality which was artfully captured by a Flemish draughtsman named Jan Van der Straet stages the rapture of America thanks to the process of encapsulating aesthetic consciousness in a liminality which is convenient for successive rehearsals. Much like the beach upon which a palimpsestic history is written and rewritten the liminal space of aesthetic coloniality is an ambiguous space, which lingers between the domain of smoothness and striation.

Yet, the desire to conquer is constantly balanced by the fearsome desire to be conquered by the magical beauty of the tropical other. This ever-present ambiguity finds its apex in on the South-American mainland where Indians and Africans prove difficult to tame and enslave. In the long term, autonomous communities of Amerindian Maroons – Boni, Saramaka, Bushinengue and other Indian-mixed tribes – carve out their aesthetic identity in *Tembe* art and sculpture, as Richard and Sally Price have cleverly demonstrated (Price, 2014, 23-34)<sup>6</sup>. And they have also shaped the African character of the colony's linguistic heritage. It is true that European toponyms have left a deep imprint in the field of symbolic representation, hence the effect of cultural estrangement produced by the juxtaposition of European-sounding names and Amerindian or African ones. French Guyana and the Dutch colony of Suriname are illustrative of this creole vicinity. Another surprising feature of the relationship between European colonizers and Afro-Amerindian natives is the very particular trophic dependence of the white masters' progeny upon their coloured nannies. Elsa Dorlin reports in *La matrice de la race* that this promiscuity remains absconded from official records, because it casts doubt and shame on the racial purity of white settlers born in the Caribbean colonies (Dorlin, 205-206). Interestingly, the scene of a white baby sucking on the breast of a black *Ayah* or *Da* (the latter term was commonly used in the Francophone islands) has been reported on many times by chroniclers and voyagers sojourning in the colonies. This practice, which was supposed to immunize the baby against malaria, later owed them some suspicion from the Goan Franciscans who were asked to educate them, on account of the general belief that they had been milked by these women in their infancy and that their blood had been forever contaminated by their lasciviousness or even their colour (Anderson, 65 sq.).



Fig. 3: A.M. Coster, *De Boschnegers in de Kolonie Suriname*, watercolour, 1866.

The shame and guilt secretly nurtured by the reception of the colonial other's production are consubstantial with the abnormality of imperial exaggerations. On the interpersonal level as well as on the macro-structural scale, realities are much more complex than they seem. Easy caricatures or stereotypes are but means of eluding the question of interdependency. When Napoleonic France lost the colony of Santo Domingo, the French emperor reacted like a spoilt child looking forward to take his revenge upon a bad *nourrice*. Before the independence of Haiti, France had been milked by its colony. It would be a spurious argument to state of the two counterparts the most dependent was not the metropolis.

The French painter Marie-Guillemine Benoist was aware of these contradictions when she composed her *Portrait of a Negress* in 1800. The inherent criticism in her work is transparent through the delicate brushstrokes used to execute a sensual treatment of black skin tones surrounded by the Republican blue, white and red. Here the allusion to the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity are elegantly mocked. Her artful counter-colonial coding becomes conspicuous when the watchful eye of the critic focuses on the centre of the canvas. The bulging nipple of the *Da* reminds us that milking the voracious Empire may never have sounded as actual as in 1800, when Haiti was waging war against France to get its freedom:

*Les idéaux de liberté, d'égalité et de fraternité qui rejettent au nom de la morale le critère de la*

6. Price, Richard & Sally Price (2014). *Les Marrons*, La Roque d'Anthéron : Vents d'ailleurs.



Fig. 4: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une négresse*, oil on canvas, 81x 65 cm, 1800.

*race ont certes été proclamés sous la Révolution mais ne seront assimilés que progressivement. A cette époque, les distinctions raciales sont minutieusement décrites et rationalisées. En parallèle, avec l'extension de l'esclavage au XVIIIe siècle s'est développée une hiérarchie des races fondée sur une classification des caractéristiques biologiques. En 1800, si la loi rejette encore moralement la race, la différenciation l'emporte.* (Albigès, 2007)

## SCENE 2 THE STAGE OF TRAUMATIC REHEARSALS

As the previous example shows, colonial aesthetics are built upon a core of ethical values which are reinforced by a set of ideological structures and stereotypes. In this sense, the patterns of otherization by which genuineness is turned into a coded representation of the unseemly alien, thanks to an intricate network of metaphors and metonymies that aim at neutralizing the irrational threat of contamination. Hybridity, in this respect, is likened to monstrosity.

Amerigo Vespucci, for example, keeps himself at bay so that his skin, the State's skin, the European's should not be contaminated with

the barbarity of heathenness and cannibalism. So the first hypodermic impression, conveyed by the ambivalent phantasm of an involuntary devouring, represents an allergic reaction.

From the insider's point of view, things are totally different. Before contact, the natives had their own system of values, beliefs and historicity. In the field of sculpture, for instance, the totemism of the Taino tribes living on the Greater Islands was based on an archipelagic feeling of kinship. Similar statues caught the attention of André Breton who called them dolls, though he was amazed by their sociality in the initiation rites of North American Indians.

All through the 16th century, the scene of *traumatic seduction* is rehearsed under the auspices of innocent submission and desired enthrallment, at the behest of Europe's strongest military power. As Bartolomé de las Casas records in his retranscription of Columbus' *Diario*, the Spaniards are welcomed by a group of "naked people". Since then, the scene is set and the stage will complexify itself by annexing the other production units.

As a conscientious captain, Columbus kept his logbook up to date, but he also recorded significant observations about the development of his first expedition. Among these, one may be surprised to find the report of frequent trade relationships between Tainos and African sailors, with whom they bargained precious objects. It is surprising to discover, on reading Columbus's diary, that Africans were already present in the Americas long before the Europeans discovered the region. In other words, from the point of view of Old World dwellers – and Africa is an even older than Europe in terms of civilization – the "New" World was only new to the Europeans, as archaeological evidence can testify<sup>7</sup>.

7. A sizable number of scholars like Van Sertima have shown that African presence in the Americas pre-dated the Columbian era by some centuries.

It is now an acknowledged fact that the presence of “black-skinned people” who traded *guanin*, a golden spear-heads with Indian tribes, a practice which is original from the West Coast of Africa. And it is on account of the report by King John of Portugal that reports of African *pombeiros* – gold casters –

*(...) that he thought to investigate the report of the Indians of this Espanola who said that there had come to Espanola from the south and south-east, a black people who have the tops of their spears made of a metal which they call 'guanin,' of which he had sent samples to the Sovereigns to have them assayed, when it was found that of 32 parts, 18 were of gold, 6 of silver and 8 of copper*<sup>8</sup>.

According to Walter Mignolo, it is upon such premises, that the foundations of coloniality were laid. The ‘heathen’ peoples subjected by means of extreme violence were culturally and humanly deleted until they became base chattel or mere tools, like the coveted objects that they had made with praiseworthy craftsmanship.

*Lest we forget the modes of power that began with the invasion of the Cross and Crown in the Caribbean and in the land and/as myth invented first as America, and later baptized Latin America. This is the land that gave initiation, substance, and form to the coloniality of power, its system of social classification based on the idea of race, of “conquerors” over “conquered,” and its structural foundation tied to modernity and Euro-centred capitalism.* (Walter, in Mignolo & Walter, 2018: 16)

The first encounter between the “Old World” and the “New” takes place on a beach, a liminal space, where arrivals and departures occur on a regular basis. In Deleuzian terminology, it classifies as a “smooth space”<sup>9</sup>, namely a nomadic space, unspoiled by the marks of modern Western civilization. No buildings, streets or any other sign of architectural division, as one could witness all over Europe, were visible. No line, or grid specific to the “striated spaces”<sup>10</sup> had been erected when 16th Century Spain interrupted the free circulations of people and goods on

this island. By a single act of megalomaniac appropriation, supported by Pope Alexander VI, Columbus’ performs what has been publicized – from a Eurocentric point of view – as the first act of colonial historiography.

Yet, it is to be remembered that the Caribbean was not covered at all. And we mean here no wordplay for, in this respect, the first *Taino* inhabitants of the area were, according to Las Casas, truly “naked people”, in other words, natives who were neither covered by garments nor made guilty by ideologies of shame.

Depending on the context West-Indianness may therefore play the role the dual role of covering discourse of that of a cathartic agent. The transformation of brute exploitation into a subject of artistic creation represents a challenge which was taken up by the long lineage of artists who addressed the issue in more or less explicit fashions.

#### **IV. ACT FOUR CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AS A LOCUS OF RESISTANCE**

##### **SCENE 1**

##### **THE ARTIFICIATION OF THE COLONIAL MATRIX**

If artification represents the “outcome of combining practical and symbolic actions with organizational and discursive ones, thanks to which actors agree on considering an object or an activity as art” (Heinich: 21), then the act of naming Caribbean spaces has had a powerful illocutionary impact on Caribbean artistic consciousness.

Interestingly, the re-discovery of America, allegorically represented by a lascivious nude woman, is attributed to Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian explorer who was given the privilege of bequeathing his first name to the Americas. This imagery is representative of the Ethno-centric world-view of the Christian imperial nexus, as Mignolo notes:

8. J. B. Thacher, Christopher Columbus, New York 1903, vol. II, p. 379.

9. Deleuze and Guattari have exposed this conception of space and the related terminology in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

10. *Idem*.



*Obviously, Western Christian Europeans had the right to build their own image of the world, like anybody else who had done so before them. But it was an aberration to pretend and act accordingly as if their specific image of the world and their own sense of totality was the same for any-and everybody else on the planet. The strong belief that their knowledge covered the totality of the known brought about the need to devalue, diminish, and shut off any other totality that might endanger an epistemic totalitarianism in the making. Out of these needs emerged the colonial and imperial differences (...). (Mignolo, 2018:195)*

Accordingly, Van der Straet's *ekphrasis* typifies as an ideological instrumentalization of art for the sake of containing and distancing otherness. His pictorial composition is conceived in such a way as to elicit contrasted reactions in European viewers. One might infer from this that in a colonial context, and from the colonizer's point of view, art is an instrument of power and subjection. In accordance with this precept, the colonial artwork is ideologically and spatially distributed so that it might elicit sympathy for the conquerors and execration for the natives. In other words, the net of coloniality is cast upon the native world. Conquest was made possible thanks to the division of space and labour, but also thanks to the artification of the horrors of colonization.

## SCENE 2

### STRIATING THE SPHERE OF OTHERNESS

The natives depicted in Van Straet's engraving is emblematic of the allergic reaction caused by the initial encounter. The Tainos are shown roasting human limbs on giant skewers. One could not expect less from savages. The evidence of their unfitness for humanity is provided by their behaviour towards the inhumanity of their behaviour towards their own kind.

This stereotyping has both a paradigmatic and a functional dimension. By creating a colonial Other whose "tastes" are definitely

sub-human – for only the wildest animals resort to cannibalism –, the colonial artist paves the way for prejudice and stages the dermic, allergic reaction towards the radical otherness of the New World and its inhabitants.

As a matter of fact, the fabrication of the subaltern other became an enterprise of aesthetic coding which oscillated between two extremes: obfuscation and stereotyping. This artification (Heinich, 2012) of the Caribbean object into an artistic subject raises the important question of how the visible status came of the representation came to be known as such. For the sake of method, we propose to apprehend the complexity of the phenomenon by articulating seven types of operational processes and their artistic correlates.

- **Downsizing:** otherness is so overwhelming that the colonial artist or cartographer needs to reduce the size of the other reality. The early navigators and cartographers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often tended to downsize the spaces that they had visited<sup>11</sup>. The postcard –Van der Straet's engraving qualifies as a probable ancestor of the West-Indian postcard – observes this logic of simplification. An additional benefit is that secures the Westerner faced to the vast complexity of the New World. It contains and collects diverse elements of colonial iconicity in a specific, easily recognizable format. This exemplar use of metonymic thought stands in the way of realistic models. What matters is not so much faithfulness to the original observed, but faithfulness to the orientation of the collective phantasm.

- **Peripheralization/marginalization:** in this libidinal economy, the relationship of the self to space depends on the location and the symbolic capitalization of the cultural subject. The closer he is to the centre of the colonial space, the thicker he

11. See the map made by Jansson, Joannes, *Insulae Americanae in Oceano Septentrionali*, 1644, medium: copperplate, size (H x W): 37.4 x 51.4 cm. Publication: Jansson, J. 1644. *Nouvel atlas, ou Théâtre du Monde*. Credit: S. Blair Hedges. CM95.

becomes. On the artistic level, the scarcity of endemic artistic production in the French and Anglophone Caribbean appeared as a result of programmatic shortage of cultural exchange. And when some local production emerged in the Caribbean, as was the case of Michel Jean Cazabon in Barbados or Guillon-Lethiers in Guadeloupe (Filleau, 2017), it was generally to the effect of reproducing exotic or exogenous norms. As a consequence of this, the visibility of Caribbean art remained a function of the concentration of symbolic capital elsewhere, in the metropolis.

- **Densification:** the reality of the post-colonial aesthetic subject is intrinsically multi-layered. To acquire density and meaning, the Caribbean production has to undergo a series of superposition. Allegorically, the beach represents an exo-skeleton, some kind of membrane or institutional/statutory skin which either protects the otherness of the Caribbean reality or hides it. This is the most problematic aspect of the *colonial artification* : the Caribbean-based artwork accumulates identity skins which can either blur its genuine message or creolize it, on condition that openings or slits enable these layers to communicate between them.
- **Reproduction:** the cultural genome of the Occident is yearning to replicate itself as purely as possible in its colonies. This can be obtained with a unidirectional, vertical organization of the cultural regime overseas.
- **Deletion:** this is the most destructive process in the unfolding of the encounter. The dominant culture does not accept the idea of cohabitation with the subaltern culture and utterly erases it, resorting to physical eradication of people, languages, buildings and books, as Cortez did with the Mayas and Incas.
- **Extraction/Absorption:** a dual and reciprocal process that operates under

the aegis of cultural cannibalism. Oswald de Andrade has conceptualized it in his *Anthropophagic Manifesto*.

Such features became paradigmatic of the transferable striation which was injected into the aesthetic unconscious of subsequent generations of artists. However, some of them managed to escape the grid of coloniality by looking out to hybrid forms of crossings, that were first intimated in Agostino Brunias' *Market Day in Roseau, Dominica*, Michel Jean Cazabon's *Creole Woman with a Parasol* (MacLean: 118) and Savart's *Creole Women* (Bégot: 40-43), then developed and stylized by David Boxer did in his iconic revisions of Jamaican history (Lefrançois, 2018) and Louis Laouchez's semi-abstract paintings, among others (Marie-Louise, 2009: 15-19).

### SCENE 3

#### NEO-CARIBBEAN HYBRIDITY: FROM COLONIALITY TO DECOLONIALITY

If the harshest excesses of slavery have been inflicted upon male Caribbean subjects, its counterbalancing agent, hybridity, has often been portrayed by female incarnations. That being said, to address the issue of *cultural hybridity* in this singular way immediately raises two matters of pragmatic/praxemic interest: the locus of utterance and the intentionality of the message conveyed by ideas and words. Such is the case for the word *métissage*. As soon as it is employed, one becomes aware that the concept does not just refer to one hybridization process, but to an infinity of crossings and labels which always take you back to the point of origins. Speaking about intentionality, one also realizes that Caribbean hybrid subjectivities often find themselves in transitional spaces, at the crossroads of multiple desires, whether they be colonial, anticolonial, postcolonial or decolonial expressions of agency, or reactions to a socio-political and cultural matrix which overly determines the singularity of the individual constantly confronted to

the maddening weight of history and the absurdity of hypermodernity.

In this reflection, we intend to underpin the performativity of this transience by staying aloof from the highways of *quintessence*. This will be our way of deflating some clichés which still have a critical edge in academic discourse. To achieve this goal, we will focus on the temporality of hybridity, and lay the stress on particular time frames or “moments” which may have a triggering effect on the mutation of identity.

One could define the ‘hybrid Caribbean aesthetic moment’ as one which qualifies the subject for a genuine experience of estrangement. As such, it becomes all the more sensible to accept, as one is willing to undergo the experiment of a radical *alienation*. For to become one again means to start by collecting and integrating the diversity of multiple components of the self into one large, solid vessel in which the synthesis can be operated.

Starting from these premises, what can “hybridity” be or do, one may ask? Is the hybrid the synthesis of different essences or just the blending of diverse biological, cultural and political elements? Can *métissage* blur the disturbing differences or recall the irreversible loss of the origin, while calling for the advent of polymorphous, mutant chronotopes?

Since these questions take us to the core problem of our study which is how to project the self into a cross-cultural topology respective of ontological and teleological considerations, we will investigate the scope of what Guyanese essayist Wilson Harris, pictured as a place of crossroads where everything pertaining to transmutation and re-substantiation can occur overnight. In these circumstances, the *aesthetic moment* is bound to the fore a corpus of West-Indian

cultural referents which will be analysed by applying some aspects Glissantian and Bakhtinian theories to drama, performance and critical theory.

## V. ACT FIVE LIBERATION: DISCARDING THE PARADOXES OF THE COLONIAL MATRIX

### SCENE 1

#### CASTING OFF THE FAKE COCOON

By virtue of its ambiguous sociality, aesthetic coloniality relies upon a series of binary, yet not systematically oppositional relationships that involve codes of varying complacency. It has forged a colonial matrix which is at the same time a fake cocoon and a stillborn fruit. The hybridity that it hosts needs to blossom by an act of emancipatory symbolic violence: the piercing of the artificial shell that the legacies of colonialism and false assimilation have discursively spun around Caribbean and American aesthetic identity.

The multiple theories on hybridity all take

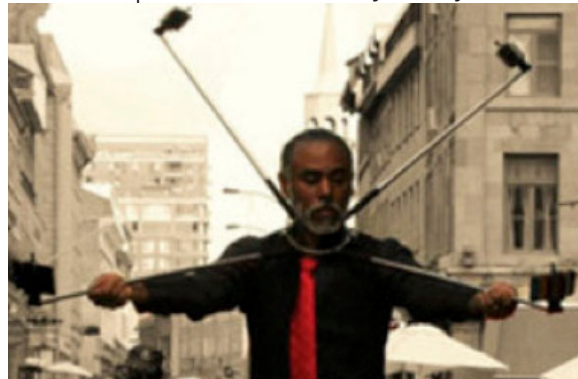


Fig. 6 : Eddy Firmin, performance in Montreal, 4 March 2011  
photo: D. Leveau. Source: [www.perspectives.org/2017/03/07/d-phormation-a-le-consommation-ano-caribeen-a-montreal-percoi-continue-coloniale/](http://www.perspectives.org/2017/03/07/d-phormation-a-le-consommation-ano-caribeen-a-montreal-percoi-continue-coloniale/)

us back to the etymology of the adjective hybrid. It means a lot for the articulation of deconstructing the Caribbean colonial nexus. A hybrid is the “offspring of plants or animals of different variety or species”. The term is derived from Latin *hybrida*, variant of *ibrida* “mongrel” or more specifically the “offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar”. Though the real origin of the word remains

unknown it is probably borrowed from Greek drama and thus somehow related to hubris. In other words the hybrid is a product of two close, but phenotypically different variants of the same species.

This metaphor proves instrumental for the general enterprise of casting off the false masks of purity subtly alluded to in Derek Walcott's plays (*Dream on Monkey Mountain*, in particular). It paves the way for the acceptance of the *hybrid aesthetic moment* thanks to which multi-layered, polymorphous cultural identities were first conceived. From this moment can be generated hybrid artistic identities, often growing larger or taller than either parent. This idea must be handled with care, for it is intrinsically unsettling.

## SCENE 2

### EXTRACTING THE COLONIAL PLEXUS

The surgery-like operation can be operated by rehearsing spinning off the cocoon in reverse orientation. The Martiniquan painter René Louise often relates to this idea in his counter-discursive visual rehearsals of the Prospero-Caliban relationship. His counterpart Christian Bertin has bravely revisited the slave trade triangle counter-clockwise, imposing the presence of the West-Indian otherness in French public space thanks to his performances in Paris (*Li Diab' La*) and Liverpool. Connecting the main iconic spots of metropolitan French architecture and artistic institutions to the furrows of his 14 km -march in Paris, Bertin has opened a slit in both the West-Indian cocoon and the French cultural shell, to let the energy of hybrid diasporic art flow between both identity *nexii*<sup>12</sup>.

Where, and when, one might ask, did this occur? For the philosopher Edouard Glissant, as well as for the Guyanese writers Wilson Harris and Fred D'Aguiar, this process occurred in the hold of the slave-ship. In his *Memories of Slavery*, Glissant reminds

us that since the beginning, *métissage* and creolization both acted as agents of harmonization and effectuation, some kind of ethnocultural code-swapping which helped the vast spectrum of the social spectrum to hold together.

*The results of métissages and creolizations are nonetheless bound to melt their actual essences into new normalities, leaving untouched but the process itself, which is a source of quiproquos and aesthetic pleasures, where the consideration of the other oozes through like an aroma in a complex elixir.* (Glissant, 2007: 49-50, transl. F. Lefrançois)



Fig. 7: Christian Bertin performing *Diab-la* in Berlin. Photo: Olivier Lussac, 2010

In other words, the hybrid space of art creolization is not whole in itself, nor does it offer a continuum of location. It can be likened to what Homi Bhabha calls the Third Space of Utterance, from which identities can take on new meanings and agencies depending on the political and cultural context.

Now to imagine art as a naval concentration camp, like the hold of the slave-ship, as an ontological chronotope, requires some inventiveness. In theory, it is already a challenge. But in practice, it becomes

12. We have coined this concept in "The Dialectics of Orientalism and Hybridity in Salman Rushdie's World", a paper that should be published shortly.

an ordeal. How can one explain to those descendants of the subaltern *others* that creativity is in the balance when the material conditions of life are so harsh and unbearable? What reward can justify such a high price?

Somewhere else, Glissant explains that the *métis* is the bearer of a symbolic debt, for it is generally through him that colonizers and slave-holders found a reason to continue their exploitation of negroes. In the best case, he represents an agent of duplicity who composes with the expectations of whites and blacks to get the better of them. Such is the portrait shown by Derek Walcott in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* with the spectacular conversion of Corporal Lestrade.

In the field of the performing arts, Ana Mendieta has consistently articulated her artistic praxis of photo-performance with the pursuit of a decolonial agenda. Her cleverly dramatized healing rites testify to the importance of reuniting with mother Earth<sup>13</sup>, of soothing the trauma of conquest and massive exploitation of the Caribbean. Her artistic enterprise aims at reconciling hybridity with the ambition of a cultural ecology by which the Creole subject can reconnect to the legacy of his ancestors and repair the damages of the past.

### SCENE 3

#### INTEGRATING CREOLE AESTHETICS

The global market which was created during the colonial expansion of the West in the Americas called for the making of new identities which had to be versatile. Adaptability was the condition of survival. This goal has been reached now. The Anancy-like Euro-Afro-Amerindian-Caribbean hybrid bears in his cultural genes the site and the means of resistance.

That one could ever think of the Caribbean basin for such a high-end project as creating a new identity is *per se* a challenge. Revisiting the past to heal old wounds and develop productive scars is an attainable objective which necessitates the global integration of Creole aesthetics in the paradigms of the Old World.

Does that mean that the suffering of African slave who was captured, sold and fettered to spend two or three weeks in the loathsome womb of compelled mingling, is to be forgotten for good? Nothing could be further from the truth. His plight is more real than our present estrangement in the world of contemporary globalism. And if the bond to his familiar village, traditions, language and customary traditions only speaks to us in nostalgic terms, then our own identity is already on the wane. His small, cramped wooden cabin – a sty, indeed – has become a more comfortable, bigger apartment or flat, wherever we are: in Europe, Africa, or the Americas.

The initial scene of conquest and forceful subjection to Europe, the echo of the cultural shock is still perceptible and must be remembered as the foundational element of Creole diasporic aesthetics. That traumatic memories of coloniality have migrated and mutated all over the world, sowing the colonial nexus in the aesthetic unconscious of colonizers and colonized peoples alike, is beyond doubt. In the process of global appropriation, new paradigms have appeared taking on new functions: blurring, superimposing, deleting – artefacts to counter the obsession of loss – which can now be counterbalanced with positive modes of creation. The time of hybridization – of *creolization* –, begins here and now.

13. This project has some similarities with the intervention of earth in the performances of the Guadeloupean art-performer Audrey Phibel.

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