

*A Critical Caribbean Constellation:
Queer Eschatapoetic Visions for (One Hell of) A Great Escape*

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Abstract

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A Critical Caribbean Constellation: Queer Eschatapoetic Visions for (One Hell of) a Great Escape is an interdisciplinary study that investigates and exposes the ways in which both History and neoliberal epistemology function to chronopolitically obscure, obfuscate, and make forget various forms of racialized, gendered, and/or sexualized violence. Given the project's interest in developing a more critical form of historiography that makes visible, thinkable, and knowable such kinds of violence, it is also a radical, alternative, and intentional departure away from the traditionally secular Marxist method of historical materialism. Following the work of Walter Benjamin, this dissertation uses specifically surrealist artistic aesthetic techniques such as literary *montage* in order to generate a constellation that juxtaposes together three different figures and images of sex workers in the context of the Caribbean during the first decade of the 21st century. Imbued as they are with a "weak Messianic power" that promises to deliver a "profane illumination," this specifically critical Caribbean constellation possesses and provides not only a non-secular sense of time but a method of historiography which can help illuminate the past differently while also queering the present. Lastly, it builds on the work of Reza

Abdoh's "queer eschatology" by developing a specifically queer set of "eschatapoetic" visions whose more stereoscopic mode of aesthetics enables the apprehension of three-dimensional depth that can, in turn, reveal a variety of different hidden histories and their related structural violences.

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I am a strong believer that our dominant modes of research as well as our dominant modes of teaching *must* change. This is a matter of not just respect and good decolonial practice but also one of our own collective survival. Knowledge is never and can never be limited to just the academically derived type of knowledges that we, ourselves, get from the traditional disciplines and that the experts tend to in their own respective fields. If anything, I think Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* has pretty much put that belief to bed. With that said, this here dissertation and all of the pages that compose it are imbued with—in fact, they seep and they are soaked in—the knowledges of just so many different people, and so the “I” that writes here is *by far* anything but a unitary and/or solitary entity. The “I” that writes here is a multitude of many, congealing in each citation that I, myself, perform of other people and their own inspiring and quite brilliant work. It is to them that I would like to take some time and some space here on down below in order to give them some special thanks and some love.

There are many within “the many” that I, myself, invoke here who do not and who have not historically registered as being worthy of producing knowledge. They, themselves, are not often seen as being the ones who are worthy of being cited within the liturgy of secular and scientific academia. This is precisely because of the epistemological, cosmological, and gnoseological politics of the United States' (neo)imperial and settler colonial projects. Many of the knowledges that inform this here text have been deemed “illegitimate” even within the (now also virtual) halls of the global university system, and so, I, myself, would like to take a moment to thank the many that make up the “I” who are here and who have also helped that ‘I’ to write

up and think about all of the many different issues and many different theories throughout these following pages.

To begin, this project is really dedicated to all the women in my life—especially to those women who have lost their own children in some way. This is primarily for you, mom—my own mother, Tina. I wanted to thank you the most perhaps, because without you and your own story—without our story—this dissertation would be so incredibly different from what it is now. Without you, I don't know if the project's main interest in spirituality and its dogged attempts to relegitimize it would have been possible. The thanks and the love that I have for you is nothing but profound. I know that our collective past is a very dark and sometimes still painful one, but your strength and your resolve in this deeply violent world are simply ineffable to me. In so many ways, this project is really dedicated to you, mom, because of who you are, how you have survived, how you have kept us both alive, and what you have taught me about *how* to survive. I, myself, have tried to interweave your many witchy teachings and your often esoteric wisdom all throughout these many pages, and so, here's to seeking divine wisdom together for many more years to come. I love you, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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traumatized state. Your patience with me as well as your scholarship are literally awesome. They have persistently inspired me to both be and become better. Memories of some of our darkest times on campus still have a deep-seated sense of care, hope, and solidarity in them for me and that is largely because of you and the reading materials you pass along. You helping us to raise our consciousnesses weekly in your living room around the Charleston Protests and the local rise in neo-nazism has made me feel so cared for in a way that was unfamiliar but oh-so welcome. I, therefore, want to give thanks to you for what has felt, for me, like becoming a part of the House of Reddy-Lowe. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, but I can only hope to produce similar work that lives up to both of your names. Like so many queers before me, I, myself, was cast out and away from my own home, having lived in many different houses (that were, themselves, not homes) ever since. That expulsion and that exile left me in search of a home which brought me here to Seattle as a very young and eager student trying to understand just what exactly had happened not just to me but to others who were all quite akin to me. I thank you for taking me in and for nurturing me in the many ways that you have.

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appreciated you letting me attend and give a small talk at your Aimé Césaire conference even though I, myself, didn't present on Césaire at the time. You should know, however, that you did end up planting a very important seed that I would later continue to nurture. Before my own time here at UW, I will say that my own knowledge of Césaire and the Négritude movement in general was superficial. I have you to really thank for helping me to better understand the legacy and the complexity of Césaire's work plus so much more. I have without a doubt persistently found myself returning in both my research as well as my teaching to the work of Aimé and his wife, Suzanne Césaire, especially the work that came out of the time they both spent together with André Breton and the other surrealists.

Ileana Rodríguez-Silva, I have such fond memories of being with you in your office and of being with you at panels. You have helped me to really anchor, stretch, and complicate my own thinking about the Caribbean as a region, and you have helped to provide me with such a rich foundation on top of which to work and build. I feel so lucky to have had the chance to work with you, and I really loved travelling and presenting with you at the *Ethnicity, Race, and Indigenous Peoples* (ERIP) conference which was held at Gonzaga University a few years before COVID. I can't thank you enough for including me in that trip and for really giving me the time, the space, the attention, and the feedback on my case involving Sirena Selenia. I do wish that I had had better things to say at the time about what it meant to think through an archipelagic framework when you did ask me that question over breakfast one morning in the place we were all staying in. I think I might have more to say now than I did back then. Nevertheless, I look forward to what I hope is an ongoing conversation for many more years to come.

Gillian Harkins, I can't thank you enough for having introduced me—and really for having challenged me—to understand Walter Benjamin and his work. I remember first reading

Susan Buck-Morss' article which you had recommended to me once—the one titled, “*The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering*”—and I remember just experiencing this complex mixture of confusion, intrigue, intermittent understanding, and the nearly uncontrollable desire as well as inspiration to dive even deeper. I could thank you for everything that I have learned from you about organizing and about working in the Monroe Correctional Complex together—which is a lot—but I do want to thank you perhaps the most for planting another important seed which I would continue to nurture. That article is what later led me to Buck-Morss's larger book, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*. It was that latter text of hers that really inspired my own framing of this whole entire project as a mystery. I am really forever grateful to you for pushing me to not only better understand Benjamin's method as well as his overall approach to aesthetics but also his specific use of Marxism and Marx's fundamentally secular method of historical materialism. I think my own current use and discussion of “stereoscopic aesthetics” is probably the fruit of some of our earliest of conversations.

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www.hidden-3d.com

introduction

Part of the inspiration for my title came from reading Susan Buck-Morss' explanation of her own writing process in the composition of her 2009 book, *Hegel, Haiti, & Universal History*. For Buck-Morss, the central question to ponder and answer in that text of hers was how the nineteenth century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *related* to the Caribbean country of Haiti. This question was important, because those working within the traditional disciplines had continued to investigate, narrate, and publish on the two of them independently from one another. As she, herself, proclaims: "[...] there is no place in the university in which the particular research constellation 'Hegel and Haiti' would have a home" (23). Like Buck-Morss, there would also be no place in the University (of Washington) in which my own particular research constellation known here as a "Critical Caribbean Constellation" would ever have a home.

My original desire to focus this project on the Caribbean was a result of me wanting to combine my own traditional disciplinary training in a way that was much more interdisciplinary. For those who might not know, I was trained as an undergraduate in the (dare I say dying) disciplines of both French and Spanish languages and literatures, which I later taught here at the UW. In those early days, I wanted to figure out how best to use my French, Spanish, *and* English linguistic skills together, so I turned my attention over to reading and studying specifically Caribbean languages and literatures. Unknowingly, however, I entered into yet another dying discipline, that of Comparative Literature this time which subsequently transformed into a renewed and renamed Cinema and Media Studies Department. As I read Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, I began to experience this institutional form of death as the first shift in my own dissertation project. Understanding what Spivak meant when she wrote that "[t]he new Comparative Literature makes visible the import of the translator's choice" and that "[i]n the

translation from French to English lies *the disappeared history of distinctions in another space*” (emphasis mine), I started to pick up different kinds of media like film, photography, and painting just to keep apace with the newer and more neoliberal academic landscape. Nevertheless, I was ready to draw out that which was recorded “[...] by the French and withdrawn by the English,” that which was “full of the movement of languages and peoples still *in historical sedimentation at the bottom*, waiting for the real virtuality of our imagination” (18, emphasis mine).

For a while, I was set on specifically trying to understand in order to reveal how certain systematized and institutionalized ways of knowing like neoliberal epistemology operated in real-time. This is when my own second shift occurred as I moved away from studying discourses to digging up the epistemologies that undergirded them and provided such a seemingly unshakable foundation for their truths. I remember reading Grace Hong’s 2015 book, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* in which she defines “[...] neoliberalism foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past” (7 and 14). She then adds that neoliberalism “[...] does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death” (ibid). Later on, she refers to neoliberalism as “an epistemological framing, a way of seeing and not seeing” (17). In other words, neoliberal epistemology disavows the racial and gendered violences that occur *well within the present* by chronopolitically framing them as *belonging to the past* while it simultaneously invites and enfolds *certain others* into a more respectable and properly reproductive sense of futurity. As Sugarman and Thrift both note, “[...]”

the neoliberal transmutation of time is reorienting and reorganizing individual and collective psychological life” (808)

During coursework, I came into contact with the famous German economist, Karl Marx, as well as his inverted Hegelian method of “historical materialism.” Admittedly, I was not at all familiar with this tradition, so my own third shift from a nascent (neo)liberalism to Marxism and Marxist theory has often felt like a long and laborious one, funnily enough. It has often felt like trying to learn yet another language with its own set of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and even style and performance of speaking. Yet, I am quite thankful for this particular tradition and the intellectual tools it has provided me, especially those feminist and foucauldian genealogies that have helped to unearth the invisibilized histories and naturalized forms of reproductive labor which both queer people and women have long performed without sufficient recognition or remuneration. Let us also remember that some of the most foundational books within the Marxist tradition have come from people who were, themselves, either born or lived in the Caribbean. Take Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), for example. Or Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Then there is the work of Walter Rodney, CLR James, Frantz Fanon, and so much of Stuart Hall.

In addition to my combined, interdisciplinary, and Marxist focus on the Caribbean, I knew that I also wanted to use a critical perspective which could help me see and understand things from a point of view much better than my own. This was my fourth shift, and its main source of inspiration came after reading two more Marxist-oriented texts.

The first was Roderick Ferguson’s 2004 book, *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. That book proffers a disidentifying Marxist analysis of a black figure of

prostitution as represented in Marlon Riggs's 1989 experimental documentary, *Tongues Untied*. As Ferguson first demonstrates, Marx originally essentialized and universalized heteropatriarchy as he theorized property ownership in his own *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Speaking for Marx, Ferguson writes that "[...] capitalist property relations represent the ultimate obstacle to heteropatriarchal practice and being. In disrupting heteropatriarchy, capital disrupted man's fundamental essence" (7). He then adds that, "[f]or Marx the symbol of that [capitalist] dehumanization [of man] could be found in none other than the prostitute" insofar as "[t]he prostitute proves capital's defilement of man. She symbolizes man's dehumanization or more specifically, man's feminization under capitalist relations of production" (7 and 8). In his own observation that "[...] the drag-queen prostitute is a fixture of urban capitalism," Ferguson emphasizes that he does not intend to read or interpret this figure "as a tangle of pathologies and misfortunes" (1). Instead, Ferguson works in a more queer of color and again disidentifying way with Marx in order to use Riggs' own image of the black drag queen prostitute as "[...] a critique of [the] commonplace interpretations of her life" (ibid).

The second inspirational text was Susan Buck-Morss' 1986 article, "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering." That text focused on another famous but more unorthodox, esoteric, and Gothic Marxist by the name of Walter Benjamin who often studied figures of Parisian prostitution as they were represented in the nineteenth century poetry of Charles Beaudelaire (Cohen). Buck-Morss writes that, for Benjamin, "the image of the whore," was "the most significant female image," because she "is the embodiment of objectivity, not subjectivity" (120). As Andrew McCann puts it "[...] the prostitute and the mannequin [both serve] as model figures, emissaries of a whole system of exploitation, reification, alienation. Like the flâneur, and yet more socialized, more representative, these women stand in for every person

in commodity-producing society” (101). For Benjamin, capitalism alienates erotic desire by funneling and filtering it through heteropatriarchal forms of reproduction which helps to create more prostitution and its various figures. But akin to Ferguson, McCann and Esther Leslie both argue that “[...] the figure of the prostitute enables Benjamin to organize a radical assault on the pieties of bourgeois conjugality” and on, more specifically, “[...] the bourgeois notions of romantic love, domesticity, and reproduction” (101). Unlike Marx, then, both Ferguson and Benjamin see the “[...] politically avant-garde potential of prostitution as a figure in a critique of capitalism” (ibid).

After reading Ferguson and Benjamin’s texts, I knew that I also wanted to focus my own study on figures of prostitution, but I wanted to do so in the context of the Caribbean. This was my fifth shift. Together, their work helped me to understand how my own project could illuminate the functioning of a much larger structure than just that of urban capitalism. I, therefore, actively chose to center, privilege, collect, and constellate together three different representations of various figures of prostitution from Haiti, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic, and I did so in the hopes of shedding a flood light onto the larger global capitalist economy which is now really interplanetary. With Laurent Cantet’s 2004 film, I analyzed the neoliberal epistemic violences that render the image of Legba, a black Haitian prostitute, as static and already moribund. His murder in the film is never solved and thus forever left a mystery because there simply is no time to investigate the “million reasons” for his death. In J. Michael Seyfert’s 2010 documentary, I analyzed the more dialectical approach of the filmmaker in his more dynamic image of the black rastafari sex worker which he intentionally juxtaposes with a variety of different historical documentation, maps, paintings, newspaper articles, illustrations, and engravings. In doing so, Seyfert, like Benjamin, uses and generates a Messianic form of

ruptural time in addition to a weak Messianic power. In Mayra Santos-Febres' novel from the year 2000, I analyzed the specifically watery-like imagery and queer aesthetics of Sirena Selena, a boricua siren and sex worker, whose erotic rhythms and rituals in singing *bolereos* help her to escape out of the longer temporal demands of an increasingly neoliberal environment. And she does so, moreover, by magically transforming herself into an iridescent cloud that suddenly floats away and disappears. Quite like Ferguson, then, my own project "[...] tries to present another story—one in which the people that presumably evince the dysfunctions of capitalism are revised as sites that possibly critique state, capital, and social science" (ix).

But as I continued to weave together my own critical Caribbean constellation, I realized that I was acting most in the capacity of what Benjamin had called an "eclectic" or "aesthetic engineer." This was my sixth shift, and Graeme Gilloch explains well the tasks that this role requires: "[o]bjects, edifices, texts and images are fragmented, broken and blasted from their usual contexts so that they may be painstakingly recomposed in *critical contemporary constellations*. The eclectic engineer juxtaposes disparate and despised artefacts, forms and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present" (4). My own work here weaves together a variety of "disparate and despised artefacts" that are all normally narrated as being separate from one another, because they are so often siloed off by the University and its disciplines. Ironically, my own work brings to light what the epistemologies behind the traditionally rational and supposedly clarifying fields of French, Spanish, English, History, Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology (among so many more) have all distorted if not outrightly obscured and/or obfuscated. Even Benjamin, himself for example, is not as far removed from the Caribbean as the disciplines might well tell and teach us today. In fact, he was actively organizing, working, and coming into conflict with other

Surrealist visual artists. He even wrote letters to André Breton who left France for the Caribbean to attend Vodou ceremonies, deliver a riotous lecture on “Surrealism and Haiti,” and make more explicitly anticolonial forms of artwork with people like Léon Damas and the Césaires, both Aimé and Suzanne (Geis).

But both Marx and Marxists share a particular conception of history and thus of time. Much of Benjamin’s work maintains several critiques of historical materialism in addition to the tradition known as historicism, which he referred to as “the greatest narcotic of the time” (Buck-Morss, 100). For Benjamin, the Marxist conception of history was problematic, because it was objective and secular, linear, sequential, developmental, and, above all, progressive, and teleological. But Benjamin also critiques historical materialism for making specific use of theology in order to win its arguments while simultaneously keeping theology intentionally hidden away and out of sight. Like Benjamin, my own project seeks to bring theology back up into sight and out of hiding, but I also wanted to do so with a specifically queer kind of twist. *What would a specifically queer theological approach have offered up to Benjamin in his own time?*

My seventh shift involved moving away from the traditional academic emphasis on words in the writing up of history to a more poetic sensibility that could engage with images. This occurred after reading another one of Benjamin’s critiques wherein he states that “history decays into images not stories,” which coincides with Carla Damião who says that, “[i]t is possible to think about the feminine, sexuality, arts and history through an epistemological principle conceived as an image: namely, the constellation” (120). Furthermore, Benjamin specifically uses “[...] the dialectical image as a radically new method for the conduct of a new mode of critical materialist historiography, on the one hand, and [...] as part of the description of

a radically alternative conception of time and of historical experience, on the other” (Pensky, 179). For Benjamin, figures of prostitution are specifically dialectical images, because “[...] they are [first] negated and preserved in history at once,” and, second, “she [sic] is [both] ‘seller and commodity in one’” (Buck-Morss, 104 and 120). “[...] We [thus] see that the method of constructing dialectical images is itself also to be understood as the development of a new form of critical memory and a new conception of the images of historical time” (Pensky, 188).

I experienced my eighth shift away from the essay format to composing literary montages after reading two more of Benjamin’s texts from the 1930s. In both the Paris essay and *The Arcades Project*—Benjamin tries “[t]o carry over the principle of montage into history” which “mean[t that he], initially, [had] to borrow an aesthetic technique of the literary avant-garde, the French Surrealists, and to apply that method beyond the aesthetic sphere, into the practice of critical historiography” (Pensky, 185). He, therefore, juxtaposes different textual fragments together such as “quotations, theoretical statements, historical data,” to such a degree that “[o]nly after repeated readings do the salient formal characteristics of the text emerge in relief: the Baudelaire essay comprises a series of images torn from their ‘natural’ context and reintegrated in the form of a montage or constellation” (14 and 24). “[T]his constellation, in turn, forms an image [...] in the sense of a new, necessary interpretation of the fragments’ relationships with one another. Finally, this interpretation would also have the shocking consequence of obliging an entirely new interpretation of the material culture from which they were wrested, and the relationship of that material culture to the present moment” (Pensky, 185). As such, Benjamin “created ‘dialectical images’ in which the old fashioned, undesirable, suddenly appeared current, or the new, desired, appeared as a repetition of the same” (100).

The queer eschatapoetic visions mentioned in my subtitle are from my ninth shift which was the result of my own revisioning of the queer eschatology that a now deceased and queer Iranian playwright by the name of Reza Abdoh had already begun to practice and perform in New York City during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Quite like Benjamin's use of montage, queer eschatology both engages and deploys an alternative mode of time that is a specifically "unsettling historiography" (Ybarra). Akin to the way in which Ferguson disidentified with the Marxist tradition, "[...] Abdoh's disidentification [...] with [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky's Christian eschatology (and the patriarchal aspects of Zoroastrian cosmology such as the emergence of the Mazda) [...] allowed him to imagine the end of evil by destroying (white) patriarchy through parricide" (145). In doing so, he put forward "[...] a rather unsettling idea [...]: that the most compelling articulation of liberation, of being other under Neoliberal necropolitical rule has been imagined—is being imagined—outside of secular, materialist temporalities and political processes" (142). In both the secular world and New Testament studies, Mayuko Yasuda observes that "[e]schatology is, in general, understood as the study of the End of the World and the related matters" and that there is often an emphasis placed on it being "the chronological End of the history/World" in spite of Vitor Westhelle's work on eschatological space (71). In any case, the Eschaton is imagined as the arrival of the Telos, or, again, the end—be it temporal, spatial, or otherwise (81). For Abdoh, his own specific use of "[...] queer eschatology [...]" is not only a divestment of theater/performance historiography from so-called teleological straight time as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman, but also from the orthodoxies of queer theory predicated either on a never arriving future (Muñoz) or the definitive lack of one (Bersani, Edelman)" (Ybarra, 142). Moreover, Abdoh "[...] quite literally drags Dostoyevsky into the Meatpacking District as a way to think through the possibilities of another world—a world imagined by queer

biblical scholars and contemporary theologians such as Sarah Coakley and Michael Nausner in which the eschaton offers a new gender future, free of gender entirely in its most radical imagination, in the present [just] as much as a distant future“ (145).

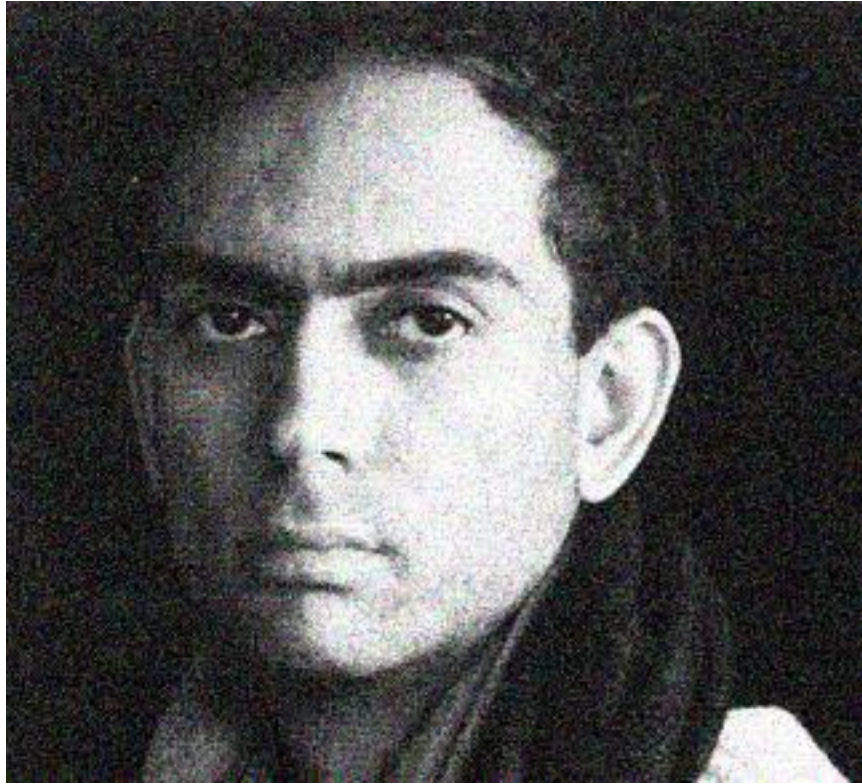


figure I | An image of Reza Abdoh.

My own queer eschatapoetics is different from Abdoh’s queer eschatology, though, in two very important ways. In following Yasuda’s postcolonial and queer work, I first chose to revision the traditionally Christian understanding of a future End Times to come (i.e. the arrival of the eschato[n]) with “[...] those who live in and through the eschata [e.g., margins] [...],” or the many different kinds of end times that queer people have already experienced (82). “Queer eschatologies [...] would [thus] become possible by (1) revealing how Telos-oriented Eschatology forms and is formed by heteronormative (i.e., anti-queer) understandings of time

and (2) remembering, or rather being haunted by, the ends of queer people that bear eschatological graveness” (87). Yasuda further adds that “[q]ueer temporalities, however, refuse such [an] understanding of time and instead proposes other kinds of eschato-/eschatalogies by revealing the ends/deaths brought by the violence of heteronormative future-orientation as well as confronting and requiring its end” (ibid). Second, I went beyond Yasuda by further queering eschatology’s reliance on a patriarchal, logical, and still rational-oriented mode of study by taking seriously the deep, dark, erotic, and specifically *visionary* power that comes out of both *poesis* and *poetics*. As Aimé Césaire writes, “[a]t the base of poetic knowledge, [is] a stunning mobilization of all the human and cosmic forces” (162). “Such is surrealist activity,” says Suzanne Césaire, “[...] which alone is able to free man by revealing his unconscious and among those that will contribute to peoples’ liberation by illuminating the blind myths that have brought humanity to his point” (Richardson, 126). Thus, a queer set of eschatapoetics as opposed to yet another rational and logical discourse on queer deaths and disappearances helped me to better align my own project’s content with its form. It also provided me with a more appropriately visual historical mode of study that could better read, interpret, and draw out the hidden Christian chronopolitics which emerged out of my own images of Caribbean prostitution as I continued to critically constellate them together.

But my own project also uses a queer eschatapoetics in order to advance a specifically *stereoscopic* form of aesthetics, which Buck-Morss had already observed in Benjamin. In fact, Benjamin clearly “[...] described the ‘pedagogic’ side of his work: ‘to educate the image creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade’” (109). My own queer eschatapoetics, thus, use “[...] a *stereoscopic aesthetics* as one that enables the apprehension of multiple realities and the relation between them—specifically, a dominant

‘reality’ and the counter-hegemonic worldview(s) it attempts to foreclose from perception” (Ponce de Leon, 25). But “stereoscopic aesthetics [also] provides a social depth of perception insofar as it enables an apprehension of epistemological-perceptual difference [while] throw[ing] light on the relations of power through which this difference is managed, negated, or obscured” (ibid). “[...] As a radicalizing force in social movements [...],” “[a specifically] stereoscopic anti-colonial aesthetics [i]s one that brings into view both the materiality of contemporary colonial practices and their systemic disavowal [...]” (Critical Theory Workshop, 26: 39). Said another way, stereoscopic aesthetics “[...] puts into relief the ways in which coloniality functions as an *epistemic* project that enables the proliferation of universalist ideologies and moral economies that are organized around system replacements” (ibid, emphasis mine).

My own Marxist approach in this project is thus akin to Ferguson’s, Benjamin’s, and Abdoh’s in that it uses the images of Caribbean figures of prostitution in order to generate a critique via an alternative mode of historiography. And that alternative mode of historiography not only unsettles bourgeois conceptions of history, time, and memory, but it also provides us with an epistemological and ontological means of furtive escape out of what Freeman has diagnosed as “[...] chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3). “In a chronobiological society,” Freeman further explains, “the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, [...] death and its attendant rituals” (4). Borrowing Dana Luciano’s terminology, my own project asserts that this hidden bourgeois “chronobiopolitical” rhythm is currently a secular but much older Christian ritual that has been specifically cultivated for the

maintenance and protection of the bourgeoisie's own reproductive future. My own call for (one hell) of a great escape is, therefore, a call to jolt my own readers awake from the living dream and hell that is our own current time-space of capitalist reproduction, while it also attempts to execute a mass metamorphosis of the bourgeoisie and their bourgeois egos. My own hope is to use these queer eschatapoetic visions as a way to help trigger and then induce a dying process which will hopefully transform the specifically bourgeois ego "back" into an imaginal one. But as James Hillman has already advised us, "[...] to reach the fully subjective, a dream-worker must reach into the last pocket of objectivity, the dream-ego, its behaviors and its feelings, keeping them within the image. The job becomes one of subjecting the ego to the dream, dissolving it in the dream, by showing that everything done and felt and said by the ego reflects its situation in the image, i.e., that this ego is wholly imaginal. [...]he first move in teaching ego how to dream is to teach it about itself, that it too is an image" (102).

methods

Benjamin & Bataille:

on stereotelescoping a constellation of key image-concepts

“[T]here is no place in the university in which the particular research constellation ‘Hegel and Haiti’ would have a home.”

— Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, & Universal History*, 2009.

“We can’t even see the sky at night if we’re in cities, right? All those kinds of things that we can’t have access to that are necessary to activate as ways to find ourselves.”

— Jodi Byrd, “Settler Colonial Elimination & the Dobbs Decision,” Q2, 2024.

"Every present is determined by those [past] images which are synchronic with it"

—Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-werk* (V, 578).

“telescoping the past through the present”

—Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-werk* (V, 588)

0 - critical constellations

I want to start off this first methods chapter by focusing in on and thinking about two major and interrelated methodological questions. The first question is this: *what is it that allows me to collect and connect together all of these seemingly disconnected fragments as well as all of these seemingly disconnected fields which I, myself, have brought here together and then interwoven with one another?* The second and more specific question is this: *How is it that I am able to bring together such seemingly disconnected things as astronomy, astrology, queer studies, performance studies, postcolonial studies, religious studies, mad studies, mythology, the (fringes of the) tradition of critical theory and philosophy, marxism, women of color feminisms, decolonial theory, and that region of the planet we have come to call the Caribbean?*

Well, I think that the short of it is simply this: it's just *me*. It's just me and my own proclivity to find and forge what I, myself, and many others—as I will later on explore and explain in much greater detail down below—have come to call “critical constellations.” *I* am the one who intentionally collects, connects, and, better yet, *constellates* together all of these seemingly disconnected little things, and I have done so, because they have all formed a very large part of my own education up and until this very point in both space and time here on this planet. Indeed, these seemingly disparate fields all form a large part of the current state of my very own knowledge, a state that I, myself, have built up and accrued over a fairly long period of time now. If there is any sort of constant thread, then, that seems or appears to have woven its way throughout my entire educational trajectory thus far—from pre-kindergarten well up and until my own current status as a doctoral candidate—then it would have to be my own relationship to what Walter Benjamin called “constellations” as well as the “secret affinities” that

exist amongst those constellations' many different fragments and their many different fields. But before we get into Benjamin and his own specific work on and with constellations, I, myself, do want to briefly revisit a little memory of mine from my own childhood.

In the earliest years of my youth, from about the years of 1989 to 2000, I grew up in a rural and "unincorporated community" out in the southeast area of the United States of America. For the first ten to eleven years of my life, I lived out in Nathalie, Virginia which is, itself, located in Halifax County and is fairly close to the Virginia-North Carolina border. Now, one might—and one more than likely would—say that this was "deep country," a style of living that was lived "out there in the woods," or out there "in the boonies" as many whom I, myself, have known would probably still say themselves. Whatever the case, the population there was and still is quite low—Nathalie, in fact, had only some 183 people as of 2020—and so it was predominately nature, itself, that really surrounded us and our whole entire existence.

In those earliest years of my own childhood living out there in Nathalie, Virginia, I can distinctively remember how we would all leave the tobacco and corn fields after a long day's work. My own mom and I would head home together by walking down the short dirt road that was just right next to the exact same set of tobacco fields in which we would all work throughout the day. I think that there were at least two of them, two tobacco fields that is, but there could have also been a third. I can also remember the barn in which we were probably air-curing and then hanging the tobacco plants that we had harvested earlier on in the day and from the many days well before that. But what I, myself, think that I can really remember the most from that whole entire early period of my own early childhood is how we would walk home and rest in a nearby trailer for the night. Yes, that rural, southern, and Virginian kind of night, that is what I, myself, remember the most. I remember the trailer, sure, but I really remember the night. When I

got a little bit older, and when we all later decided to move on further along down the road—that is, further along down Ellis Creek road to be more specific—into a doublewide that was more than twice the size of our original trailer, I remember how I used to love sitting outside at night, and I used to really love sitting outside during those hot and humid summer nights out in southern rural Virginia. I really used to love the nighttime out there, because *how could one not become so bewitched and/or bewildered by it?* There was the moon, the humidity and the heat, the fireflies, the constant and yet rhythmic chorus of both the crickets and the frogs. Everything was humming. Everything was beating, throbbing, and erotic in that hot, velvety, and luscious darkness. It was all so alive, and, goddamn, do I miss it.

Now, when one is out there in southern rural Virginia, it is nearly impossible *not* to look up, out, and into the dazzling darkness of the bright night sky. It's really all so incredibly dark, and I have tried my best to better explain the quality of this kind of darkness in a bit more detail in the second opening chapter to this here project, the one whose main title I, myself, have chosen to call, "into the luminous dark." In fact, I still remember how I used to sit outside a lot at night and just look up at the stars. It may sound somewhat cliché, but, as a kid, I really did used to wonder back then and back there about what was possibly up and out there in outer space. *Were there other planets outside of our very own solar system? If there were, then were there other people living on those extra-solar planets? Were they just like us? Were they different from us?* I still remember how I used to look up and think about what it was that we really *knew* about what exactly was up and out there, and I still even remember thinking about what it was that we as a collective species *still don't know* about whatever it is that could possibly live up and out there. As a kid, I used to wonder about all of these kinds of things while I, myself, would continue to stare up, out, and into the deep darkness of the bright night sky.

I used to (day)dream about these kinds of things a lot too as a kid. I used to imagine all of the many different and possible worlds that there could be whenever I would go off to school, and I used to imagine all of the many different and yet possible unknowns that were just out there somewhere lurking in the dark whenever I would go to bed. It was as if they were all hiding up and out there in this watery-like depth of an enormous cosmic ocean, and so, just like an actual abyss, the cosmos seemed and still seems to me to stretch out as if for an eternity, concealing things that I could not even fathom. For me, outer space was and still is a sort of infinite abyss, one that I, myself, would finally and hopefully come to cross upon my own death one day—or night for that matter.

I would also like to say here that it was during this whole entire early phase of my own childhood—between the time I spent living there in that trailer on Cook Lane to the double wide which we later lived in on Ellis Creek Road—that I, myself, got into the habit of wondering a lot about *other worlds*. As a child, I was fascinated with what *other possible worlds* there might be out there, and that is mainly because I think I, myself, was much more interested in trying to live in those places that were so very very far away from the one in which I was currently living. It wasn't always like that, but it ended up being so in the end. In fact, I remember so desperately just wanting to go and be and live *somewhere else*. At times, I wanted to live in those places that were located somewhere so far out there in the deep and somewhere so far out there in the dark, I would even risk some of the deadliest spaces of the cosmos to get there. I wanted out.

And so, in a way, I had an early and perhaps even spiritual kind of fascination with the stars. They were what helped serve as a sort of compass for me, a way to help orient me and my own immanent escape into another world. I loved constellations, and I was incredibly taken with the whole idea of “the universe” and “the cosmos” in general. In part, I think that this is due to

the influence of my very own mother who really nurtured that sort of astral interest and love of mine in ways that extended well beyond just astronomy and the empirical sciences. Out there and back then, the night sky was—and I’m sure it still is—nothing but chock full of constellations, the milky way, and all of the cosmos’ awe-inspiring wonder. Out there and back then, the constellations were all so astonishingly visible to the naked eye and just, oh, so vivid. So, my mom got me a telescope one year, and I absolutely loved it. Little did I know that as I started to point my newly gifted seeing-device into the dark night sky, that I was physically and mentally preparing myself for learning how to critically telescope the past in the way that the critical historian, Walter Benjamin, once did, himself.

Throughout all of the time I spent stargazing and being suspended in some other kind of night-oriented daytime reverie with a telescope my own mom had gifted me, I have since come to learn a thing or two about constellations which I, myself, would like to share with you both here and now. Constellations—be they real ones or be they the kind created in the process of a research project such as this—are quite the tricky little things. They’re tricky in that they’re not always what they initially seem to be or whatever it is that they initially seem to look like. In other words, there’s much more going on than there initially seems to be on the surface, and there’s often another kind of layer—if not multiple layers—that is so often kept hidden away from us. Constellations, therefore, have their own kinds of secrets to them. Quite like a *trompe-l’œil* in this regard—that art technique which I, myself, have further explored and explained in the first introductory chapter, titled “the (hidden) door”—constellations can also deceive the eye, and so it is important to remember that our own observations of them cannot, themselves, be fully trusted. In short, we must, ourselves, doubt what it is that we are initially seeing, because constellations are not exactly straight forward kinds of things. We must, as James Hillman would

probably still say, look at them as formations of the nightworld, things that come out of the dark and which only really emerge as the sun, itself, sets. That is, we must look at constellations in a way that is much more similar to moonlight than in a way that is akin to sunlight. That is, we must look at them *askance* in order to be able to better see and better understand the actual arrangement in question. We must look at them through their reflections. We, ourselves, must therefore move and shift our own perspectives, if we, ourselves, can even begin to get a glimpse of what, in fact, is actually going on. Constellations can and do create many different kinds of illusion of their own, and so we must learn (how) to shift our own vantage point if we ever want to be able to clock those kinds of illusions, themselves.

One particular kind of illusion that constellations can and do, indeed, create involves the bending and/or distorting of starlight. While I am no professional astronomer, myself, I do think that the scientific short of it is something close to this: the light of the stars that we, ourselves, see within any given constellation is, itself, starlight which can be and is often located close to or behind the light of other stars. That close or backgrounded starlight can then become bent and/or distorted as it passes through the gravitational pulls of other stars in order to make its own way to us and to our very own eyes. I believe scientists have referred to this particular phenomenon of bending and distorting starlight as “gravitational lensing.” With constellations, then, the light that we, ourselves, receive from them is distorted, bent, and/or refracted many times over, and it is more than likely the case that this distorted, bent, and/or refracted light has already been distorted, bent, and/or refracted before. Constellations, then, can be riddled with all different kinds of distorted, bent, and/or refracted forms of starlight, and this is again just one aspect that may, itself, be largely kept hidden away from the vast majority of the uninitiated.

Another particular type of illusion that accompanies constellations is the illusion of the lack of depth. Constellations are, themselves, a collection of many different stars that can, at times, all appear to exist on the exact same plane or on the exact same seemingly flat surface of space (and time for that matter). But, in all reality, not every single star within any given constellation is located on that exact same plane of space (and time). Some stars within any given constellation are much closer to us, and, thus, they are positioned much more towards the fore. Others are positioned much farther away from us, and, thus, they are located much more towards the back. Some stars remain somewhere in the middle. In other words, constellations do possess a certain kind of depth component to them, and that depth component can, itself, be and so often is obscured from our very own vantage point here on Earth. This is, again, why we, ourselves, must often look at constellations askance and from many different perspectives.

Permit me to just slightly reiterate one little important point here: all of the stars which are, themselves, brought here together in order to create just one kind of constellation do not all rest on the exact same plane of space. Nor do they all rest on the exact same plane or dimension of time, again for that matter; but let us just focus here on the spatial dimension for now. The stars that do make up any given kind of constellation are, themselves, usually stars that are very far away from one another. In fact, the stars which make up any given and specific kind of constellation occupy a space (as well as a time) that is, itself, much more three-dimensional (if not of many more dimensions than that) than it is of simply two. And, because we modern and secular westerners are so used to just seeing constellations in two dimensions, we aren't exactly great at noticing all the three-dimensional phenomena. We have, ourselves, some difficulty in thinking about the existence of the depth that is occluded from us in addition to thinking about

what the very fact of that depth having been occluded from us must, itself, imply. Again, we must learn *how to look* and maybe even *how to think askance*.

I think another Benjaminian scholar by the name of Graeme Gilloch is getting at this very same kind of point of mine regarding the trickery of constellations in his own 2002 book, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. In the introduction to that text of his, Gilloch explains that “[t]he notion of the constellation captures both the potential deceptiveness of any scheme—points which seem nearest to one another may prove to be those furthest apart—and their contingency. Each constellation must be recognized as just one permutation among an infinite number of possible configurations, conjunctions and correspondences” (25). In this quote that helps to explain Benjamin’s whole “notion of the constellation,” Gilloch, himself, echoes many of the issues that I have already raised just here on up and above—the main thing being that of deception. Again, and quite like a *trompe l’œil* that can and does so often deceive the eye, Gilloch explains that part of what a constellation captures is “[...] the potential deceptiveness of any scheme.”

After briefly explaining the main leitmotifs of his own book, Gilloch then explains what it is that he, himself, thinks Benjamin saw as the main goal or work of what Benjamin had called the “eclectic engineer” or, sometimes, the “aesthetic engineer.” For both Gilloch and Benjamin, the portrait of the eclectic or aesthetic engineer as it is presented here almost resembles that of another esoteric figure: that of the magician. The magician is the one who, in tarot, gathers and collects their own many different “fragmented, broken and blasted” materials to then position and arrange them so intentionally onto their own table or altar. It is the eclectic or aesthetic engineer, moreover, who, according to Gilloch’s own reading of Benjamin, plucks the individual parts of the constellation from their own original historical contexts so as to then later rearrange

them in the form of a much more “critical contemporary constellation” as he puts it. And this is how the magician begins to cast a spell. It is how the magician begins to propitiate the gods, to invoke the divine. But we must remember that the constellation, itself, was just one tool of many within Benjamin’s fairly large belt of similar tools. In that much larger tool belt of his, the constellation fit snug beside others, such as that of the monad and the treatise, “the aphorism, the ephemeral ‘thought’, [the] ‘dream’ and ‘dialectical’ image, the textual ‘snapshot’, [and] cinematic montage [...]” (ibid). Nevertheless, Gilloch does refer to Benjamin’s own use of the constellation as a pioneering mode of critical reading and textual representation (ibid).

In any case, there is, indeed, a certain kind of magic that is at work in the composition of constellations, because that kind of magic helps to reveal the depth to their own constellations which is, otherwise, kept hidden away from us. I, myself, think that that depth in addition to the very revelation of that depth are, themselves, two things which have been rather unfortunately and intentionally kept hidden away from us, and they have been kept hidden away from us because of the dominance of our own modern Western position and our own modern Western perspective. This means that, in order to perceive the depth to constellations such as the one that I, myself, am presenting you with here and now, we must literally lean into and begin to shift our own positions and even our own perspectives so that we may, ourselves, then be able to even get a glimpse of the depth that is, again and otherwise, kept hidden and occluded away from us. When we shift our positions and when we shift our perspectives, the apparent flatness that links all of the stars together into the shape of a certain kind of constellation begins to open up and, most importantly, change. The seemingly non-existent space that once existed/exists there in the in-between suddenly becomes something that is, itself, much more than simply flat. It becomes a space that is shockingly revealed and then realized, and so the depth that was once hidden away

from our very own line of sight given our own positions and given our own perspectives finally appears right there before us as if it were another metaphorical (hidden) door. For some, this shifting move might involve a rather striking and shocking sort of revelation, but, baby, that is what divinity is all about: the revelation from the dark that accompanies the electrifying shock of Zeus' thunderbolt.

And how curious it really is that me-now continues to do astronomical and astrological oriented work today but in a way that me-then would have never even thought possible—nor would I have ever been able to foresee the me that is now for that matter. Change really does funny and sometimes rather uncanny things like that. Today, I am still fascinated by the astronomical and the astrological. I am still enchanted by those things like the stars and the constellations, the universe and the cosmos. But what is so interesting is that this fascination of mine is all in a completely different and quite a pleasantly surprising kind of way than what I was initially used to. Today, I select specific kinds of “stars” in order to compose and forge together specific kinds of constellations that make us rethink the big things, and I was inspired to do this by initially investigating and reading certain kinds of intellectual figures from the rough field of Critical Philosophy. Two of those figures to whom I, myself, take perhaps the most recourse here in this project and here in this first method's chapter are both Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille.

Like the many different telescopic images of supernovae and even those images of distant star systems, or of nebulae and the light that surrounds black holes as it attempts to escape them even though it can't, the images that I, myself, present you with here come in slowly and then they come in with a little bit more detail each and every time. With every return and revisit, it allows me to better illuminate the image in order to slightly sharpen it as well. This dissertation

project, therefore, attempts to present evidence that, itself, appears to be quite like those early, nitty-gritty images of the cosmos that were once taken well before the invention of the Hubble Space Telescope. This current iteration and this current constellation are, therefore, nothing but the nitty, gritty, beginnings of a first attempt at what will hopefully and much later on become a longer book-length project with the central aim and hope of drawing up a much better constellation in much greater detail.

It seems pretty clear to me at this point in my life that western and secular modernity has done some pretty serious and rather traumatic things to so many of us. It demands and requires of us that we sacrifice parts of ourselves as the price to pay for admittance into the heavily policed clubs of the human, of civility, of citizenship, respectability, and, perhaps above all, of progress. I have later come to understand how it coerces us into a certain type of (chronopolitical) assimilation as well, and this is in addition to a whole host of other forms of coercive assimilation. Personally, I see this as a certain kind of Faustian bargain, really. I see this as a deal with the devil that has allowed us to cross over the otherwise uncrossable threshold of an abyss which is located somewhere before the ontological states of both *being* and *becoming* human. The price that we seem to so willingly pay for admission into those heavily policed clubs called “humanity” is paid for in a currency that, I think, involves our own souls. Yes. In a way, I think it involves some sort of psychic or soulful form of payment. It seems to me that in order to *become* and then to *be human*, we, ourselves, must sell our own souls.

But westernization, secularization, and modernization have also done things *for* us—no doubt. I must confess that the three have always held a certain kind of draw and allure to them, and I, myself, am not the only one to have felt that—to be sure. So many of us southern and rural diasporic queers have fled and/or migrated to major metropolitan cities that are all scattered throughout and across the United States’ many stolen lands. For some it was Richmond, for others it was Hampton Roads, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and/or Austin. For me, it was Newport News at first, and then it was Seattle. There are also just so many people who make the same journey as I, myself, have done, usually traveling from somewhere in the southeast to somewhere in the north and/or the west. These are historical migration patterns, or so I have come to learn and see. As part of a southern queer diaspora, I often find myself transfixed by and getting lost in the western and secular modern labyrinth of the northern metropolitan city. But out there in the unincorporated town of Nathalie, Virginia, I think I grew up quite comfortable with certain aspects of southern rurality, and, in a way, I also think that I grew up quite comfortable with certain kinds of non-modernity, non-secularity, and the not-so-western.

Back then and back there, I was quite taken almost as much as I am now with all of the deep, dark, and seemingly dangerous unknowns with which outer-space, itself, presents us. Back then and back there, I would frequently imagine what other possible worlds could exist, and I would also frequently ask myself just *why* it was that I had to be born specifically into this one. At one point in time, I remember wanting to become an astronomer, and my own mother really supported and encouraged this career dream of mine when she, herself, bought me my very first telescope. But that dream ultimately came to an end when I finally realized and soon reasoned thereafter that I wasn’t a very nocturnal-oriented person—funnily enough. In accordance with my own kid-like logic at the time, I was simply not “cut out” for the job, because I, myself, could

hardly stay awake past 10 o'clock at night—this is still sadly true. *How could I, as such a sleepy little kid, possibly be an astronomer given that I, myself, couldn't seem to stay awake at night?*

The irony of it all really does come out whenever I think about this now as an adult. In any case, I looked forward to my own sleep back then and back there, because dreams—quite like outer-space—also gave me access to so many other possible worlds, worlds that were anything but the one in which I, myself, was currently living at the time.

Now, for the purposes of steering the direction of this first methods chapter, I want to turn to one particular and very important point in both space and time that is located here on our very own planet. This is another important star—or, a “node,” if you will—in this project's overall constellation, and this particular point in both space and time is, itself, the metropolitan city of Paris, France sometime during the mid- to late-1930s. It is this particular point and moment that I, myself, want to explore the most in this first methods chapter, and I want to do so, because it is a particular point and moment that I, myself, think is quite important for better understanding the whole entire critical methodology of Walter Benjamin's “constellation” which, in turn, informs the very foundation and composition of this here project. It is also important for better understanding what lies behind the forging together of what I, myself, have come to call and use as the main title to this here project as a whole, and that main title is, thus far, “a critical Caribbean constellation.”

Now, Paris in the mid- to late 1930s is a particular point that may, at first, seem to be just too very far away and too seemingly disconnected from a place like the Caribbean in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. After all, there is an entire ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, that does, indeed, separate the two of them. But let us remember that this is again part of how constellations work. The connection here is there; it just has to be revealed to us sometimes and

somehow from the historical depths that are hidden down below. This particular point located in Paris is, in fact, an integral part of this here project's constellation as well as the much larger puzzle which I, myself, have been attempting to solve. In a way, this particular Parisian point in both space and time has been one of my most leading and guiding "stars" in so much of the work that I have accomplished throughout the long period and process of research, and so I think that this point serves as a sort of compass for us—a "north star" as it were—to help orient both us and the intellectual work that some of us are called to do today in the here and now.

In this first methods chapter, I seek to accomplish four major goals which I, myself, have chosen to divide up into this chapter's four main fragments. In the very first fragment, I provide a bit of the socio-historical context as well as a bit of the background to two of this project's key intellectual inspirations. I, therefore, pay a certain kind of queer homage to both Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille, and I do so in order to illuminate some of the otherwise obscured connections that exist not only among their concepts and their thinking but also between these two people, themselves, who were once close friends and close allies. In fact, Benjamin and Bataille were two critical philosophers as well as comrades who not only collaborated across long distances, but they also eventually met up and worked together in the metropolitan city of Paris, France sometime around the same decade of the 1930s.

In the second fragment, I introduce, discuss, and attempt to shift away from Benjamin's notion of "*telescoping* the past through the present" to my own notion of "*stereoscoping* the past through the present," and I choose to do so so as to reveal an otherwise hidden dimension of depth. I then go on to discuss how it is that I, myself, have both adopted Benjamin's own original method of telescoping and then later adapted it into my own method of stereoscopy. The impetus

to do so resulted from the need to meet my own needs in the very composition of this here critical constellation of my own.

In the third major fragment, I aim to return to and revisit a series of four key image-concepts with which Benjamin and Bataille were both working in those early years of theirs spent together in Paris. In brief list form, those four key image-concepts are that of 1) the arcade, 2) the labyrinth (and by extension the maze), 3) the prostitute, and 4) the minotaur. I will, therefore, explore each and every single one of these image-concepts in depth the further on down we go.

In the fourth and final major fragment, I shift the focus over and onto some of the more formal elements of this whole entire project. That is, I want to focus here on the connective stitching and/or the arachnid-like act of weaving together my own collection of many different fragments into the shape and form of a constellation. I also want to discuss here the name, the role, and the responsibilities of the one who does such an act of stitching and/or weaving together. In order to do so, I revisit the ancient Greek myth of Ariadne's thread as I, myself, both stitch and weave together that particular myth with my own reflections on what Walter Benjamin, himself, considered to be the role of the aesthetic engineer. I then close up this first methods chapter by sketching out the specific intellectual labor that an aesthetic engineer is expected to do while undertaking the stitching, weaving, and ultimately forging together of critical constellations such as this one. Hence again the forename of the project as a whole, "a critical Caribbean constellation," which is, itself, a title that attempts to allude to and account for the creation of not only a *critical* constellation à la Walter Benjamin but a specifically *Caribbean* constellation as well.

I - Benjamin & Bataille

I am convinced that undertaking any sort of critical and interdisciplinary research requires a certain degree of intimacy. There is, without any ounce of a doubt, an erotic component to this type of work in that one really has *to know* in a quite intimate manner what it is that one is researching—and I’m thinking here again of “knowing” in the sense of the French and Spanish understanding of “to know” with their verbs, “connaître” and “conocer.” In other words, one has “to know” in the sense of *knowing intimately* just what exactly it is that one is studying in order to be able to speak and write about it in ways that are at once complex as well as deep. Intimacy in this type of research, moreover, enables a certain kind of ease in what is without a doubt the difficult work of translation.

When I, myself, first started to undertake research into the lives and the deaths of both Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille, there were so many connections that I could not yet see—let alone begin to understand. Perhaps this was because I, myself, was initially telescoping them individually instead of stereoscoping them both together. In fact, and at first, I, myself, never even knew that the two of them really *knew* each other, or that they had even worked together. But over time, the many, different, and often obscured intimate connections that existed there between them—between these two radical thinkers and their own respective scholarly work—would slowly start to reveal themselves to me with greater and greater clarity.

As if a neural network that were just laying there somewhere dormant in the dark, its electrical impulses would slowly start to light up almost in reaction to me having leaned into it with my very own metaphorical and hermetic lantern in hand. In doing so, I was able to reveal their pathways and how it was that the two of them had met. In leaning into the dark, I was able

to see some of what their own otherwise hidden connections were. These hidden, intimate connections that existed between both Benjamin and Bataille, they emerged for me as illuminations that came not in the sunlight of the day but from somewhere out there in the deep and the dark. And that's when I began to better see them as I continued to dig and dive even deeper into each of their own personal lives as well as each of their own respective deaths. To echo Margaret Cohen and her own work on the intimate connections between Walter Benjamin and André Breton, I, too, sat and pondered the question, "[h]ow did these men's paths cross in the Paris of the late 1920s and 1930s, [and] might their personal intercourse provide some clue to their textual exchange?" (14). But this time, I, myself, wasn't wondering about Benjamin and Breton—even though their collaboration is more than interesting to think about. I, myself, was wondering more about the relationship and the collaboration between Benjamin and Bataille.

Following the lead of scholars like Susan Buck-Morss, who works quite intimately with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in her own 2009 book, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, I, myself, decided to investigate both Benjamin and Bataille's social contexts as well as their own individual and collective histories. This, to me, seemed to be where the critical and the interdisciplinary research was most needed. I, therefore, had to learn more about what exactly it was that they were both *doing* there and then when the two of them were both together as well as where and when they were apart. Basically, I needed to know more about how exactly it was that they *had both worked* together over the many years that they both spent with one another. I needed to know how it was that they might have both allied together and supported one other. I wanted to know about the possible disagreements that they did, in fact, have as well as the possible fights that they might have had as well. I was curious to find out what it was that they, themselves, had disagreed on just as much as whatever it was that they, themselves, had agreed

on. These thoughts of mine were all a part of the intimate details that I, myself, needed and which helped me to animate and fill in what was an otherwise depthless kind of image of the two of them. Bringing light to these truly obscured intimacies provided the rather vivid imagery and necessary detail to an otherwise opaque and murky painting.

But like with anyone, there is no clear cut and easy way to paint a picture of both Benjamin and Bataille. Their lives, their contributions, and their deaths were and still are incredibly complex. I cannot just reduce them to the rather simple narrative that I, myself, will end up producing here about them. And so, I would like to flag here that whatever I, myself, may write and/or say about them above as well as below will always and forever be catechrestic and even potentially problematic, if only because the (English) language, itself, and the (anglophone) descriptions that we all use to describe these two people will *always* fall short. Indeed, they lived their own lives in predominately *other* languages, and we cannot continue to forget this fact. For Benjamin, it was German. For Bataille, it was French. To describe their own two respective experiences in English is to *always* experience the existence of a gap that exists between us and them, and to ignore that gap can produce a lot of unwanted and unwarranted issues.

The image and the picture that are, therefore, used to tell the story about both Benjamin and Bataille will forever fail because they are and they will be forever incomplete. I'd like to think that both of them would have agreed with this kind of sentiment and maybe even with my own approach here to writing about them. The two did share a certain kind of suspicion of coherence and continuity—which I, myself, also espouse. On the one hand, Benjamin thought that it was narrative continuity which served as the flaw that doomed traditional history writing to a tacit complicity with the ideology of the ruling class. Bataille, on the other hand, possessed a keen awareness of that which always exceeds and even transgresses the frame and/or the

framework. Whereas Benjamin was attuned to such historical things as the fragment, the break, and the constellation, Bataille was attuned to that which tries to limit, confine, and/or pin the excessive down. To now echo Michael Jennings, “[t]his summary has merely skimmed the surface of a complex and essentially irreducible argument; worse, it distorts Benjamin’s essay as it ossifies his method, lending it a narrative coherence that it actively resists” (24). With all that said, may we now continue and proceed onward with some of their more intimate details.

Whatever the actual case may have been, I do know that both Benjamin and Bataille were close. In fact, they were so close that Benjamin felt comfortable enough leaving Bataille with his own unfinished work as he, himself, attempted to escape arrest in late September of 1940. Before Benjamin fled from the encroaching Nazi Wehrmacht to the French-Spanish border town of Portbou, he ended up entrusting Bataille with his own final work of art, *Das Passagen-werk*, or *The Arcades Project* in English. Many scholars have since and rather consistently referred to this final work of art of Benjamin’s as his magnum opus. This is quite a big deal. I do not think that it would be a long shot to say, then, that Benjamin’s own intentional act of entrusting Bataille with what he, himself, also considered to be the culmination of so much of his own life’s work would seem to serve as and suggest some sort of testament to the trust as well as the bond which existed between these two intellectuals.

And so, we know again that both Benjamin and Bataille were somewhat close with one another and that they also frequently worked together. Not only were they both part of similar intellectual and artistic activist groups that cohered together throughout the decade of the 1930s in what Graeme Gilloch calls the “[...] kaleidoscopic, surrealistic city of Paris [...],” but they also worked together at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* [National Library] (98). According to Plate S. Brent who writes in the preface to their 2005 book, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and*

Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts, “[l]ater in his life, in exile in Paris when he met up with Bataille and others in the College of Sociology, [Benjamin] would toy with their commitments, and those of other surrealists, to bring the sacred into every-day, modern life. Yet, for Benjamin, like Bataille, the sacred was orientated within sociopolitical structures ” (x). At that exact same time and according to the work of Susan Buck-Morss, Benjamin was working on his latest and increasingly experimental essay, “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire” [“The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”], as well as the “[...] earliest notes for the Arcades Project” (32). At the same time, Bataille was working on the many different collections of medallions that were all held at the library. He attended to these collections while he also wrote a few of his own essays on numismatics, which is, itself, the study and collection of things like coins, tokens, and other currency-related objects. According to Cohen, we know that “[i]n the same year that Bataille was engaged in the heat of avant-garde polemic, however, Benjamin was formulating the materialist content to the profane illumination” (9). We also know from Jennings that the two of them were both part of a “[...] small group of distinguished contemporaries on the continent,” and that group included people like György Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, Paul Valéry, and Maurice Blanchot (1). Eventually, Benjamin and Bataille would both go on to later work together again at the Collège de sociologie, and this would be right before Benjamin would, again, ultimately entrust Bataille with his own final, unfinished work, which he, again and himself, considered to be his own magnum opus.

During their own time together and even well after their own deaths, both Benjamin and Bataille have largely been misinterpreted and/or misunderstood. Many other scholars have already written and commented on this very popular dynamic. Michael Jennings, for example, writes that “[t]he juxtaposition in Benjamin’s work of literary critical, epistemological, and

historical analyses had led many readers to misunderstand the character and, in particular, the intent of Benjamin's work" (4). Because of such a heterogeneity of topics and materials, much of Benjamin's own writing has long been framed as being (too) "eccentric," if it is not already written off as being (too) "esoteric." Sometimes, critics will refer to Benjamin and his work as "peculiar," and perhaps there is something to be made of that kind of remark as opposed to the others. As Tom Holert, himself, does point out, "[s]ymptomatic of the problems inherent in epistemization as a tendency (or a 'turn') are the numerous interpellations of artists as *peculiar* thinkers" (10, emphasis mine).

More often than not, though, Benjamin and Bataille are two thinkers and writers whose work is often framed and narrated as being "too dense," "too complex," "too incomprehensible," and/or "too unintelligible." What seems to be the connective thread here, at least to me, is a shared notion of "excess" and simply of being "excessive." Many readers, perhaps, don't know where to gain their footing with these two. But while the work and the contributions of both Benjamin and Bataille might not seem, at first, to make much sense or even to provide some of the most immediate solutions for some of our most immediate needs, issues, and/or concerns today, I would argue that these two early twentieth century thinkers and writers are quite critical for and useful to us today. In fact, these two might even be crucial in ensuring for us our very own survival in the current and upcoming dark moments of what is the unfolding of the early to middle years of the 21st century.

I will say that I, myself, think part of the reason for which both Benjamin and Bataille are "difficult to understand" is because the two of them do not fully align with traditionally critical and/or materialist approaches, such as that of orthodox Marxism, for example. While both Benjamin and Bataille did, indeed, agree with many of Marxism's tenets, concepts, frameworks,

and methods, these two Marxist-adjacent thinkers have long been viewed as and are still considered to be “unorthodox Marxists.” As Max Pensky, himself, writes, Benjamin possessed an “[...] eccentric and distinctive appropriation of Marxism” (182). And so, too, did Bataille, I would add.

But in their own respective ways and for somewhat different reasons, Benjamin and Bataille were both invested in a continuous critique of the orthodox Marxist understanding of historical materialism. On the one hand, Benjamin would go on to ultimately and unabashedly employ aspects of (Jewish) theology in his own uptake of historical materialism—a method which he, himself, saw as traditionally being ashamed of its own reliance on theology. For Benjamin, historical materialists both shunned and hid theology away in the famous image of the chess playing automaton, that image of the mechanical Turk he, himself, describes in his own 1940 essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Much of his own use of certain non-scientific and alternative religious methods, such as that of Jewish mysticism and Jewish messianism, for example, was (and often still is) disregarded as illegitimate and/or shunned by the orthodox Marxist community, and this is perhaps due to the orthodox Marxist community’s own uncritical and perhaps even unconscious investment in secularism. “Seeking nonetheless to integrate his preoccupations with the concerns of Marxist theory,” writes Cohen, “Benjamin brought Marxism together with all manner of paradigms for grasping the irrational, ranging from the high tragic narratives of Jewish mysticism to the tawdry spiritism of nineteenth-century Parisian mass culture and the surrealist profane illumination” (4). On the other hand, Bataille would go on to push the limits of historical materialism with his own interests in the esoteric and the occult. His own idea of base materialism, as a prime example, was quite unheard of as it takes up “[...] the concept of an active base matter that disrupts the opposition of high and low and destabilises all

foundations. Inspired by Gnostic ideas, this notion of materialism defies strict definition and rationalisation”.¹ Even without Benjamin and Bataille’s own revisions, however, the concepts and theoretical frameworks of Marxist’s “historical materialism” as well as the “base superstructure model” would long be critiqued for what they, themselves, have failed to account for.

I think part of what had to do with both Benjamin and Bataille’s split away from traditional Marxism involved their own shared interest in alternative religious traditions, which is exactly the kind of expression that scholars like Celia Rabinovitch have also used to describe the surrealists with which Benjamin and Bataille both trafficked. As Rabinovitch has put it in her own 2002 book, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art*, “[s]urrealism has much in common with alternative religious traditions including occultism, theosophy, and fascination with Buddhism in the West from the mid-nineteenth century forward” (xvii). This is what perhaps led both Benjamin and Bataille to seek out and collaborate with certain kinds of avant-garde artistic movements just like those of the Surrealists who, in turn, helped them both to better hone their own critical and theoretical forms of expression. In their own time spent there in Paris, the two of them were often together *with* the Surrealists, which greatly influenced the two of them and their own individual works.

Now, when both Benjamin and Bataille joined the group, “the Surrealists” had both artists and intellectuals who cohered and formed around a literary and then later visual art movement which was both international in scale and quite avant-garde in terms of its thinking. This group included a fairly large amount of people who also later on divided up and then factioned off into two to three major camps. Whereas Guillaume Apollinaire is the one who is accredited the most with having coined and defined the original word and term, “surrealist,” the

surrealist movement, itself, was later led by two increasingly warring factions. There was, on the one side, Yvan Goll (also known as Isaac Lang) who led one camp of the Surrealists, and then there was, on the other side, André Breton who led the other camp of the Surrealists. As I, myself, will discuss a little bit later on, Bataille ended up splitting away from both Goll and Breton, and he did so, interestingly enough, more from Breton and his camp than he ever did from Goll's camp. Bataille ended up splitting away from the two of them, though, in order to form his own group, his own contingent—which was, quite possibly, a third surrealist camp, if we could call it that. The famous Spanish painter, Salvador Dalí would soon join in with many of the other Surrealists working in the city of Paris, and he would do so from the city of Madrid sometime in the year 1929. But Dalí, too, would cause quite a commotion as well as a stir as his fellow surrealists grew increasingly uncomfortable with his sometimes-ambiguous and sometimes-open flirtation with fascism. Other well-known artists that also formed part of the Surrealist group at one point in time and for a variety of different periods were André Masson, Michel Lérisse, and Pablo Picasso.

I think that one of the main reasons for which both Benjamin and Bataille were attracted to the Surrealists was because of their shared interest in dreams and dream work. Gilloch explains that “[i]n conceiving modernity as a 'dream world' of phantasmagoria and mythic forms, Surrealism articulated an, albeit nebulous, vision of contemporary commodity culture which would prove central to Benjamin's *Passagenarbeit*” (105). But even before then, Benjamin had already been interested in the capabilities and the potentialities of the extra rational for quite some time. He, himself, was into dreams, hashish experiences, intoxication, and mystical visions. Perhaps more importantly, he viewed one of the main effects of capitalist modernity writ large to be that of generating and sustaining a dream. As Susan Buck-Morss reminds us, “[t]he

Surrealists recognized reality as a dream,” and so for Benjamin, “the *Passagen-werk* was to evoke history in order to awaken its readers from it [the dream of capitalist modernity]” (34). One of the central goals and contributions of Surrealism was to use and express one’s own dreams in art so as to “[...] create a new reality, a reality that was beyond real, or surreal” (The Dalí Museum, 1:04). For Benjamin, I think the central goal was to create a new reality beyond the dream of a specifically capitalist modernity, and the key to doing so lay in using that which it hid as its own historical detritus against it. It involved juxtaposing together some of the thrown-away fragments in such a way that they would, themselves, form and forge an electrifying constellation, or what Gilloch again calls, “a profane illumination.” That electrifying tension that is generated amongst the historically forgotten but now juxtaposed parts has the capacity to awaken the observer. With its weak messianic power now activated, the dead and their history are further redeemed.

It seemed, then, that both Benjamin and Bataille shared a somewhat similar political aim with regard to the Surrealists. With the publications of Yves Goll and André Breton’s two essays of the same name, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), the new movement was already associated with both communism and anarchism. The Surrealists, as a collective, presented a veritable contestation of occidental society while often performing a form of immanent critique at the exact same time. With the breakout of World War I, the Surrealists were staunch critics of the excessiveness of rational thought as well as that of bourgeois values in general. Breton, moreover, would further push the group into being even more revolutionary by taking on an explicitly anti-racist and anti-colonial position. He eventually took a trip, himself, to the French overseas department and Caribbean island of Martinique in order to meet up with the two

married and now famous poets by the names of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. While staying in Martinique, Breton also got to meet the famous Caribbean philosopher, Édouard Glissant.

During the time that both Benjamin and Bataille were involved with the Surrealists, several of them were already experimenting with a variety of different innovative writing and/or visual art techniques. These included practices and even games such as automatism, dislocation, the exquisite corpse, interruption, juxtaposition, collage, montage, and transformation. It was Breton who was the one specifically working on “automatism,” which he, himself, defined as a form of writing that privileges the unconscious, and it does so by avoiding conscious intention. For Breton, automatism was a Surrealist method of making art that relied on the subconscious and its own associations. It was meant to be a mode of making art in which the artist was invited to intentionally relax their conscious control over the art-making process. In 1920, Phillipe Soupault composed one of the first literary works of Surrealism using Breton’s method of automatism, and he named it *Les Champs magnétiques*. André Masson would later modify this understanding of Breton’s main method of automatism by later adapting it and theorizing another and yet similar kind of method which he, himself, called “automatic writing.”

Evidence of the collaboration among Benjamin, Bataille, and the Surrealists is quite plentiful. One of the more famous of the Surrealist artists, Masson, was the one who designed the cover art for the publication of Bataille’s very first issue of *Acéphale*. Their coupled text and cover art were part of a public review that ran between the years of 1936 to 1939, and it was largely dedicated to the theme of the sacred conspiracy. On the cover of that very first issue, Masson drew for Bataille the image of a relatively thin and somewhat muscular man’s naked body with a noticeably missing head. In fact, it is implied here, that the man depicted in the image has been decapitated—perhaps even of his own accord. What is most interesting, though,

is that the review's title, *Acéphale*, is, itself, a name that is derived from the ancient Greek word, ἀκέφαλοι—a word that was later romanized into the word, *akephalos*—which literally means “headless” or “without head.” In his right hand, the headless man holds his own heart which we, ourselves, can see here is set ablaze and now on fire. In his left hand, he holds a dagger, which is seemingly cold, pointed, and sharp. His nipples are replaced with stars, and his intestines are revealed within his stomach in such a way that they resemble the shape of a snake all coiled up deep down and inside of him. A jawless and furrowing skull rests at the body's groin where the penis is normally located. The man stands firm, feet assuredly placed and assertively grounded. Here he stands, strong, naked, and semi-transparent, rooted in the body in spite of not having a head.

This particular image on the cover of *Acéphale* resembles, and I would also say that it even harkens back to, Leonardo da Vinci's late fifteenth century image and drawing of *L'uomo vitruviano* [*Vitruvian Man*] (c. 1490). I've reproduced both Masson's and da Vinci's images here on further down below with both of them placed side by side in digital form. In doing so, I wanted to stereoscopically juxtapose them here together so as to demonstrate not just their similarities and their differences but to point out the major repetition of the main image itself, and that major repetition of such a main image is the image of Man with a capital 'M.'



figure II & figure III | On the left, there is Leonardo da Vinci's *Uomo Vitruviano* [Vitruvian Man], while on the right there is the cover of the journal, *Acéphale*, which presents a headless man standing in a similar stance to that of da Vinci's *Uomo Vitruviano*.

Now, there are a few things to note and compare here with regard to these two images. Whereas da Vinci's image of Man on the left represents Man around the time of his own birth sometime during the Italian Renaissance, Masson's image of Man on the right represents Man around the time of his (self-imposed) death, during the post-modern era. da Vinci's image of Man on the left represents the rise and the power of a newly emerging mode of producing knowledge known as scientific reason. Man's own ideal body proportions and his own capabilities were calculated and even exemplified in this very drawing. Masson's image of Man on the right, however, represents the (self-)decapitation of Man, the cutting off of his (very own) head, the symbol that has long now been associated with Western scientific reason. Whereas da

Vinci clearly embraces scientific reason on the left, we see that Masson (and Bataille) renounce it on the right. By severing off his own head from his own body, Masson's image of Man violently separates himself from that same scientific reason which birthed him in the first place and which later ruled—so long and so despotically—over the knowledge and the wisdom to be gleaned from his very (own) body to begin with.

Inspired more by the Surrealist collective's work with montage than the visuals of Bataille's *Acéphale* cover, Walter Benjamin adopted and adapted this particular technique of theirs to fit the purposes of his own historiographical work. He, himself, would then go on to further develop this specifically surrealist-oriented use of montage into what he, himself, would simply call "literary montage." But in order to understand just what exactly Benjamin both meant and did with this specifically surrealist-oriented method of literary montage which he, himself, both developed and named, I do think that we need to take a step back and briefly discuss—if only for a moment—what exactly "montage" is.

I think that most folks now know of and understand montage as it is used in the context of both film and filmmaking. In French, the word, "montage," simply means "assembly," as in the assembly of many different images that are used and edited together in a film. Interestingly enough, the word, "montage," is also linked to the French verb, "monter," meaning "to mount" as in to mount a horse or a mountain. But as one may guess, this technique of simply assembling together many different images is not just limited to the domain of film, itself. In fact, and as we see time and time again, montage had spread to film after it had already spread to other artistic domains—the literary and the visual only being two of them.

While there is so much to be said about montage, I do think that one of the most important things there is to understand about it is its specific relationship to time. In speaking to

the specific context of filmmaking, itself, Alice Sparkly Kat explains that “[t]he montage, which came of age in the 1900s, was a technique of cutting film into very short segments to suggest fragmented events and the passing of a large amount of time within a very short space” (War of the Worlds). Now, while this statement is seemingly straight forward, there are a few things to be gleaned here in this description of montage. The first is the time period in which montage, itself, “came of age,” which was, for Sparkly Kat, sometime “in the 1900s.” This coming of age is right before both Benjamin and Bataille in the 1930s, which suggests that montage may have been well on the rise as a popular artistic mode of expression by the time the two of them came together in Paris. The second thing to glean is that montage in this period of the early 1900s was specifically “a technique of cutting film.” Montage, then and in this case, is a technique that comes to those of us working in the literary world from those of us working in the world of film. It is a transposition then of montage as it is used in film to montage as it is used in literature. The third thing to glean is how the technique of montage is, itself, performed, and that is by “[...] cutting film into very short segments to suggest fragmented events and the passing of a large amount of time within a very short space.” Montage, then and for Sparkly Kat in addition to Benjamin, was a way of (re)arranging fragments in such a way that one could, indeed, manipulate time.

Montage, therefore, is largely a filmic technique that is used for the manipulation of time. Sparkly Kat, themselves, further elucidates this aspect when they explain that “[t]he montage is an artificial sequence of time in which fragments are edited together to create the illusion of continuity, often either elongating or condensing the experience of time within a story. The montage forces the viewer to create the story within their own head by bringing shots from different locations and moments together.” Montage, then and perhaps a bit more specifically, is

a technique that can, itself, be used to manipulate not time, itself, but one's own *experience* of time. Montage can elongate or condense time, and it can also generate an interactivity with the one experiencing that very manipulation of one's own experience of time. It requires, as Sparkly Kat points out, that one fill in the gaps or the missing puzzle pieces so to speak. It, therefore, brings together both the viewer/the one experiencing the art and the very art object, itself.

But I also want to just pause here and revisit some of the work of the great Soviet theorist and filmmaker of montage, Sergei Eisenstein, who has also written on the subject. For Eisenstein in his own essay, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," the first thing that he, himself, has to say is that "[s]hot and montage are basic elements of cinema" (48). "Montage," he then goes on to further tell us, "has been established by the Soviet film as the nerve of cinema" (ibid). So, right off the bat, we understand here that, for Eisenstein, montage is both a basic element as well as the very nerve of cinema, itself. In differentiating himself, though, from "[...] the earliest conscious filmmakers, and our first film theoreticians [...]" who regarded montage as a kind of rhythm and even Vsevolod Pudovkin who thought of montage as "[...] the means of *unrolling* an idea with the help of single shots: [known as] the "epic" principle [...]," Eisenstein, himself, proclaims that "[...] montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots-shots even opposite to one another: the "dramatic" principle" (49). For Eisenstein, then, montage isn't really about rhythm, because it is more metric in its nature. Nor does it follow any sort of "'epic' principle," because it follows a much more "dramatic" one that involves both conflict and collision as well as the "idea that arises" from that conflict and collision. We can already hear the exact same idea that Benjamin, himself, seems to echo as he goes on to theorize the surrealist's own use of montage and its ability to generate what scholars have since called a profane illumination in the 1930s.

Of course, the surrealists, themselves, quickly took to film, and the use of montage was an absolute staple. According to Charles R. Warner, the more film-inclined surrealists like Jean-Luc Goddard used montage “[...] as a tool for retrieving forgotten histories, and for redeeming the cinema of its failure to sufficiently confront the atrocities of the twentieth century” (2). Already, there was a critical historical consciousness at work in the filmic art of surrealist montages, but Benjamin sought to further enhance this kind of critical historical consciousness.

Of all the many different surrealist techniques with which they, themselves, experimented, Benjamin appreciated their principle and use of montage the most. He did, however, desire to do something else with it in the end. In fact, Benjamin wanted to carry “[...] the principle of montage into history” (28). Whereas many of the Surrealists, themselves, were too busy creating montages out of many different things without much concern for history, itself, Benjamin sought to intentionally combine the two, bringing together the power of montage with the forgotten material of history. *Das Passagen-werk* was to be his magnum opus in that it attempted to fully employ and exemplify his own historical use of the surrealist principle of montage with which he, himself, was already experimenting in his own earlier essays. We might think of his first experiments with an historical use of montage in his one essay on Baudelaire. Benjamin ultimately believed that such an historically informed piece of surrealist-inspired artwork would present a much more political and potentially even revolutionary type of project. And so, in performing this kind of synthesis, in carrying the surrealist principle of montage over and into history, Benjamin would create a new aesthetic mode which was, itself, a much more fragmented and yet critical form of representation.

But in spite of their collaboration together, both Benjamin and Bataille would eventually break away from the Surrealists, and they would both do so in their own unique ways. It is well

known that Breton openly disliked Bataille and that Breton was often in open competition with him. In an apparently famous episode, Breton invited Salvador Dalí to be a part of the Surrealists, but when Breton extended the invitation to him, he did so on the explicit condition that Bataille *not* be included into the group.²

Benjamin's own break with the Surrealists was also bit more intellectual than Bataille's competitive quarrel with Breton. Jennings tells us that Benjamin "[...] rejected the arbitrariness of the Surrealists's dream-inspired imagery" (25, qtd in V, N, 2, 6). He wanted, instead, a much more intentional use of Surrealist techniques, and he thought, in short, that the Surrealists, themselves, could do much more than what they were currently doing. According to Gilloch, Benjamin thought that "[...]he Surrealists were too immersed in, too intoxicated by, the fantastical forms and uncanny experiences they discovered to provide the necessary clear-sighted, sober criticism" (91). And so, "[f]or Benjamin, the Surrealists linger[ed] in the realm of dreams, whereas what is needed is to awaken from it. Profane illumination is not enough: engineering demands an explosive moment" (ibid).

As two members who were tied to the academy, both Benjamin and Bataille would seek to deploy some of the surrealist's visual techniques in order to make interventions within the academic discourses and scholarship of their own time. Jennings tells us that Benjamin was particularly interested in "the reconstruction of the nineteenth century in a manner that could expose its *underlying structure* [which] might have an explosive effect on the contemporary understanding of the historical situation" (emphasis mine, 29). In fact, Benjamin, himself, believed that both montage and collage were two specific and surrealist visual art techniques that were quite capable of exposing such an "underlying structure," and they were able to do so because these two techniques could help induce epiphany and then even facilitate awakening.

When deployed in the work of historical academic scholarship, Benjamin sought to “dive for pearls” as Hannah Arendt once referred to and described this very activity of his that he did, in fact, do. For Arendt, Benjamin goes off and dives down somewhere into the historical deep, dredging up fragments from the past, and, while doing so, he pays special attention to those particular pearls that had been buried, lost, ignored, and/or forgotten. Once he found and gathered enough of them, he would then come right back up to the surface so to speak where he would then rearrange those exact same pearls that he had found, putting them all together into a brand-new shape by using the surrealist-oriented and surrealist-inspired technique of montage.

II - from telescoping to stereotelescoping: or, on the revelation of depth

In the process of writing up this here project, I have often continued to catch myself wondering about just *why* it is that I have so consistently kept up with the very act of telescoping not just the work of Walter Benjamin but that of Georges Bataille as well. As Susan Buck-Morss has put it, herself, in building off of her own reading of Benjamin, “[...] the past was illuminated only when lit by the present (V, 573)” (104). In this small little reformulation of just one of Benjamin’s historical aphorisms, there are a few things that immediately stand out and on which I, myself, would just like to reflect on if only in brief here on down and further below. First, it is the present that serves here as the illuminating agent and not so much the past. Buck-Morss’ sentence is written in the passive voice, such that it is “the past” that is “illuminated [...] by the present” (emphasis mine), and it is, therefore, not the past that illuminates the present as it would be in the active voice. The past, thus, assumes a certain kind of passivity here while the present, itself, is much more active. Second, the past is something that can, itself, be illuminated and be left un-illuminated, which means that the past, then, can sometimes be left completely in the dark whenever the present, itself, doesn’t seek to illuminate it. Third, the fact that the present can’t light up the past in its entirety implies that the present can only ever light up certain parts of the past according to some kind of logic, desire, or interest on behalf of the present. In short, the present picks and chooses which parts of the past it wants to illuminate, and there is something to really realizing not only what the current parts of the past are that are actively being illuminated by the present but what that exact selection and illumination of those particular parts of the past over others *says* about the current state of our very own present. In other words, the question thus becomes something like this: *why pick these particular parts of the past over others? Why*

illuminate them and not others? The answers to these two questions, for Benjamin, resides in our very own present.

Now, this whole entire line of thinking led me to ask a whole other series of related questions. *What was it, I thought, in my very own time that was making me engage in the act of what Benjamin, himself, called “telescoping the past”?* *What was it, in the here and now of my very own present, that made me, moreover, telescope both Benjamin and Bataille?* *What was it in the here and now that made me want to light them both up from somewhere down there in the darkness of the past?* And so, through the magnifying and illuminating lens of my very own active present, these two dead people, their work, and their spirits continued to take up so much of my own time. It was as if their own two ghosts kept on calling out to me, and so I simply kept on (re)turning my own attention toward them, time and time again.

But it took me a while to finally realize and to make the (much more personal) connection, of just *why* exactly it was that I was so consistently fixated on telescoping the both of them in the first place: we needed, I thought, to reanimate an alternative way of writing history in the present. In a way, I think that I, myself, was telescoping them both independently and then I moved on to telescoping them both together. I started out by telescoping Benjamin at first, and then I later moved on to telescoping Bataille. Even later than the time I spent telescoping Bataille, that’s when I started to telescope them both together and to really start to connect the dots which would then reveal the connections that were previously obscured between them. They were these intimacies that had been left hidden there somewhere down in the deep and down in the dark of the un-illuminated past.

For the past few years, I do know without a doubt that I have been deeply invested in telescoping, studying, and writing on these two specific people and the work that they,

themselves, both did together as well as apart and independently. At first, it seemed to me to be some sort of queer fascination as well as an “obvious obsession” with their own writing, theories, and methods. The two of them do certainly share in a rather curious kind of perplexity and esoteric quality that is, itself, found at the very heart of their own thinking as well as the core of their own writing, but it wasn’t until much later that I, myself, finally realized that something much deeper was at work here. Something much deeper was getting me to pay attention to them, to listen and to learn from them, and it was urging me to ultimately resuscitate them—if only temporarily. By telescoping them, and by bringing them back into the light of the dayworld whilst still remaining there in the House of Hades, I would start to bring them back into focus by lighting up the underworld. With Hekate at my side, I would start, in other words, to re-animate the dead. With our two torches there high in our hands, both Hekate and I could begin to cast the necromantic spells that we needed in order to conjure them both up right there before us, and we would do so for the explicit purposes of our dire need for an alternative mode of historiography in what has been, no doubt, our very own precarious present.

I, myself, think that both me and my own moment have needed Benjamin as well as Bataille, and so I, myself, just started to commune and really communicate with them both. As I, myself, continued to stumble upon others who were also doing similar work as me, I came across scholars like Buck-Morss who, herself, wrote the following admonishment to other would-be Benjamin telescopers: “[i]t follows that in interpreting *Das Passagen-Werk*, our attitude should not be reverence for Benjamin’s work that would immortalize it as the product of a great author no longer here, but *reverence for the very mortal and precarious reality that forms our own ‘present,’ through which Benjamin’s work is now telescoped*” (emphasis mine, 100). In short, our own current present and our own current era are, according to Buck-Morss, in a certain

period of time that can, itself, be characterized by a deep woe and worry. It's a "very mortal and precarious reality," indeed, one in which so many of us are dying. Woe be to us—not joy—for having to conjure up and raise the spirits of both Walter Benjamin and George Bataille. Ours is a time of great despair in needing to shed light on them from somewhere deep down in the dark depths of Hades, there amongst its incredibly large company—if not army—of the dead. Our own current time is a very dark time, indeed, and that is all the truer if this is the kind of people in the past of which we are now currently in most need. In addition to all of that, this work requires of us the "pre-modern" knowledge and practice of certain kinds of necromantic rituals, rituals that have, themselves, long been framed as "superstition" and/or "heresy."

And so there I was initially telescoping Benjamin—just like Benjamin, himself, had telescoped Antoine Wiertz—before I then moved on to telescoping Bataille, and then it was just me sitting there telescoping both Benjamin and Bataille together. I believe that what was just as true for Benjamin with regard to his own act of telescoping back then is just as true for me in the here and now, and that truth is the somewhat unsettling fact that the elements which "[...] he chose to record reflected the concerns of his own era" (Buck-Morss, 100). And so, if I am indeed here, telescoping Walter Benjamin and others within his own close little intellectual circle of friends, then it would seem to raise yet another string of inquiries: *What exactly are the concerns of my very own era? Why am I telescoping these two specific people, Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille, instead of anyone else among all the other people that there are to telescope in the history of the world? Why is it that these two people come into view for me and not others? What is it in the present that makes these two intelligible to me now? What might their own two spirits have to teach me? Why am I—as a subject and particle that is part of my own historical era—so concerned with trying to telescope and better yet understand the very person and his*

friend who lived, wrote, and theorized about this whole entire act of telescoping to begin with and right before he died to boot? What do these stars and what do these images, upon which our own metaphorical telescopes today have settled, bring into focus for us? What do they allow for us to think about our own current historical moment and its own current configuration of space-time? And lastly, what other constellations might we form and might we investigate in order to unearth, read, and better understand the present of today, itself?

Questions like these continued to plague my mind almost as much as the many mysteries have here within this project; but, in all reality, what I really think I needed was not to necessarily answer these questions. It was already enough to simply have posed them, to write them down there on the page. What I really think I needed was something else that was akin to a telescope. I needed a different kind of contraption with a different kind of set up. I needed something that could, like Hekate, help me to reanimate the dead at the same time that I, myself, was telescoping them. Like Benjamin, I knew that I really needed something else that could help us to see with our very own two—and hopefully three—eyes instead of just the one as one does when one normally looks through a telescope. I needed something else that could help me relax the face and then open up the second as well as the third eyes. In a way, I needed something that was much more like binoculars, something with two lenses instead of just one, and, while binoculars were good, I do think that they were a bit too small or a bit too short on distance for what it was that I, myself, was trying to do with them. Telescopes allowed for long, astral lengths of distance, while binoculars simply did not. I, therefore, still needed something that could help me telescope people from the past, just like Benjamin and Bataille did back in the 1930s. I knew that I needed something else, something like binoculars that could help me see the much more

intimate and the more-than-likely hidden little details even in spite of being across very large distances of both space and time.

Then it hit me! I realized I needed something much more like a *stereotelescope* as opposed to a simple old *telescope*. I needed something that was, itself, quite capable of seeing not only across very long distances (*-tele*) but also through at least two different kinds of lenses *at once* (*stereo-*). A *stereotelescope* would, in theory, allow one to better perceive the distant and otherwise hidden little details that were all just there in the shadowy depths so far down below. Yes, it seemed to me that a stereotelescope as opposed to something like a regular old telescope or even something like a simple set of binoculars would help me out the most, because stereotelescopes were, themselves, quite capable of generating that exact kind of depth which I, myself, needed most to reveal. A stereotelescope, in other words, promised to help generate a depth that would, itself, stretch—eventually and hopefully—well past both Benjamin and Bataille, somewhere all the way down and into that Olympian-made prison called Tarturus.

Yes, that's when I, myself, I started to understand the very real power that lay behind this odd little contraption of mine. This stereotelescope, I thought, was powerful in that it could help us all quite easily and quite sneakily too peer into the very House of Hades, itself. In fact, we could even peer all the way down into the realm of the dead in such a way that the image, itself, became not only quite deep but also quite detailed in addition to being both fertile and furtive. One might say that this stereotelescope of ours would allow us to sneak right past and right under the very nose of the King of the Underworld, himself. In fact, the stereotelescope would promise to be a way to subvert Hades' own cloak, veil, *and* cap of invisibility. With its own two, long-distance lenses juxtaposed there together in just the right way, a stereotelescope could help us all see right through and well into the realm of the dead.

By stereotelescoping the past as opposed to simply telescoping it, we would then be able to bring back up these riches from the deep. We would then begin to see something like the simple and much more intimate fact that both Benjamin and Bataille were two people who had, themselves, actually known one another and who had actually known one another quite well. In fact, by stereotelescoping them both together, we could begin to easily see that they had already worked together on several different projects of theirs. With just a normal old telescope at hand, it was as if I—and many others—had only half of the picture in view while not fully realizing that both of them were part of the exact same picture and the exact same collective group of people. That's why I, myself, thought that I need not only another lens but another way of bringing together these two images of both Benjamin and Bataille so as to illuminate their otherwise obscured and rather intimate connection(s).

In this particular case and in this particular context of mine, stereotelescopy as opposed to simply telescoping alone started to better and quickly deliver in on some pretty great historical and intellectual goods. These were riches that just kept on coming up from the deep, and so I just kind of ran with it, honestly. I ran with my own stereotelescope in hand, and I did so just like Benjamin had done with his own telescope. She carried that thing well in hand as she, herself, travelled over from the U.S. to Haiti. We all have our own tools, I guess. And now that I sit here and really think about it, we both have had our own respective tools well in hand. For Benjamin, it was his telescope. For Hurston, it was her typewriter. For me, it was my very own stereotelescope, which would, in turn, allow me to not only better see those in the past by reflecting light through the very veil that exists somewhere there between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead, but it would also help me to begin writing up a very different kind of history in a very different kind of *mode of historiography*. I now want to turn to a deeper and yet

still brief exploration of what Benjamin, himself, meant by his own use of the word, “telescope,” before I, myself, then turn to my own work on the stereoscope as an alternative way of seeing, doing, and writing history.

telescopy

Let us pause then for a second to briefly think about just what exactly Benjamin meant by his own verbal and written use of the word, “telescope.” Normally, this word is invoked in its more substantive or noun-like form, such as when one says, “a telescope” in English. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “a telescope” is, itself, “[...] an optical instrument using lenses, curved mirrors, or a combination of both to observe distant objects by their emission, absorption, or reflection of electromagnetic light.”³ This is a definition with which many of us should be quite familiar even if we might not know more of the specialized vocabulary around the types of lenses and mirrors that are used or even the kind of light that is involved.

Now, the word, “telescope,” itself, is not normally used in its verbal form in modern English, such as in the verb, “to telescope” or in the form of a gerund, like “telescoping,” as I have so often used it here. It is not common to hear one say that one “telescopes” something as I and Benjamin have both done, but that is precisely what one does when one uses a telescope. One *telescopes* as a verb, and, when one telescopes something, one “[...] collect[s] and magnif[ies] the light from distant objects.”⁴ “To telescope,” then, is about seeing, collecting, and magnifying the far off light from very distant and far-off objects, objects that are, themselves, stars or like stars in that they give off some sort of “emission, absorption, or reflection of electromagnetic light.”

Etymologically speaking, the word “telescope” comes to us in English from multiple origins. From Italian, the word *telescopio* was used around the 1640s, but, prior to that, it was popularized in 1611 by the now famous and highly remembered scientific observations that the Renaissance astronomer, physicist and engineer, Galileo Galilei, once undertook. This Italian version of the English word, “telescope,” derives in turn from the modern Latin word, “*telescopium*,” which was also used around the exact same time as Galileo. Johannes Kepler, a fellow and contemporary astronomer, mathematician, natural philosopher and musical theorist among other things, used the Latin version of the word, for example, in 1613. But the word, “telescope,” itself, ultimately derives from the ancient Greek word, *τηλεσκόπος*—or *tēleskopos*, which, when transliterated into Latin, means “far seeing.” The word, itself, can also be broken up into its own two constituent parts. Whereas the prefix, “*τηλε-*”—or *tēle*—is a word that signifies “far” in terms of either space or time or both, the suffix, “*-σκοπος*”—or *-skopos*—means “watcher, one who watches.”

The telescope, then, is a literal object with which so many of us modern Westerners are quite familiar. It and its whole entire symbolism are a very important part of our own common historical narrative of Western civilization as well as its entire propensity for innovation. We have long taken pride in our own ability to invent the tools that we, ourselves, have needed in order to better see, observe, map, and detail not only the entire planet but well beyond it as well. The telescope, therefore, has long been an image as well as a symbol of (early) modernity often paired with the image and the symbol of Renaissance men just like Galileo, himself, who built his own version of a telescope in order to better see celestial objects sometime in the year 1609.

But when we get to the 1930s—sometime around the periods of *late* and *liquid* modernity—Walter Benjamin, himself, uses the word “telescope” to mean something that is

much more metaphorical than it is literal. “To telescope,” for Benjamin, doesn’t so much mean to look through an actual telescopic apparatus or device in order to observe the celestial realm as both Galileo and Kepler did. He isn’t telling us to use telescopes in that quite literal and early modern way. Instead, telescoping, for Benjamin, is more of a metaphorical act that is done *with history*. For Benjamin, one telescopes into the past that is history, itself. In short, one telescopes the past, which is, itself, history. I will say though that even when we do telescope the stars quite literally like both Galileo and Kepler did, we are still telescoping the past. We are, like Benjamin, telescoping history. His own method was just more metaphorical.

Now, for Benjamin, his work—especially in *Das Passagen-Werk*—would, itself, serve as the telescope through which to peer into the past. In other words, the intellectual work of art, composed largely of montage and dialectical images, was, itself, the medium. *Das Passagen-Werk* was, in other words, the very telescope through which one read about and thus “saw” the past. According to Jack Post,

“Benjamin described his *Artwork essay* as a self-built telescope through which he peered at the mirages of the nineteenth century (GS Bd 5.2 1151): the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, department stores, advertisements and that strange figure of Antoine Wiertz. Through this telescope, Wiertz appeared to him in the flash of a dialectical image, as a precursor of film and the political use of photo-montage.”

In addition to what Post mentions here, we must also remember that Benjamin, himself, thought that the architecture of the Parisian arcades, themselves—which I will turn to shortly in the next fragment—as functioning telescopically. Sunlight and even some starlight would peer in through the glass rooftops which functioned in a way quite like telescopic lenses do. In recomposing a

variety of different historical fragments concerning the very arcades, themselves, Benjamin would retain this telescopic mode and method of observation. He would forge together a montage of images and then telescope these historical constellations of his so as to reveal a depth that was, itself, already there and latent within them, and this is primarily because that depth had been obscured in the dominant narrative of history which frames History, itself, as something that is a secular, linear, and teleological progression of events. In practicing a different kind of historiography, Benjamin was able to temporarily reveal that which progressive history had, itself, left and forgotten in the shadows.

We might, therefore, consider Benjamin to have offered us up a method that is, itself, better known as a critical form of telescoping. Not an actual device through which to see, “to telescope,” for Benjamin, was part of his own general method of “telescoping,” and telescoping, in general, is a branch of astronomy and the art of making and operating telescopes. And so, *what again might this critical method of telescoping offer us now in our own precarious present?* In sum, one might say that this critical, Benjaminian method of telescoping presents to and recounts for us a story about how to make constellations that are, themselves, intentionally collected shards or fragments of a previously exploded and dispersed structure. It helps us to remember and illuminate those very same shards or fragments that were made to be forgotten in what Benjamin so often called “the dust bin of History.” It is in bringing them together in this kind of dialectical fashion, in juxtaposing images together in the form of a montage that is then carried over and into history à la Walter Benjamin, that something electrifying emerges. In doing that kind of work, Benjamin, his friends, and I are all able to generate not only a critique of our very own present conjuncture but an offering that, itself, presents us with an alternative framework for *interpreting, thinking and knowing* the many different violences that are increasingly surrounding

us today. In forging this kind of constellation and then telescoping it in a way akin to how Benjamin once did it, I think that we will come to better understand how to escape out of the seemingly endless nightmares and exponentially growing deathworlds that global neoliberalism has wrought and will have come to wrought.

In total, Benjamin's method was, to my mind, a largely decent one. I had consistently found great use and great value in telescoping the past in the way that he, himself, once did, but I, myself, still needed and desired something that was a little bit different than what he was doing. I, myself, needed and wanted to see more of the intimate little details of the past. I needed an instrument that could help show me the intimate little details that were all still hidden there deep down and in the dark. And so, in slightly modifying Benjamin's already critical historiographical method of telescoping the past via things like montage, constellations, and the dialectical image, I, myself, hoped to create something more like a stereotelescope, a device with multiple lenses and even mirrors. A stereotelescope, I also thought, could potentially reveal the outlines of another (seemingly hidden) door, one that I, myself, desired to both open and transgress, because beyond that second (seemingly hidden) door was/is an alternative path and another possible way through to the land of the dead. I later refer to this alternative path right past the door and its own door frame as "a critically queer and diasporic eschatology," which I explore in much more detail in the epilogue to this here project. For now, however, let us briefly turn to some of the lessons there are to learn from the word and the field of stereoscopy.

stereoscopy

I don't think that the word, "stereoscope," is a common word in modern U.S. English, but stereoscopes, themselves, definitely did and still do exist. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "stereoscope" has two major meanings. The first is as follows: "[a]n instrument for obtaining, from two pictures (usually photographs) of an object, taken from slightly different points of view (corresponding to the positions of the two eyes), a single image giving the impression of solidity or relief, as in ordinary vision of the object itself." This first definition of the word anchors it in a literal contraption that is used to obtain "a single image" that emerges out of the juxtaposition of two pictures or images—typically photographs, as the definition notes. I will turn to examples of these contraptions as they were actually designed and created by two feuding, nineteenth century scientists and inventors by the names of Sir Charles Wheatstone and David Brewster.

The first definition then continues on into a second little paragraph, which goes on to specifically mention both Wheatstone and Brewster. That little paragraph states the following:

"In the original form of the instrument (reflecting stereoscope), invented by [Sir Charles] Wheatstone, the images were combined by means of mirrors placed at a suitable angle; the common form (refracting or lenticular stereoscope), invented afterwards by [David] Brewster, has two tubes each containing a lens, through which the two pictures are viewed by the corresponding eyes."

The second definition of the word in the OED anchors it in surgery. In this kind of context, a stereoscope is "[a]n instrument resembling a catheter, for detecting solid foreign bodies, as calculi." But the dictionary entry does note that this kind of use of the word is rare. In

any case, the word, “stereoscope,” appears to become more popular in the modern English language sometime around the decades of the 1830s up and until the 1860s. This would coincide well with Wheatstone and Brewster’s own two iconic inventions.

While many of us may be more familiar with the mechanics of a telescope, I think that far less of us are familiar with the mechanics of a stereoscope. Let us, therefore, return to those two initial stereoscopes that both Wheatstone and Brewster invented. The first is represented here on down below as an illustration in digital form. It is labeled as figure XXXI. In this drawing, the Wheatstone stereoscope is composed of several major parts, one of the most important being the four mirrors labeled, “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D.” One is expected to then place their own face on what is perhaps the next most important part of the stereoscope, which is the middle part of the device, looking through the glasses whose lenses are, themselves, labeled from left to right, “E” and “F.” By looking at the mirrors, A and B, one would also see the reflections in the mirrors, C and D. This would then generate a three-dimensional effect for the viewer.

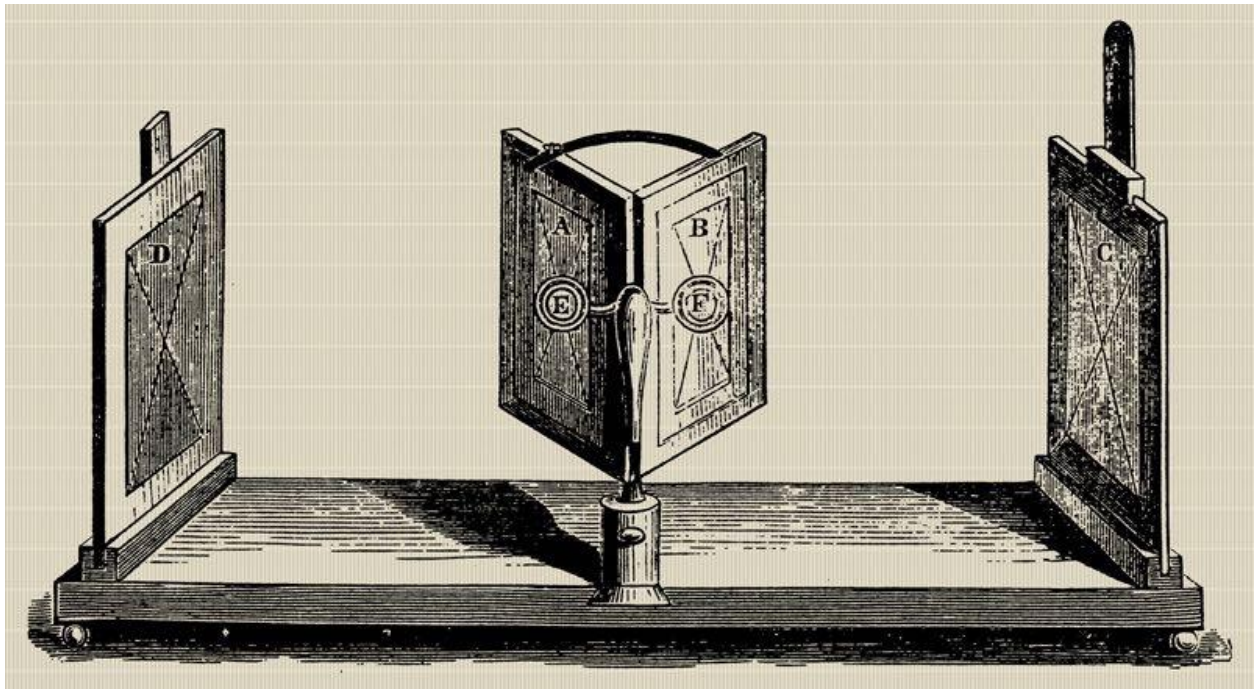


figure IV | This is a drawing of Sir Charles Wheatstone’s original stereoscope.

But instead of simply using telescoping in order to see as I, myself, have already mentioned up above, I have tried to adopt and employ “stereoscopy” as a different way of seeing within this here project of my own. And “[s]tereoscopy,” according to Felipe Pantone, “[...] sometimes called stereoscopic imaging, is a technique used to enable a three-dimensional effect, adding an illusion of depth to a flat image. Stereopsis, commonly (if imprecisely) known as depth perception, is the visual perception of differential distances among objects in one’s line of sight” (Graffuturism).

Of course, I, myself, have not come up with this way of seeing on my own. In fact, I learned about this technique from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, himself, used images in his own *Das Passagen-werk*, which was a pedagogical project among many other things, and he did so in order to “[...] educate our image-creating medium to stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of history’s shadows.” So, again, I wasn’t the first person to really think about all of this. In all truth, I showed up late to the party, because that’s exactly how Rudolph Borchardt had already summarized it back in 1923.

This project’s uptake and use of Benjamin’s concept of dialectical images therefore generates more of a double-lensed stereoscope rather than that of a single-lensed telescope. In thinking about stereoscopy as a dual way of seeing, of bringing together two major lenses, I also think that it is a way to bring together the lunar and the solar faculties, which, themselves, can serve as lenses. In a way, it attempts to bring together the solar and the lunar faculties—which I, myself, explain and explore much more of the differences between the two in addition to the power of their convergence in the second introductory chapter which I have chosen to call “into the luminous dark.” I, like Benjamin, treat these two faculties as lenses through which to not only *see* but to better *perceive* the otherwise hidden historical depths down below, to get a

glimpse of the shade and the shadow that are both hiding there in the dark. When we use stereoscopy as opposed to telescropy, we begin to see and perceive with both of our faculties at the exact same time which then reveals to us certain kinds of hidden images which are just sitting there in the deep and the dark. As Yulia Ustinova has said, “[...] reason alone cannot lead to the transcendental reality; therefore, both the philosopher’s mania and reason are necessary preconditions for his perception of truth.”

III - key image-concepts

In this third section of mine, I want to turn to four key image-concepts that both Benjamin and Bataille were, themselves, working on. By way of an introduction to what I think are some of the most important key image-concepts for this here project—those being keys II, III, & IV—I first look at the central organizing image of Benjamin’s last and ultimately unfinished project, *Das Passagen-werk*. For that final project of his, the key image-concept was that of the arcade, and so it serves as the very first key that I, myself, explore here on down and further below. The second key image-concept is that of the labyrinth, which is an image to which both Benjamin and Bataille returned over and over again throughout much of their own work—and that is true both independently as well as together. The third key image-concept is that of the prostitute and/or the sex worker. Both Benjamin and Bataille worked a lot with this particular image, as did many of the other Surrealists, and so I, myself, want to revisit the specific ways in which the two of them worked with it in particular. The fourth and final key image-concept is that of the minotaur. Altogether then—the arcade, the prostitute, the labyrinth, and the minotaur—these were the four key image-concepts with which both Benjamin and Bataille so often worked. In spite of their own two deaths, they, themselves, have inspired and even helped me to spur my own interest in reanimating and redeploying these images here in the writing up of my very own project. And so, in what follows, I discuss some of the ways in which both Benjamin and Bataille used these four key image-concepts before I then turn to how it is that I, myself, aim to use them.

One of the major things that links both Benjamin and Bataille together was their shared intellectual labor and work that was done on the idea of the “image-concept.” In brief, an

“image-concept” can be any kind of sign or symbol. In fact, it can practically be anything as long as that specific thing is charged with some sort of symbolic kind of meaning. An image-concept can, therefore, be a snake, for example, as it is so often found in so much of the work of Gloria Anzaldúa who, like Benjamin and like Bataille, also worked with images as concepts. I will return to this particular point and this particular snake-like image of Anzaldúa’s in the second methods chapter. For now, however, it is important to note that an image-concept can also be, for example, that of the image of the (hidden) door. This was the image-concept with which I, myself, chose to start out this project in the first introductory chapter of mine of the very same name. But an image-concept could also be the image of the cross, as it is in many religions, or perhaps even the image of water. In short and again, image-concepts can be almost anything as long as they’re imagistic and imbued with some sort of concept and/or symbolism.

One might also say then that image-concepts kind of function in a way that is very akin to the way that glyphs function. We must remember, after all, that both Benjamin and Bataille were two people who were very well connected to and interested in things that had a lot to do with the religious and the sacred. Sacred images and glyphs have both helped to convey religious and/or spiritual ideas, and, despite their differences, Benjamin and Bataille were both deeply pulled in and influenced by certain religious and/or spiritual traditions. Religious and sacred imagery is also often saturated with obscured but significant meaning. It is highly complex and frequently esoteric, which means that it is, itself, in need of decoding. Like glyphs, image-concepts are also imbued with deep, layered, and complex meaning. They can even be so saturated with meaning that, again like glyphs, they too become specifically *esoteric* images, or again image-concepts that provide for a wide and diverse array of many different kinds of meanings and/or associations.

Since Benjamin's own death, the idea of the image-concept has only entered into academic discourse relatively recently. Nataša Lacković and Alin Olteanu, who have written within the realm of educational philosophy and theory, for example, tell us that an image-concept is an idea and mental representation which is used for undertaking what they call "[...] deep and critical teaching-learning" (2021). Others, like Paul Cobley, describe the image-concept as troubling the often mainstream and uncritical commitment to both (phal)logocentric and glottocentric "[...] construals of knowledge, learning, and teaching" (598). Now, I think the first definition of an image-concept as that which facilitates "deep and critical teaching-learning" is a bit easy and clearer to understand. I think this latter definition, however, as an idea that troubles both (phal)logocentrism and glottocentrism, requires at least a little bit of unpacking.

When I and Cobley both use the adjective, "(phal)logocentric," here, I think that we both mean to suggest a way of privileging and viewing the (masculine) logos as not only something that is, itself, seen as central but also something that is, itself, seen as superior. This word, however, still needs a little bit more breaking down, I think. According to Oxford Languages, "logocentrism" (without the prefix, "phal-") is a way of "regarding words and language as a fundamental expression of an external reality (especially applied as a negative term to traditional Western thought by postmodernist critics)." According to this view, logos—or, the word, logic, language, text, discourse, and reason—is seen as epistemologically superior and, within the philosophy of logocentrism, language, itself, is seen to have a fundamental kind of truth and/or meaning to it. One of the first people to use and write down this word, "logocentrism," is the early 20th century German philosopher, Ludwig Klages, who was the one to first coin the term and use it in order to refer to those traditions of Western science and philosophy that view both the word and language as a fundamental expression of an external reality. It is also taken to be an

ostensibly transparent system through which reality is both expressed and understood.

Interestingly enough, Jacques Derrida has said that it is logocentrism which gives birth to history.

Let us now return to the addition of that prefix, “phal-” to the word, “logocentrism.” The prefix, “phal-,” comes from and is short for the Greek word, “phallus,” which represents male potency as well as male domination in the literature. “Phallogocentrism,” then, combines together the two words, “phallogocentrism,” with “logocentrism,” and it is one of Jacques Derrida’s famous neologisms. For Derrida, the addition of the prefix, “phal-,” connotes the privileging of the *masculine* point of view, of *masculine* thought, of masculine words, logic, language, texts, discourse, and even reason.

When I and Copley both use the adjective, “glottocentric,” here, I do mean to refer to the word “glottocentrism,” which I understand to be a belief in the centrality of speech or spoken language, and it usually involves *one* (normally Western) language in particular. According to Susan Petrilli In her 2014 article, *The Critique of Glottocentrism: European Signatures*, “[g]lottocentrism refers to the verbal sign and to the linguistic science that takes the verbal sign as its model” (26). A glottocentric belief, therefore, is one that views a particular language as well as the particular cultural values that are associated with that language as being privileged and/or superior to other languages and the cultural values that are associated with those other languages. This belief in the superiority of one’s own language is connected to many other types of -isms that, like glottocentrism, are rooted in domination.

Petrilli also explains how glottocentrism is “phonocentric, anthropocentric, [and] ethnocentric.” This claim is supported in the work of other scholars, such as Klaus Zimmerman, who adds that glottocentrism also participates in a eurocentrism. This also requires a little

elaboration. Glottocentrism is phonocentric in the sense that it privileges “[...] language (verbal language) among the various sign systems [...],” which means that it privileges “the *phoné*” in addition to assigning “[...] a subordinate, ancillary value to writing and writing systems, reducing them to the status of transcription” (25). It is ethnocentric in the sense that “[...] from a historical perspective glottocentrism has privileged certain languages over others and with them it has privileged certain types of writing systems over others, fundamentally the Western” (ibid). Finally, it is anthropocentric in the sense that glottocentrism privileges “[...] verbal language and forms of human communication connected to verbal language fail to recognize the sign nature of other systems in the living world, (whether at the macroscopic or the microscopic level of life) means to exalt “man” as the only authentic signifying and communicating animal existing” (25-26). For Petrilli, “[g]lottocentrism should be rejected for all these reasons [...].” (26).

To return to the general idea of the image-concept on which I, myself, aim to elaborate here further on down below, both Benjamin and Bataille spent much of their own time as well as much of their own work focusing in on a particular set of key image-concepts. For Benjamin, there were, indeed, many to consider. He investigated a variety of different images like that of the *flâneur* and that of the gambler, that of the sandwichman and that of the prostitute. And there were more than just that. For Bataille, he, too, had several different image-concepts in mind. There was that of the sun and that of the labyrinth, that of the flower and even that of the anus. I could also go on here. Despite some small differences between their two focuses, however, both Benjamin and Bataille did end up collaborating together on a few of the same key image-concepts, and those specific key image-concepts included: 1) the labyrinth, 2) the prostitute, and 3) the minotaur.

But before I, myself, get into my own major discussion of both Benjamin and Bataille's collaboration together on some of their own shared key image-concepts, I do want to provide some more of the historical context for their general use and interest in image-concepts altogether. In order to do so, I want to first briefly detail and then discuss what Benjamin, himself, was attempting to do in general with his own collection of key image-concepts. But, in order to discuss that specific aspect of Benjamin's own life, I want and must also (re)turn to his own specific use of the arcade. For Benjamin, the arcade was *the* key image-concept that he, himself, used above all others in the very organization and structuring of his own final project: *Das Passagen-Werk*.

the arcade

While *Das Passagen-Werk* was concerned with many different image-concepts, it was the particular image of the Parisian Arcade that served as *the* key image-concept for the entire project as a whole. By using and studying the emergence, structure, and destruction of the Parisian arcades, Benjamin offered up and contributed a certain kind of graphic perception that was lacking in traditional Marxist analyses rooted in historical materialism. As Alison Ross has put it, "[t]he Arcades Project identifies in specific material instances of outmoded commodity forms and in the steel and glass of the nineteenth-century Paris arcades the graphic perception that is missing from conventional Marxist accounts of history" (8).

We know that Benjamin got his own inspiration for such a graphic focus on the arcades after having read a certain book that was specifically surrealist in style. In 1926, the French surrealist novelist, poet, and editor, Louis Aragon published "Le Passage de l'opéra" [The

Passage of the Opera / the Opera Passage / the Opera Arcade] in his *Le Paysan de Paris* [The Peasant of Paris], which was a book that he, himself, dedicated to one of his own fellow surrealist artists, the famous French painter, André Masson. In that text of his, Susan Buck-Morss tells us that Aragon “[...] describes in detail one arcade, the Passage de L’Opera, just before this material space disappeared, torn down to build the Boulevard Haussmann” (33). In reading Aragon’s novel, Benjamin took inspiration from his keen eye for the memory and use of the Passage de L’Opéra, which I have chosen to reproduce here immediately down below in digital form as figure XXXII.



figure V | Marville, Charles. *Passage de l’Opéra*. 1868.

Figure XXXII here is a screen shot of what was originally a photographic image of one of the many famous Parisian arcades that existed before their destruction. This particular arcade is, again, the *Passage de l'Opéra*, which was, itself, part of the *Galérie de l'Horloge* [Gallery of the Clock] located in the *quartier, Opéra*, or neighborhood, of the ninth arrondissement in Paris. This originally photographic image is currently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in their gallery numbered 691. It was taken by Charles sometime around 1868, and the medium he used here was albumen silver print from a glass plate negative.

In general, one could say that the Parisian arcade was the predecessor to the department store. It was a new form of architecture, a sort of late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century mercantile gallery in which one sold a nearly innumerable variety of commodities from all around the world. According to Claire Kennard, Parisian arcades were constructed sometime between the years of 1818 and 1845, and the Parisian arcades were, themselves, designed for the explicit purpose of shopping within them. But since their initial construction and eventual destruction, many different scholarly and much more detailed descriptions of these arcades have emerged in order to both further study and reveal more about them. Howard Eiland and Kevin McClaughlin, for example, describe the arcades as “[...] glass-roofed rows of shops that were early centers of consumerism.” Susan Buck-Morss describes them as “[...] interior streets lined with luxury shops [that] open through iron and glass roofs to the stars [...]” (103). According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “[a] mid-nineteenth-century guidebook described the arcade as a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.”⁵ While the arcades did, indeed, house all sorts of things, such as “[...] shops, brothels, and cafes” as Kennard has pointed out, Rolf Venner adds his own more psychoanalytic take to their

description. He writes that “[t]he arcade is also a microcosm of the city and of modern mental life. With its display of desired objects, it is also a paradigm for the unconscious.” I could go on.

Louis Aragon’s own description of the *Passage de l’Opéra* is one that is, itself, both detailed and oneiric. It is important to remember that, for Aragon, his depiction of this particular passage is one of lamentation given its later destruction. He, himself, laments *the loss of the Passage de L’Opéra* due to the ever-increasing urban planning projects that began emerging throughout the city. He, therefore, intended to defend some of the much smaller traders who he, himself, described in his own text as an integral part of this particular arcade. In a way, Aragon was sad to see this particular *Passage* destroyed in the massive urban renewal projects led by the late nineteenth century French official, Georges-Eugène Haussmann. And perhaps one of the main reasons for Aragon’s grief is that the *Passage de l’Opéra*, according to Venner, stood against the alliance which had then formed between the City of Paris administrators and the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society. In order to be in accordance with Haussman’s new design for the city, many of the older *Passages*, like the *Passage de l’Opéra*, itself, would be demolished to order to build newer, wider and straighter boulevards in addition to a sprinkling of various parks and public works all throughout the city.

Across these different descriptions of the arcades, there are a few things that do consistently stand out to me. The first is that the arcades, themselves, were once very real, material, and concrete things. They were physical structures and literal buildings that were composed of both iron and glass. They, therefore, were the result of a certain kind of industrialism. The second thing is that the arcades were also places dedicated to consumption, and in this way, they were, themselves, akin to these miniature displays of industrial capitalist desires filled up with all of the world’s finest of fetishized commodities. Arcades like the

Passage de l'Opéra, therefore, helped to reveal not only the desires but the dreams of the Parisian bourgeoisie. The third is that the arcades, themselves, also possessed an interior and an exterior to them. The iron and glass ceilings shielded them from not only the rain that would normally pummel and muddy up the otherwise exposed Parisian streets, but they would also temporarily insulate them from the ravages of a much larger and much more dangerous capitalist and imperial world. The fourth is that the arcades, themselves, were deep and complex phenomena that Benjamin thought of as being equivalent to miniature cities and/or worlds.

While the Parisian arcades may have been an actual and unique form of architectural phenomena that did, indeed, emerge in some parts of Paris during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “[t]he arcade” was, for Benjamin, “[...] the most important architectural form of the nineteenth century [...]” (ix). Benjamin, himself, found the arcade and its image to be of absolutely critical importance to understanding the much larger, metropolitan city life of Paris, itself. As Kennard puts it, “Benjamin identified the arcades as the most important symbol to examine [...]. Paris represented modernity, and the arcades were a symbol of the city’s position at the apex of capitalist consumption and luxury.” For Benjamin, the Parisian arcades were the means by which one could temporarily enter into entirely other worlds, and, in this way, they sort of lived up to their own name in French, which is again “*passages*.” The arcades provided a kind of passageway space into and through which to access a variety of different materials from linens to coffee, stamps, wine, books, watches, letters, trinkets, and maps etc. These materials had been collected and/or produced from a variety of different regions all over the globe, and the arcades helped to bring them all together as so many different kinds of commodities into the very heart center of the metropolitan city of Paris, itself. The arcades, moreover, brought in commodities from *all over* and *well beyond* the very reaches of the French

empire. For Benjamin, the arcades thus served as veritable passageways in that they, themselves, provided access to so many different kinds of objects in addition to their own respective worlds from which they had been ripped. In the arcades, the objects that were so frequently put on display there and then expected to be sold would either be carried off with the next buyer or left to perish with the next boom and bust of fashionable products. Just like the arcades, themselves, the commodities they sold would ultimately be left to the side and discarded after the novelty of it all had worn off.

Perhaps one of the most important things to note and emphasize about the Parisian arcades then is that they were, themselves, passages, or passageways, as the original French word for them indicates. In French, this expression, “*les passages*” [the passages/passageways], was used to designate what we English speakers now call today “the arcades.” And I think it is here where we must remember the first part of the expression as well as the title of Benjamin’s final project: *Das Passagen-Werk*. This original title is, in part, German for what is in French, “*les passages*.” Note the similarities between the two words, themselves, “*Passagen*” and “*passages*.” And so, Benjamin used the image of the arcade, the *passage*, the image of the passageway, or *Passagen*, as his own final work’s central organizing metaphor.

But these arcades or passageways, for Benjamin, also represented something more than a simple kind of throughway. They were also what he, himself, considered to be part of a capitalist bourgeois dreamworld. Sigrid Weigel tells us that Benjamin interpreted “[...] the arcades and other phenomena as *residues of a dream world*; for him they are *materialized wish symbols* of the crumbling bourgeois epoch [...] (350, emphasis mine). The arcades were, in other words, the then decaying monuments that the capitalist bourgeoisie had yearned for, imagined, and made real but which were now crumbling into ruins. According to Buck-Morss, “[...Benjamin] made it

clear that he chose the Paris arcades as the central image precisely because these early forms of industrial luxury were in decay in his own time.” (100). By the time of the 1930s, Benjamin, himself, wanted to capture the very image of these decaying bourgeois ruins well before they, themselves and just like the commodified products they once held, vanished altogether from history as if they too had never existed.

And given that the Parisian arcades were a part of a capitalist bourgeois dreamworld, they were also, according to Benjamin, an integral part of an archetypal dimension. That is, Benjamin, himself, understood the arcades to be an archetypal phenomenon of modernity which is, according to Sebastian Meixner, “[...] structurally linked to Goethe’s concept of symbol.” In other words, Benjamin considered the arcades to be an example of what the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century German polymath and writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, had referred to as an “*Urphänomen*” or “Ur-phenomenon,” which was, it turns out, a word he used and invented in the context of his own theory of colors. For Goethe, the “*Urphänomen*” was the name for the emergence of colors out of both the light and the darkness. Yet, “*Urphänomen*,” was also the word that Goethe used in order to give name to “the primal phenomenon,” which was something like an original and archetypal phenomenon, and so, in Goethe’s own use of the term, the *Urphänomen* could, itself, be grasped via an intuitive understanding.

Perhaps it is because Benjamin, himself, viewed the arcade as an *urphänomen*, or primal phenomenon of the bourgeois and capitalist world of modernity, that it also had a sense of timelessness to it. The time of the arcade is a deadening time in which the new, which the flaneur seeks so avidly, is “always the same.” In other words, the time that seems to function in the space of the arcades is a time of constant newness which quickly turns stale and then dead. The arcades present us with a certain kind of time that is, itself, eternally new and never really

changing in spite of all the many different changes in the commodities, themselves. When we look at the *Passage de l'Opéra* in the *Galérie de l'Horloge*, we also see the presence of an industrial clock almost in the very center of the above photographic image.

But at base, the Parisian arcades were absolutely fundamental for Benjamin to study, if only because they were, for him, the materialized wish symbols of bourgeois capitalist dreams. For Benjamin, the arcades as passageways represented something else, something more than the simple fact of them being unique physical buildings of a certain architectural style. What Benjamin, himself, saw in the image-concept of the arcade, of again the passageway, was something that was exemplary of his own slowly emerging and experimental metaphor and method. As Michael Jennings explicitly says, “Benjamin also finds in the physical structure of the arcades an important metaphor for his own methodology. He places particular emphasis on the fact that they ‘obtain their light from above,’ that light shines through the glass ceiling, illuminating the world below” (17). The arcades, as Benjamin both saw and understood them methodologically, were miniature cities and worlds that, themselves, could and did need to be illuminated from the traversing sun light located up and above them. But Benjamin, too, was bringing his own kind of (handheld) light in addition to the sunlight.

The arcades, therefore, served as metaphors that enabled Benjamin to become methodologically capable of revealing the (collective) unconscious. *Das Passagen-werk* was a text that sought to do precisely that: the illuminating of the Parisian arcades. “*Das Passagen-Werk*,” as Jennings frames it, “would have enacted the process by which reason shines through into regions previously darkened by the madness of early capitalism” (ibid). By peering into the arcades, Benjamin was shining his own light of reason both into and onto them. The arcades were, thus, spaces that were both obscured and obscuring until the sun light (of reason) beamed

through and all that was once enshrouded in darkness became visible and much clearer to see. While the arcades, themselves, did bring together and house the shops of merchants whose collections were mad blunders of all sorts of different things from all over the world, the very origins of all the objects that the merchants, themselves, had collected and then attempted to sell were sometimes still traceable. Other times, there was not as much luck as some commodities were, quite unfortunately, simply lost to historical oblivion. Nevertheless, *Das Passagen-Werk* sought to illuminate the obscurity of the arcades and the commodified objects they held therein by shining through the glass roof in order to then begin the difficult task of interpreting and disentangling all the madness that lurked behind early capitalism's own creations.

For me and my own project as a whole, it is not so much the image of the arcade that serves as the central and organizing metaphor. Instead, I turn to another key image-concept, one that is still inspired by Benjamin and his work—no doubt. But, for me, the key-image concept that I have chosen to turn to is that of the specifically *Caribbean* figure of prostitution and/or sex work. This is an expression as well as a linguistic and discursive category that is intentionally broad enough so as to fit a variety of different subcategories and subjectivities within it, such as the black Haitian sex worker, the black Jamaican rent-a-rasta, and the boricua drag queen prostitute.

the labyrinth

Both Benjamin and Bataille deployed the image of the labyrinth in their own respective works, and while they did so in ways that were similar, they were also slightly different. This is on top of the fact that the general presence and persistence of the image of the labyrinth apart

from the work of both Benjamin and Bataille has a sort of life of its own. The image of the labyrinth is, after all, much older than the work and writing of both Benjamin and Bataille who were living and primarily working in the period of the 1930s. This particular image of theirs was already used and saturated with much meaning well before these two early twentieth century thinkers first picked it up and redeployed it on the European continent.



figure VI | Masson, André. *Le Labyrinthe*, 1938.

Figure XXXIII here is a digital copy of the French, surrealist painter, André Masson's 1938 visual representation of the labyrinth, which he, himself, simply named, "*Le Labyrinthe*" [The Labyrinth]. As Tom Holert describes it, Masson's labyrinth is composed of a "[...] vision of a body as run down, bleeding, ruined building embedded in a barren landscape featuring as its center, at the place of the stomach, a labyrinth" (31:48).

As time has gone on, the image of the labyrinth as well as the myth and the meanings behind it have all come to evoke a string of seemingly contradictory and unrelated words and concepts. The labyrinth is, at once, a metaphor for many different but interrelated things. For some of the more radical left-wing European intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s, including thinkers as Benjamin and Bataille, the image of the labyrinth is at once a metaphor for things that are *exterior* to us just as much as it is a metaphor for those things that are *interior* to us. And one might say that whereas Benjamin is more concerned with the labyrinth that is located on the exterior, perhaps the labyrinth as the city, Bataille is much more interested in that labyrinth that is located on the interior, perhaps the labyrinth of the psyche. I want to begin with the latter before moving on to the former.

In his *Visions of Excess: selected writings 1927-1939*, Bataille theorizes and describes "human being" as a labyrinthine structure. For Bataille, the labyrinth was also a key image-concept not for the or a "human being" in the sense of a person but for "human being" in the sense of a more verbal type of expression, an ontological state, a particular way of being in the world, specifically *human* being. Bataille uses the word "being," here, not in its substantive, nominative, or noun form but as a verb in its gerundive form—as in what it means to *be*, or to exist, in the world. Of course, Bataille asserts that "being" imposes such a complexity that it "[...] becomes in turn the labyrinth where what had suddenly come forward strangely loses its

way” (173). As Holert describes the image of the labyrinth in Bataille’s work, “[...it] serves as an ontological backdrop” (Holert).

In the third section titled and dedicated to “the structure of the labyrinth,” Bataille takes recourse to another set of particular images and metaphors. One is the “satellite-like mode of existence” in which “the miniscule human” is understood to be a particle that orbits a center and nucleus (175). Together, the satellite-like mode of existence and the miniscule human form part of a much larger whole that is described as both “shapeless and structureless” (ibid). He then moves from this celestial and planetary, atomistic imagery and metaphor to something more terrestrial and floral. He writes:

“[t]hus relatively stable wholes are produced, whose center is a city, *in its early form a corolla that encloses a double pistil of sovereign and god*. In the case where many cities abdicate their central function in favor of a single city, an empire forms around a capital where sovereignty and the gods are concentrated; the gravitation around a center then degrades the existence of peripheral cities, *where the organs that constituted the totality of being wilt*.” (emphasis mine)

In this quote, Bataille uses the imagery and the metaphor of a flower to provide a mental visual geography and cartography of a city. Imagined within the very center of that city-as-a-flower is “a corolla” that contains a “double pistil of sovereign and god.” There is, moreover, the notion that due to the “gravitation around a center” the peripheral cities that “wilt” can be said to be “the organs” in the sense of the flower’s petals.

For Benjamin, the image of the labyrinth that was exterior to us in the sense that it provided a map of the polis, which was in his case the metropolis of Paris, France. This is a rather recurrent use of the labyrinth that is not unique to Benjamin. In *The Unending Mystery: A*

Journey through Labyrinths and Mazes, David W. McCullough writes that “[t]hroughout its long history, the labyrinth (and later the maze) has been associated either symbolically or actually with many different ideas or concepts, but the connection with the city is almost always there” (2005). For Benjamin, the image of the labyrinth was a useful spatial metaphor for critically thinking about what he called “the big cities.” The labyrinth, then, was meant to invoke the image of a labyrinthine-like system such as a city grid or layout with all of many twisted roads, streets, and alleyways.

The image of the labyrinth was a useful image in that it was a *mutable* image for Benjamin. It could be used to discuss the city in general as well as the metropolis of Paris more specifically. In fact, it was the big city of Paris that was the inspiration for one of Benjamin’s first experimental essays and exposés: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” which was, itself, part of a much larger book project titled, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. With Paris of the nineteenth century as his particular city of study, Benjamin asseverated in a chapter of his dedicated to “Central Park” in his *Selected Writings*, that:

With the emergence of big cities, prostitution comes to possess new arcana.

Among the earliest of these is *the labyrinthine character* of the city itself. *The labyrinth*, whose image has become part of the flâneur’s flesh and blood, seems to have been given, as it were, a colored border by prostitution. *The first arcanum known to prostitution is thus the mythical aspect of the city as labyrinth.*

(emphasis mine)

Before I unpack some parts of this quote, I think it is important to understand the meaning and the nuances of the word, “arcana,” here. As is probably well understood by this point, Benjamin loved to use words that had multiple layers and many different meanings to them. In its singular

noun form, “arcanum” means “[a] hidden thing; a mystery, a profound secret.” It is also related to the words “arcane” in English and to “*arcanus*” in Latin. These words connote something that is understood to be private and concealed. The word, “arcana,” was also directly related to and important in the practice of alchemy. In that particular context, the word meant a “supposed great secret of nature.” Per its etymology, the Latin word *arcanus* derives from a few more ancient words. The first is *arcere* which meant “to close up, enclose, contain.” The second is *arca*, meaning a “chest, box, place for safe-keeping”. Going back even further into proto-indoeuropean roots of “arcana” reveals how the prefix *ark-* designated that which “to hold, contain, guard.”

In this quotation of him up above, Benjamin is marking an addition that occurs in the arcana which prostitution possesses, and this addition occurs precisely with the emergence of the “big cities” of Europe, themselves. Put another way, in addition to the older arcana that prostitution once possessed, it takes on even newer arcana “with the emergence of big cities” as he, himself, says. By way of elaborating on just what exactly these newest arcana are, Benjamin points out that the earliest of these arcana is “the labyrinthine character of the city itself,” “the mythical aspect of the city as labyrinth.” The newer secret to the city that is added on to the older secrets of prostitution, then and for Benjamin, is to mentally imagine the city as a labyrinth and it is this particular secret, this image that figures of prostitution can and do reveal. Like streetlights in the dark, they help to illuminate—for those of us willing to take, read, and interpret them seriously—the labyrinthine-like structures of the big, metropolitan cities in which they are coerced and so often forced to prostitute themselves as a result of the bourgeois capitalist system. On the European continent, these big cities to which Benjamin referred were, in fact, the now global cities of Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and Naples—four specific cities that, according to Buck-Morss, were “[...] decisive for the *Passagen-Werk*’s conception” (26).

But the labyrinth as a mutable image has offered up more than just a useful analysis of the city. It was also an image that is quite “analogous to the mind,” and I think that Benjamin, himself, knew that. The labyrinth in this sense was an image that is concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power, and I also think that Foucault knew that.⁵ The one who possesses the knowledge of how to brave the deep and dark halls of the labyrinth becomes powerful in the sense that they know how to and do in fact reach the labyrinth’s center. With this particular usage of the image of the labyrinth as analogous to the mind, knowledge, and power, the symbol also came to signify seemingly contradictory things, such as confusion, on the one hand, and yet wisdom, on the other. The labyrinth was, indeed, a confusing place, but given that one knew how to navigate one’s way through the labyrinth meant that one demonstrated a certain kind of wisdom.

The image of the labyrinth is also associated with the notion of a process. To enter *into* a labyrinth is to eventually come back out completely changed—if one comes back out at all. Of course, the myth of the labyrinth narrates an allegorical story that is, itself, concerned with a deep and complex process of transformative encounter. So transformative is the labyrinth that it carries with it associations to Death and its related images of the minotaur and the skeleton. The labyrinth as transformative encounter is, in other words, a process of metamorphosis.

Imagery of the labyrinth has appeared and circulated in the ancient Roman, Greek, and Egyptian worlds. One of the oldest known representations of the labyrinth has been found on silver coins from the island of Crete, and I venture to think that Bataille in all of his work with numismatics, may have been very well aware of this. Other images of the labyrinth from this same location and era can be found etched into the Knossian Linear B tablets dated at around 1400 B.C.E.



figure VII | A Knossos silver coin with the image of a labyrinth sometime around 400 B.C.E in *Κνωσός* [Knossos] on the island of Crete.

Although there are exceptions, these ancient Greek images of the labyrinth often represent it—as seen in the coin up above—as a specifically unicursal structure. The labyrinth, in other words, consists of a singular, non-linear path. It is a hall that winds its own way from the outside, going around, and finally arriving at the center. While the unicursal path may initially seem confusing, it does, ultimately and unfailingly, lead one directly (in)to the labyrinth’s center. While there may very well be a sense of *getting lost*, here, this is, in the end, a sense that is ultimately false, because, in reality, anyone who enters into a unicursal labyrinth is quite on track and simply *going in deeper*. As Karl Kerényi, himself, has noted, “[...] the present-day notion of a labyrinth as a place where one can lose one's way must be set aside. It is a confusing path, hard to follow without a thread, but, provided one is not devoured at the mid-point, it leads surely, despite twists and turns, back to the beginning” (93). With this unicursal rendition, there is also only ever one entrance—often located at the bottom of the image. This makes the entrance the exit at the exact same time. It is, in other words, an entrance/exit both at once. As such, it is a

certain type of portal and a certain kind of threshold that marks and puts an emphasis on the liminal space located somewhere in that place in between the two poles we call “the entrance” and “the exit,” that liminality which exists right there in space of the slash between the entrance and the exit in the very expression, “the entrance/exit.”

Now, the structure of a labyrinth is at once elaborate and confusing—no doubt. Its passages and its turns present a veritable puzzle for anyone who dares to venture inside. Historically speaking, representations of the labyrinth have changed over time. On early Cretan coins, such as the one represented up and above, the labyrinth is, itself, often depicted with multicursal or branching-like patterns. As of 430 B.C.E., there were also unicursal or single-path patterns. These contain no branching paths or dead ends of any sort. Unicursal patterns were quite popular in the period from Roman times leading up and until the Renaissance while multicursal versions reemerged along with the popularity of hedge mazes.

These ancient Greek images of the labyrinth were also associated with what was, at the time, a very popularly circulating myth of the labyrinth. Prominent between the two periods of what scholars often refer to as “classical antiquity” and “the Renaissance,” the myth of the labyrinth was kept alive with the works of famous poets such as Homer, Ovid, and Virgil. According to this particular myth, the labyrinth was a structure that was designed by the skilled architect, craftsman, and artificer, Daedalus with the help of his son, Icarus. That labyrinthine-like structure was simply known as “the labyrinth,” or “Daedalus’ labyrinth.” The two were hired by the then King Minos of Crete who commanded and commissioned the labyrinth in order to imprison a purportedly horrible beast at its center: the Minotaur whose actual name was again *Ἀστερίων* [Asterion] or *Ἀστέριος* [Asterios]. The brave Athenian hero, Theseus thus enters into the labyrinth at this point in the myth, tasked as he is with two primary objectives. First, he must

make it down, through, and into the dark, dangerous, and deadly depths of the labyrinth's center and, second, he must slay the dark, dangerous, and deadly Minotaur that lay somewhere hidden and unknown there within.

But the labyrinth is not just a purely material structure meant to be challengingly confusing, because it also—if not primarily—possesses a spiritual dimension. Theseus entering into the labyrinth is really about Theseus going inward. As described in the myth, the structure plays with our own notions of what counts as the “beginning” and the “end.” It is a structure that, in a way, has no exact beginning and has no exact end. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, even Daedalus, himself, “could barely escape it.” There is thus a mystical aspect to the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a symbol that communicates secrecy and even revelation. It involves mystery and, therefore, mysticism.

It is here that I would like to assert a third arcanum regarding specifically Caribbean figures of prostitution. It is not so much that they point us to the labyrinthine-like character of “the big city,” as Benjamin's own figures of prostitution do. No, this is far too simple for what we are experiencing in the here and now. What Caribbean figures of prostitution seem to point us to is something that is, instead, much more complex. A third arcanum may well be the *maze*-like structure and character of the “global metropolis”—perhaps even the whole modern notion of “the globe,” itself. Now, while the image of the labyrinth may often be used synonymously with that of the maze, in this project there is a distinction that needs to be made between the two of them. This distinction is of both critical importance and necessity. The maze, it would seem, is an amalgamation of many different kinds of labyrinths, many different kinds of metropolitan cities, a labyrinth that is, itself, a collection of many different kinds of labyrinths. The maze, for

us, is this kind of meta-labyrinth. *What else is an empire but an amalgamation of many different cities, an amalgamation of many different kinds of labyrinths?*

One of the major differences between the image of the labyrinth and the image of the maze is the amount of entrances, exits, and paths that each one has. Whereas a labyrinth may only possess one entrance, the maze possesses many entrances. Whereas a labyrinth may only possess *one exit*—the entrance through which one began—the maze possesses *many exits*. Whereas one must enter and exit a labyrinth by following *one, unicursal path*, one is able to enter and exit a maze by following *a number of multicursal paths*. There is also a qualitative difference that exists between the labyrinth and the maze, as the maze is unequivocally much more puzzling. One may enter one way and exit through another. Two people may enter from seemingly opposite sides and yet exit together.

the prostitute

Perhaps it was Benjamin's general interest in whatever capitalist commodity culture deemed to be its "unvaluables" that ultimately led him to figures of prostitution. Indeed, he was particularly taken with *whatever* it was that capitalist commodity culture and its society determined to be its own "trash" and "detritus," its "debris" and its "decay." As Michael Jennings tells us, Benjamin "[...] took seriously the debris of mass culture *as the source of philosophical truth*" (ix, emphasis mine)," and, as Susan Buck-Morss reminds us, Benjamin avoided in general more obvious social types and went to the margins. He then singled out certain marginal and liminal figures like that of the flâneur, the prostitute, and the collector. These figures, according to Buck-Morss, were:

“[...] historical figures whose existence was precarious economically in their own time (although their numbers flourished in early industrialism, and socially across time because the dynamics of industrialism ultimately threatened these social types with extinction as it threatened the arcades, the environment which had originally been so attractive to their trades.” (102)

When we zoom out and take a long-arc view of Benjamin’s relationship to and work on prostitution throughout his whole entire life span, it would seem to have both changed and, yet in some ways, stayed the same. Across several of his own publications in which he, himself, addresses it—from his “The Life of Students” essay published in 1915 to *A Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, which was published in 1950 to *Erotic Education* and his very last treatment of it in *Das Passagen-werk*—Benjamin’s engagement with the figure of the prostitute has taken on a variety of different meanings due to his uptake of it and due to his own use of it as a key dialectical image and allegory.

But it is also true that Benjamin, himself, also engaged in prostitution as a buyer throughout his youth. His own youthful engagement with prostitution in this way has led to much discussion about Benjamin’s politics with regard to both the world of prostitution as well as the world of feminism. In fact, some have used this point to question his own attachment to any sort of feminist analyses.⁶

One thing does remain consistent throughout Benjamin’s own writings, however, and that’s the fact that the figure of the prostitute and prostitution more generally are both framed within a particular—and, for some, a rather peculiar—kind of paradigm. In one sense and according to McCann, Benjamin viewed the figure of the prostitute “[...] as a commodity, as a ‘mass-produced article’ [...]” (111). The prostitute is the one who sells herself to a mass

audience, and so, in this way, Benjamin talked about prostitution as a specifically broad kind of condition. As McCann further explains it, Benjamin, himself, “[...] redescribe[s] prostitution not as a specific kind of sexual relationship, or a specific kind of violence, or even a specific kind of agency, but as *the broader condition of man under capitalism*” (109, emphasis mine). For Benjamin, not only are the flâneur, the poet, and the man of letters all considered “prostitutes,” but so, too, are *we* insofar as we also sell our own labor on the marketplace (ibid). “The figure,” McCann writes a bit later on, “can be a general, inclusive one, but only in so far as prostitution involves the same sort of contractual arrangements as other forms of labour” (110). Prostitution, therefore and in Benjamin’s work, comes to represent something more and a lot broader than just the prostitute, itself. It is indicative of the general state of both living and working within the confines of a capitalist system.

In fact, Benjamin viewed the emergence of figures of prostitution as key opportunities for rather serious and critical forms of inquiry. That inquiry, moreover, would be directed to what he, himself, referred to as their “arcana,” which was a word that he used in order to convey the many different secrets and the many different mysteries which figures of prostitution held within themselves. For Benjamin, capitalist modernity had concealed the truth, but investigation into prostitution and its proliferation promised to reveal something rather profound about it. These figures, therefore, indexed and provided clues to that which made them not only desirable commodities to be bought and sold but also just possible to begin with—there in the window so-to-speak standing as a manifested dream ready for erotic consumption. In other words, the proliferation of figures of prostitution within cities like Paris indexed their own capitalist and modernist conditions of possibility.

For Benjamin, one of the earliest of prostitution's arcana was that it could reveal the deep and complex structure of "the city." As McCann puts it, figures of prostitution reveal the relationship between commodity culture and the development of new urban space. We see this same observation in the more recent work of Roderick Ferguson, who, in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, discusses a black figure of prostitution represented in Marlon Riggs's experimental documentary, *Tongues Untied* (1989). Ferguson writes that "[i]n the film, the drag-queen prostitute is a fixture of urban capitalism" (1).

And so, in addition to it being the rather broad condition of people under capitalism, prostitution, for Benjamin, also had a unique and esoteric ability to it—one that was linked to its indexical quality. The figure and the image of the prostitute was, as McCann writes, able to "[...evoke] the deadly mystery at the heart of the 19th century metropolis" (107). That is, prostitutes and prostitution more generally pointed Benjamin in the direction of better understanding what was the central most driving forces of the very city of Paris, itself, which was at the time the seat and the height of capitalist modernity. In doing so, prostitutes and prostitution pointed to the door through which Benjamin, himself, could then step in order to better understand the reign of capitalism in the nineteenth-century metropolis. For Benjamin, they would help him come to understand what he, himself, would refer to as Paris of the Second French Empire. Benjamin, therefore, uses the figure of the prostitute as a broad condition as well as an allegorical figure. In doing so, he uses it to tell us a story as well as teach us a lesson. McCann explains that "[t]he force of the prostitute as a dialectical image derives in part from this sense of its inclusiveness as a universal allegory of labour" (35).

Sex workers and/or prostitutes are often framed as existing *at* or *beyond* the law. They are even understood as being beyond "the threshold of humanity." And this is also true for

Benjamin, but in a more nuanced way. It would also seem safe to say that the necropolitical dynamic so common with sex work and/or prostitution is related to the stigmatization and dehumanization of the sex worker and/or prostitute which is, at base, rooted in the perception of them as *animals* instead of as *humans*. They are, therefore, framed as ready to (repeatedly) commit illicit acts of (sexual) transgression.

On one side of this threshold, within that domain of the human, we have the end and limit of what the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, has called and theorized as the realm of *bios*. In his 1998 book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben takes the ancient Greek word for “life,” *bios*, and translates it rather generally as civic or social life. But in an English translation of Agamben’s originally Italian text, it explicates that *bios* “[...] indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1998). This particular “form or way of living” that Agamben describes as *bios* builds upon the work of Michel Foucault who also focused on the related concepts of *biopower* and the *biopolitical* realm. On the other side of this threshold, within the domain of the subhuman and the animal, we have the beginning and the infinitude of *zoē*, or bare life, “[...] the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods) [...]” (ibid). McCann interprets Agamben’s concept of *zoē* as “[...] the biological matter, or the biopolitical body, that constitutes the object of sovereign power” (103).

Within the modern world order, *bios* and *zoē* exist in a particular type of relation to one another. *Zoē*, according to Agamben, “[...] exists in a relation of *exception* to the law, which is to say that it has been abandoned by the law” (ibid, emphasis mine). And so, we learn from Agamben, here, that sex workers and/or prostitutes, insofar as they exist within the realm of life known as *zoē*, exist in a state of exception to the law. In short, then, the figure of the prostitute points us to and exposes the state of exception. But we also learn from Agamben that it is their

exclusion that “[...] founds the polis [...]” (ibid). For Agamben, it is the process of the production of *zoē* that forms part of “[...] the foundation of western politics” (ibid).

Within liberal and/or feminist discourses, sex workers and/or prostitutes are normatively seen and narrated as “choosing” or “having chosen” to *transgress* this threshold. Sometimes, they are framed as stubbornly choosing and/or having willingly chosen to exist on the other side of the contemporarily accepted boundaries of the human. In doing so, they are understood as having openly embraced a life and a lifestyle that exists on “the *outside*” as opposed to “the inside.” As such, they are believed to participate in a lascivious ontology, a lewd state of being, that is more akin to being “animal” than it is to being “human” (Kempadoo, 5). And so, because sex workers and/or prostitutes are commonly framed and, therefore, seen as animals that are wild and obstinate, salacious and libidinal, they are not considered to be what Neferti X. M. Tadiar has called and theorized as “already human” (2022). Instead, black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes, just like Legba and Jane Doe, must undertake or be forced to undergo the coercive assimilationist process of “becoming human,” which, in this case, the victims in question have ostensibly “failed” to do. It would seem, then, that their premature deaths as well as their murders are understood to be part of the price which they had to pay in what was viewed to be their own potentially obstinate “failure to become human.”

Given that they are considered to be members of the animalistic underclass—that lowest class of society frequently referred to as the (neo)colonial lumpenproletariat in much of the literature on Marxist theory—they have not historically had the linguistic capability or the technological access needed for representing themselves. Put another way, they do not have the means of and for self-representation. Instead, it is usually the members of the upper classes—invested in religious and scientific epistemologies whose discourses aim tell the “truth” about

such things as their animality, their incivility, and their primitivity. It is those in the upper classes who have long been able to represent the sex worker and/or prostitute, who have been able to speak and/or talk for them, to speak and/or talk in place of them. In fact, it is the members of the upper classes who have historically dominated the discussion concerning members of the lumpenproletariat. And I do locate myself here as a member of one of those upper classes, as a current member of the intellectual proletariat, as a student as well as an instructor, living off of my own labor and the promise of future labor interested as I am in the representation of sex workers and/or prostitutes as just one of the many subgroups that make up the lumpenproletariat. I have tried to make it my job to investigate them, to study them, and to analyze the ways in which these types of people are represented. My interest here is not so much in aiming to tell the “truth” about them but in exposing the epistemic politics as well as the epistemic violence that both lay behind certain representations of them. We might think, for example, of the one with which I have opened this first methods chapter.

Given the lack of self-representation and our inundated state of upperclass media concerned with members of the lumpenproletariat, we have normalized a particular perspective, and we have, therefore, cultivated a rather common type of view and vision. Many of us participate in this uncritical way of seeing be it consciously or unconsciously. And it is to this type of common view and vision, to this common perspective, that I want to draw our attention as part of a denaturalizing gesture and offering of mine.

Such a way of seeing has generated a large and copious amount of discourse that tells a rather convincing narrative about sex workers and/or prostitutes. It has produced an enduring but altogether ungrounded rationale concerning them. And so, it is my contention that we must come to terms with—that is, we must learn how to recognize and then reckon with—this particular

narrative and rationale that has never been told or given *by* the sex workers and/or prostitutes, themselves. According to Kamala Kempadoo, this type of representation with its accompanying narrative and rationale has persistently framed sex workers and/or prostitutes as belonging to an ultimately unworthy, threatening, and even dangerous class of people (35).

There is a paradox that is concentrated within Benjamin's figure of the prostitute. As McCann explains it, the figure of the prostitute is, for Benjamin, a form of "[...] life which signifies death" (111). It is that which blends "Eros and Thanatos," as Lynne Huffer says, and this is perhaps because the prostitute is not only a tragic subjectivity but a tragic body (xvi). But there's more to this particular figure than the simple paradox of a life that represents death. McCann goes on to describe how "[o]n the one hand, the prostitute is a threshold figure that signifies the suspension of bourgeois norms linked to work and family. On the other hand, the figure occupies a space in which those conditions are intensified, because prostitution nullifies the creative potential of eros that might drive a more thoroughgoing interruption" (107).

For Benjamin, the figure of the prostitute essentially provided the outlines of a map. As a threshold figure, the prostitute marked the boundaries of what was, for Benjamin, the bourgeois habitus. They provided the opportunity for a certain critical and political cartography of the city. Benjamin had his own particular and peculiar way of seeing the prostitute and prostitution, and it is this particular and peculiar way of seeing like Benjamin that I want to now expound on below.

There have been some predominately feminist critiques of Benjamin that seem to hinge on misreadings of him. This all pertains to the accusation and charge that was once made of Benjamin participating in a certain reductionism as it pertains to his use of the figure of the prostitute and even prostitution. Some critics have suggested that in Benjamin's use of the words, "prostitute" and "prostitution," he conflates, reduces, and ultimately obscures the important

differences that there are between the type of reproductive work that is a part of sex work and/or prostitution. Folks have discussed how Benjamin eclipses this *reproductive* work in conflating it with other types of *productive* work that are done by the poet and the proletarian worker. I, like Esther Leslie, take issue with these feminist critiques and do not think that this is what Benjamin was attempting to do, say, and/or assert.

Throughout the time Benjamin spent in Paris, he became fascinated by the specific representations that he, himself, had found there of specifically *Parisian* prostitution. He was particularly interested in those prostitutes that he found represented in the work of the nineteenth century French writer and poet, Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin saw in Beaudelaire a poet who could, according to McCann, give “expression to the change” that occurred on the face of prostitution in the change that was brought about with the rise of the great cities (108). Benjamin viewed Beaudelaire as imagining “[...] prostitution [as] the yeast that causes the great urban masses to rise [...]” (ibid).

Instead of participating in some sort of a moral hermeneutics—a way of morally interpreting (and judging) them as “criminal,” “corrupt,” “unworthy,” “backward,” and/or exemplary of “societal decay”—Benjamin investigated the presences (as well as the absences) of various figures of prostitution. He investigated what he thought their presences might mean and meant, and he studied, perhaps most importantly, what they made thinkable about the very systems that even made them possible. For Benjamin, the figure of the prostitute points us to the very system that creates and relies on prostitution as its constitutive underground. Put another way: instead of simply blaming prostitutes for their supposed “choices” or pitying them for their “lot in life,” Benjamin inquired into what it was that they could help him understand about a system that has both made, required, and maintained a massive system of prostitution.

With his focus on the figure of the prostitute, Benjamin sought to trouble the bourgeoisie and the specific type of culture that it, itself, had cultivated. Esther Leslie has insisted that Benjamin used the figure of the prostitute in order to “[...] organize a radical assault on the pieties of bourgeois conjugality” (101). Whereas prostitutes, in Benjamin’s work, have the capacity to “[...] derail bourgeois notions of romantic love, domesticity, and reproduction,” it is prostitution more generally and again that evokes the deadly mystery at the heart of the 19th century metropolis (ibid). That is, prostitution is the (hidden) door through which we access the deadly mystery that is at the center of every modern city’s labyrinth.

As I’ve mentioned above, Benjamin conceived of the figure of prostitution as an image. That is, as an emblem, symbol and/or omen. For Benjamin, I think he understood “the images of figures of prostitution” in the sense that they functioned as visual phenomena out in the world. They formed part of what he called a “phantasmagoria.” Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that Benjamin referred to them as “social hieroglyphs” that, when interpreted, offer(ed) materialist insights into the objectification of labor and sexuality under (racial) capitalist modernity. Later, she writes that “[t]he image of the whore reveals this secret like a rebus” (185). They were images that could and in turn, tell a story with the potential to unearth largely concealed secrets, secrets only revealed if one is daring and willing to interpret them and interpret them well.

But we must stop and ask here what exactly Benjamin meant by “an image”? Etymologically speaking, the word “image” offers us an array of meanings both literal and figurative. An image, literally, can be a figure, a drawing, a portrait, a picture, a reflection, or a statue. But it can also be—and this is where my interest lay most—a phantom, ghost, or apparition. Figuratively speaking, an image can also be an idea, a copy, a likeness, an

appearance, or a public impression. Insofar as the word itself, “image,” stems from the Latin *imitari*—meaning to imitate, to copy—it captures the idea of an artificial representation.

But the image of the prostitute wasn’t just any old image, for Benjamin; it was a specifically *dialectical* image. Benjamin used the figure of the prostitute as a key dialectical image in his work. And it is, according to McCann, “[...] one of the most evocative and multifaceted dialectical images to emerge out of [his] work on nineteenth-century Paris” (100). McCann goes on to tell us that this figure of the prostitute as a dialectical image “[...] drives important points about the relationship between commodity culture and the development of new urban spaces in the nineteenth century, and enables Benjamin to link these points to broader, materialist insights into the objectification of labour and sexuality in capitalist modernity” (ibid.) Buck-Morss writes that “[a]s a dialectical image, she ‘synthesizes’ the form of the commodity and its content: She is ‘commodity and seller in one’” (185). The figure of the prostitute is, therefore, a figure that is two things at once—a dialectical image.

As a dialectical image, the figure of the prostitute is able to produce, like all other dialectical images, a certain kind of effect. As Buck-Morss explains it, the dialectical image of the prostitute produces a “[...] political electricity in a ‘lightening flash’ of truth” (219). But as a *key* dialectical image, the figure of the prostitute promises to offer, uncover, and reveal something that is much more sinister but also, hopefully, revolutionary. The prostitute is a key figure and dialectical image that is full of dangerous secrets. It brings together sexual awakening with political awakening, the libidinal and the political, sexuality and sovereignty.

The prostitute is a metaphor for modern capitalism, itself. Studying the representations of prostitutes that appear in French literature throughout the 19th century, Maurice Samuels observes that “[b]ecause of the way the prostitute commodifies sexuality, she provides an apt

metaphor for the economic regime of the modern era, in which everything, even love, has a price. A sexual capitalist, the prostitute exploits her beauty for all its worth” (173).

There is also a relationship between the prostitute and allegory. According to McCann, the figure of the prostitute serves as a universal allegory of labor (110). As an allegory, the figure of the prostitute is capable of telling a story, of recounting a narrative that usually possesses a deeper and often hidden meaning. And it is *in the process* of telling and recounting the prostitute’s particular story and/or narrative, that it is able to conjure up a series of related mental images and visuals. Benjamin did, after all, participate in and advocate for the use of a much more visual as opposed to linear logic. To circle back, this narrative visual then provides one with the opportunity to interpret a much deeper and often hidden meaning—what Benjamin called their “arcana,” their secrets. Both past and present, here and there, figures of prostitution have the ability to evoke certain secrets. They reveal their arcana for those who are ready and willing to receive such offerings.

But figures of prostitution also possess a second, more figurative kind of arcanum. They reveal the intimate connection and relationship that exist between sexuality and sovereignty while under modernity. This connection is revealed upon further contemplation of the figure of the prostitute’s necropolitical and moribund status. As McCann writes, they are “forms of life abandoned by the law” (McCann). Within the imperial realm and regime of modern space-time, the conception of freedom is predicated on the reproduction of sexual repression.

Bourgeois eroticism has been historically regulated and redirected. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, “[e]rotic desire, instinctual nature itself, and also those forces of fantasy-life that might imagine a better society, are cathected onto commodities. Trapped within capitalism, they become its enthusiastic source of support” (121). In other words, instead of tapping into their

own unregulated eroticism the bourgeois subject regulates and redirects their own erotic power through the buying of (erotic) products, such as women in the case of marriage for children and prostitutes in the case of satisfying one's desire.

Prostitution has—at least in historically documented cases—long aroused the sexual fantasies of the bourgeoisie. Within capitalist commodity culture, “[...] society traditionally channelled erotic desire through the elaborately regulated and constrained exchange of women as gifts.” But with the figures of the prostitute and the whore, the buyer is liberated from all of that. In this way, the bourgeoisie is able to use prostitution as a means to live out their sexual fantasies.

Figures of sex work and prostitution often represent a defiant form of sexual labor. In the colony of Kenya, for example, “[...] Kenyan prostitutes themselves defined sexwork as a defiant form of labor,” as a type of labor that enabled them to dodge the colonial system of wage labor (83). McClintock shows how the colonial state has objected less to prostitution than it has to the ability of women (and I should add many others) to accumulate both money and property. McClintock continues “[...] the real threat to the state was not prostitution but the general spector of economically independent women, who were fetishized and demonized by the whore stigma in order to license state violence” (84).

M. Jacqui Alexander has written of how the figure of prostitution has come to embody a particularly dangerous and threatening form of eroticism. In the context of the law in the late twentieth century islands of the Bahamas, Alexander observes that, within the matrix of white heteropatriarchy, “particular figures have come to embody this [dangerous] eroticism, functioning historically as the major symbols of threat” (23). Among these “major symbols of threat” are the prostitute and the lesbian. Alexander goes on to point out that whereas these two

figures are often conflated within the matrix of white heteropatriarchy, they are positioned as outlaw in the Bahamas as they form part of the the matrix of black heteropatriarchy in the Bahamas. And as outlaws, they are “[...] poised to be disciplined and punished within it” (23). Thus, the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act frames prostitution as one of four criminal offences.

Alexander’s work is so crucial, because it offers us a theory of the sexual politics in the time of the neocolonial state. And provided that Alexander published that work in 2005, its publication signals shifts that I think are not just indicative of the neocolonial sphere, but the neoimperial sphere as well. If the neocolonial state of the Bahamas were passing legislation that criminalized prostitution, then what is happening in the neoimperial sphere? Alexander even addresses this neoimperial-neocolonial connection but without posing the question when she says, “[t]he [British] imperial government retained control over foreign affairs and defense, while the Bahamas lost sovereignty over those portions of Bahamian territory that were negotiated away under the earlier leadership of the United Bahamian Party” (25). In essence, neocolonization involves yet more land dispossession.

The figure of the prostitute, for Benjamin, is located at what he described as a threshold. This figure is, therefore, a specifically threshold type of allegorical figure, the exact position of which is located at the threshold of “the sphere of life”. Such a “sphere of life,” in this case, is the Western biopolitical realm within which one is, according to Giorgio Agamben granted political or civic existence, life as “*bios*.” At the threshold of this sphere of life, this life as *bios*, one can find the figure of the prostitute whose life is quite unlike this political and civic life that is, again, life as *bios*. It is a different type of life, a life that “[...] exists in a relation of exception to the law, which is to say that it has been abandoned by the law” (McCann, 103). This is “bare

life,” as Agamben calls and coins it. This other type of life is life as *zoē*: a life that has little to no life because it is both “[...] ’exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (qtd. in McCann). The threshold as well as this threshold figure form together part of an outer limit, beyond which there was, according to Benjamin, and still is, I think today, nothing but nothingness [4]. And it is here at this threshold from the side and perspective of life as *bios*, that one confronts along with that nothingness “[...] the disappointment that lurks within the allegorical figure [of the prostitute]: its materiality, its mutability, and hence its essential morbidity—the death’s head at the core of allegorical signification” (105). There, at the threshold, at the cliff and the frontier to the sphere of life as, lay nothing but nothingness and death. The allegorical figure of the prostitute, life as *zoē*, located at that very same threshold of the sphere of life, life as *bios*, functions as a threshold figure and experience.

For Benjamin, the prostitute—and prostitution—more broadly took on a variety of interrelated meanings quite distinct from those of the dominant paradigms both then in his own time as well as now within ours. Margaret Cohen, honing in more specifically on Benjamin’s interest in the socially marginal and economically precarious figure of the prostitute, reminds and explains to us that “[...] Benjamin was interested in the prostitute as an embodiment of distinctive features of modernity as well as for her privileged link to the commodity” (165). Andrew McCann tells us that, for Benjamin, figures of prostitution functioned as emissaries of a whole system of exploitation, reification, and alienation among others. In other words, Benjamin was interested in the prostitute and prostitution, because they “[...]drive] important points about the relationship between commodity culture and the development of new urban spaces in the nineteenth century [...]” (101). As embodiments, they teach us something about capitalist

modernity. And for Benjamin, writing in *Das Passagen-werk*, the specific context with and within which he was concerned with such a commodity culture and the development of new urban space was the metropolitan city of Paris during the 19th century. McCann further describes Benjamin's use of the figure of the prostitute as "[...] a general, inclusive one, but only in so far as prostitution involves the same sort of contractual arrangements as other forms of labour" (110). In this case, the word "prostitution," for Benjamin, is used to describe a condition of labor more generally under the economic system that is capitalism, a condition of labor that involves selling oneself in order to survive (Buckmorss). As explains it, Benjamin "[...] redescribes prostitution not as a specific kind of sexual relationship, or a specific kind of violence, or even a specific kind of agency, but as the broader condition of man under capitalism" (109). More in line with Benjamin's own words, Susan Buck-Morss writes that the figure of the prostitute is "[...] the Ur-form of the wage-laborer [...]" (184). As Ur-form, the prostitute functions as "[...] an objective emblem of capitalism, a hieroglyph of the true nature of social reality in the sense that the Egyptian hieroglyphs were viewed by the Renaissance—and Marx's sense as well: 'Value transforms... every product of labor into a social hieroglyph' (184).

For Benjamin, the figure of prostitution offers materialist insights into the objectification of both labor and sexuality within capitalist modernity. Benjamin observed in Paris of the 19th century how capitalist commodity culture had shifted sexuality from the realm of the organic into the realm of the inorganic. In this shift from the organic to the inorganic, sexuality was turned into a fetish, and one of the effects of that shift was the radical denaturalization of sexuality from "the spell of bourgeois ideology." Put another way, capitalism commodifies and therefore forges a particular type of erotics and erotic phenomena—especially perverse ones.

We see this same concern for the figure of the prostitute as image in recent scholarly work as well. For Roderick Ferguson, writing within and about the United States context in his *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, he asks “[...] what mode of analysis would be appropriate for interpreting the drag-queen prostitute as an image that allegorizes and symbolizes that social heterogeneity, a heterogeneity that associates African American culture with gender and sexual variation and critically locates that culture within the genealogy of the West” (2).

What’s important about the hieroglyphic nature of the figure of prostitution as dialectical image/emblem/symbol, is that it requires a particular knowledge for decoding that image. Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that Benjamin referred to them as “social hieroglyphs.” When interpreted, they offer materialist insights into the objectification of labor and sexuality within racial capitalist modernity. As omens, they require us to sit with and dig deeper into their meanings. This knowledge helps one to not only decode and interpret it but translate it for another. This instantly presents us with a hermeneutical issue. For Ferguson, he takes recourse to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification in order to read them. Defined as a “hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (qtd on 4). But the meaning of the image/emblem/symbol/hieroglyph of of the figure of prostitution changes according to its spatio-temporal coordinates. Given that one does not know how to interpret and decode the figure of prostitution as a hieroglyph, they are then unable to know its secrets.

Benjamin noted this dynamic under capitalism and referred to these repetitions in his own work as *urforms*. Because these *urforms* are structural in nature, they reproduce themselves in

modified forms across racial capitalism's expanding spatio-temporal zones. While each have different origin points, some urforms stretch back to fairly new articulations of racial capitalism. Others go back to its very beginnings, echoing well into the contemporary period. The difficulty always lies, however, in recognizing them in their past and present instantiations, in their past and present resemblances.

the minotaur

Between the years of 1933 to 1939 in the metropolitan and labyrinthine city of Paris, Albert Skira and Efstratios Tériade—the pen name of Stratis Eleftheriades—ran a surrealist-oriented magazine whose title exemplifies our third and final, key image-concept: the *Minotaure* [Minotaur]. It was Pablo Picasso who arranged the cover image for the very first print of the French-language magazine.

Reproduced here below, the cover image showcases how Picasso juxtaposed together in typical collage-like form and fashion a variety of different objects. Laying on top of a nailed-down piece of cardboard are two pieces of aluminum foil. There's also a doyle, a few leaves, some lace, and few other unknown objects. At the center of the artwork, itself, we see a suggestive and sensual image, that of a naked minotaur sitting on the ground with its tail as well as its buttocks exposed. It holds itself up, slightly twisted and reclined, with its left hand firmly planted on the floor. The minotaur is turned around, facing the viewer. It holds a dagger in its right hand. Located at the bottom of the artwork and in the center, the French word, "MINOTAURE," is written in all caps on a seemingly similar piece of paper to that on which the minotaur was, itself, drawn.

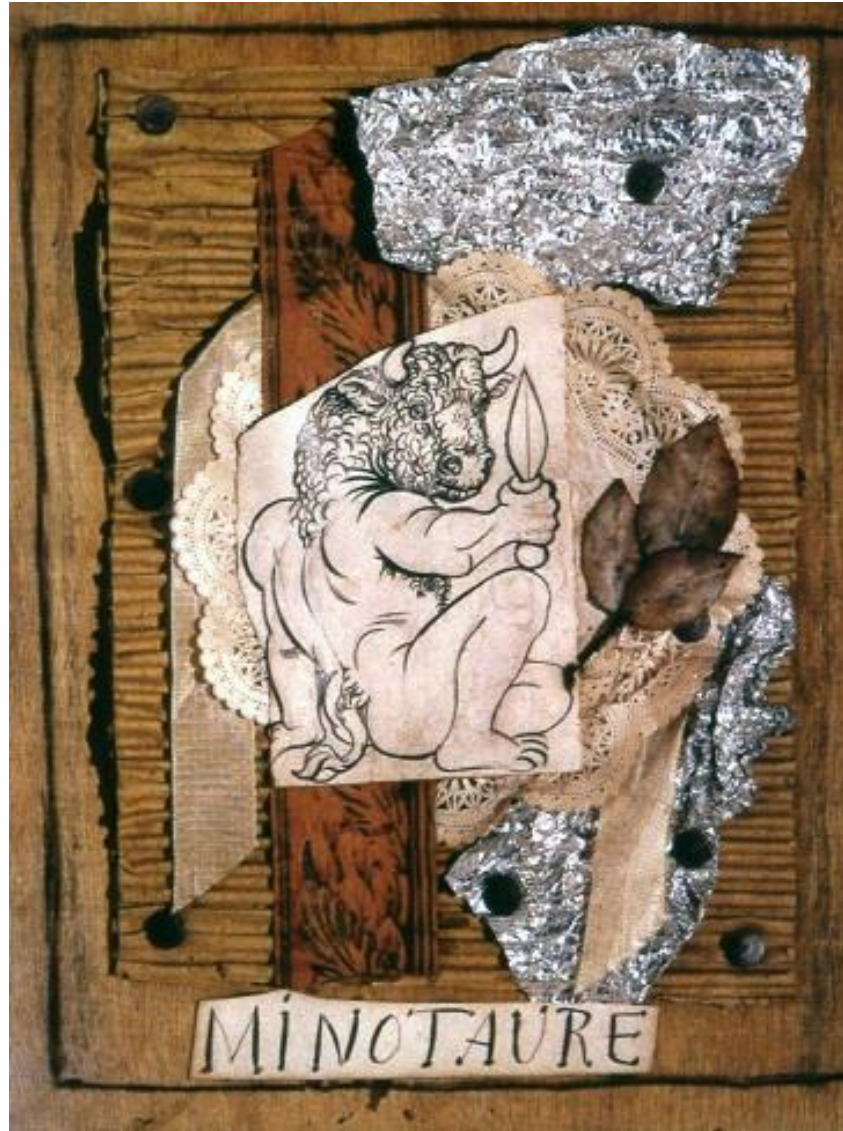


figure VIII | Pablo Picasso's cover image for the surrealist magazine, *Minotaure*.

Like the other image-concepts that I've already explored up above, the minotaur can and does mean a variety of many different things. For the intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s, the minotaur represented the "mysterious irrational impulses hidden within." It was also the representation of the deadly power that lay lurking at the center of the labyrinth. The minotaur is the power that, from the center, organizes and orients the entire labyrinthine structure. But while

the minotaur may be dangerous and/or deadly, this is not its most essential fact or ability. It is *the image* of the minotaur's deadly power which it embodies that is the most important.

In English, the word “minotaur” has long been used as a noun. According to the word's etymology, it refers to “a flesh-eating monster with a human body and the head of a bull” (Harper). But our present use of the English word, “minotaur,” comes to us from the late 14th century Greek word, “*Μινώταυρος*.” This word can be broken down into its two constituent parts. The first part is the prefix, *mino-*, which refers to the ancient and mythological King Minos of Crete. In ancient Greek, his name is written as “*Μίνως*.” There is also evidence to suggest that Minos was the name of a lunar deity and can, therefore, be interpreted as “Moon Man” (footnote). The second part of the word is the suffix, *-tauros*, which means “bull.” In ancient Greek, the word is “*ταῦρος*.” This suffix informs other words like the name of the fixed earth zodiac sign, Taurus, and the adjective, “taurean.” It is worth noting here that, at least astrologically speaking, the Moon is considered to be exalted when it is transiting the zodiac sign of Taurus, the bull.

In the ancient Minoan myth, it was the Minotaur who dwelt at the very center of the labyrinth—Daedalus' labyrinth to be more specific. According to the myth, Poseidon, the ancient Greek god of the ocean and the sea, first struck Pasiphaë, the queen of Crete and later mother of the minotaur. Poseidon didn't strike Pasiphaë in any sort of physical way; he struck her, instead, with love for a beautiful bull that the then King of Crete, King Minos, had failed to sacrifice. Pasiphaë, now lovestruck with the bull, had Daedulus, an engineer and architect, craft for her a hollow wooden cow. This artificial cow would be a beautiful bull into which she, Pasiphaë, would climb in order to then mate with the beautiful bull. It is later in the myth that Theseus—

who is the son of Poseidon, divine hero, and founder of Athens—enters Daedalus’ labyrinth in order to later confront and kill the Minotaur.

Because the minotaur is born of both Pasiphaë and the beautiful bull that King Minos had failed to sacrifice, the minotaur’s body is—according to the logic of this myth—composed of parts that are half-man and half-bull. While the minotaur possesses the legs, torso, and arms of a human, it also has the head and tail of a bull. After its birth, Pasiphaë supposedly nursed the minotaur until the day that it grew too ferocious. It needed to feed off of humans in order to stay alive. Upon consulting the oracle at Delphi, King Minos hired the same engineer and architect, Daedulus, who helped craft Pasiphaë’s artificial cow to now build a labyrinth that could (and eventually would) hold the minotaur at its center as its prisoner.

But just like the other key image-concepts that I’ve listed and explained here above, the Minotaur also functions as a metaphor. It is, first and foremost, a mythical creature, one that is the product of illicit and taboo sexual relations. It is the “unnatural offspring of a woman and a beast.” The monstrous figure of the minotaur, then, is the product of racial sexual transgression. It is therefore imbued with a dangerous and/or deadly kind of power. Second, McCan both admonishes the reader when they write that “[t]he danger of the Minotaur may well be the danger of the people” (108). When we think from the perspective of the Minotaur, not only are they a sacrifice, but the labyrinth becomes a prison into which it had been confined and out of which it now attempts to escape.

As we’ve already seen, Walter Benjamin also used and played with this key image-concept of the minotaur. In the same chapter on “Central Park,” Benjamin builds on this same ancient Greek myth. Immediately after describing the mythical city as a labyrinth, Benjamin writes the following: “This includes, as one would expect an image of the minotaur at its center.

That he brings death to the individual is not the essential fact. What is crucial is the image of the deadly power he embodies. And this, too, for inhabitants of the great cities is, something new.”

In his *Visions of Excess*, Bataille describes the universal as the minotaur. This is what we must slay. He writes that “[t]he UNIVERSAL resembles a bull, sometimes absorbed in the nonchalance of animality and abandoned to the secret paleness of death, and sometimes hurled by the rage of ruin into the void ceaselessly opened before it by a skeletal torero.”

I think that my own metaphorical minotaur—that is, “the Minotaur” to which *A Critical Caribbean Constellation* corresponds—is an image which points us to as well as attempts to confront the deadly and seemingly universal power of what is now a surely global if not already (inter-)planetary project known as “the West.” Perhaps this particular metaphorical minotaur is but a mirror in that it reveals to us nothing more than the very image of own selves. And yet even with such an uncanny kind of experience, it might be time to sit quiet with and in front of that particular image of the self in the mirror. With time, some dedication and a little bit of spiritual discipline, I think that we can and are able to then confront that which we regularly if not ritualistically refuse to face: our own collective shadow and own collective unconscious.

If it is the case that for both Benjamin and Bataille the minotaur is located at the very center of Daedalus’ labyrinth, and, if a labyrinth is nothing more than a metaphor for a city, then I cannot help but begin to wonder. I am inundated with so many different questions that all immediately come to flood my brain. *How many different minotaurs are there, imprisoned as they are in these centers of labyrinthine-like, modern metropolitan cities? How many minotaurs are out there confined in those centers that make up the very nodes of a much larger global matrix and maze? How many deadly and dangerous minotaurs might there be lurking somewhere in the unknown darkness of their interiors?* But perhaps the most important question

is this: *how might we—figuratively speaking of course—confront and then come to slay those imprisoned minotaurs so that we may then make our own way back out of, to secure an escape from, the labyrinth in which we currently live?*

IV - ariadne's thread & the aesthetic engineer

"[...] all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth."

— Georges Bataille, *L'anus solaire*. [The Solar Anus]," 1931.

"[...] here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening [...]" (41).

—Bill Marshall, quoting Benjamin in *The French Atlantic*

I have found it both funny as well as a bit uncanny how the image, the myth, and the memory of Ariadne's thread have all consistently returned to me over and over again throughout my many years now in graduate school. I remember quite vividly sitting down with a colleague and very close friend of mine, a fellow student from the French and Italian Studies Department, in the hallway of her own apartment building one early afternoon as we both tried to make sense of some of the assigned reading that we had been given for a class we were taking together. That reading was Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 book, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* [*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*], and we had no idea what the hell we were getting into. Together, I remember us both sitting there in that hallway talking about that book for hours on end. For an entire afternoon and an evening, we wracked our brains trying to comb through that damn thing, and we even laughed until we cried about just how hard it was to think about and understand whatever the hell "postmodernism" was.

Now, there is one thing in particular, though, that I do remember from this somewhat professional and somewhat personal little memory of mine, and it is related to this project now. I

do remember sitting in that hallway of hers, again, as I was trying to draw up on my little iPad mini at the time the image of a labyrinth with a thread which wove its own way through that very same labyrinth's many different chapters and its convoluted pages. That thread, in spite of all of the labyrinth's many different twists and its many different turns, would eventually come to reach the very center of the labyrinth, itself. I remember telling my own friend who sat right there next to me in the hallway that day that this kind of wandering thread of ours—this Ariadne's thread to be more specific—would help us both in finding and remembering our own way into, through, and then back out of what, again, felt like such a labyrinthine-like text.

Little did I know that, in this precise moment, this divine offering of mine—that of a mythological and digital thread—was a part of my very own spiritual inheritance. In way, I was acting just as Ariadne, herself, had done: I handed over the thread with a certain kind of intention. Back then, reading Lyotard initially felt like entering into something that was just so incredibly dark and just so incredibly mysterious, and so, I think that I just naturally reached for the thread as if I had already had it there in my very own pocket. I knew of labyrinths already quite honestly, and I had already collected my own Ariadne's thread, I will say. So, yes, I handed it over as if it were nothing really at all—I just plucked it right out of my own pocket, and then I offered it up to her and that was basically that.

As we continued to make our own way through Lyotard's seemingly long and labyrinthine-like text as the sun began to set that day, it was as if Ariadne's thread, itself, would somehow become charged up with a static-like electricity. It was as if our consistent act of holding onto the thread, itself, as we continued to “stick to the text,” would somehow begin to electrify it. It was as if the very act of simply sliding the thread through our own fingers as we, ourselves, continued to push on even further and dive even deeper into each of the chapters that

would really begin to help light it all up. As we, ourselves, felt all the tiny little fibers passing through our own fingertips there in the thick darkness of this labyrinthine-like text, the thread, itself, would start to somehow lighten up, spark, and glow. And so, as we, ourselves, pushed onward and even further into the textual abyss, the thread, itself, would soon start to shoot off real bright and light up some of the most pitch-black depths of Lyotard's text. *La Condition postmoderne* felt so opaque and yet so tantalizing at times, because there really were these glimpses of recognition that we would both have and experience while in it, and with the help of Ariadne's thread we would both begin to light up the darkness if only for a bit before it would all then fade right back into the dark once again. Sometimes we could generate and sustain the light for a while, but it was always temporary. We found ways to keep the sparks alive there in the dark and to regularly feed the glow, but it could never be fully sustained. At other times, however, we'd lose it there altogether, and we'd sometimes sit there for a while just laughing in the dark.

But these tiny little shimmers of understanding, these tiny little sparks of divine light, that would sometimes happen, they would really happen whenever we would just honestly sit down and decide to really wrestle with the text. This act of "wrestling with the text" so to speak was our own attempt, I think, to try and slay the minotaur in a way. It was our own daring approach to finally reach out and confront Asterius by shining a light directly into his eyes. But I will also say that there might have been something else here that was at work. Something was perhaps different in our own approach to the text. *Were we really there to kill Asterius just as Theseus had once done? Were we really there to do him any harm?* I'm not quite sure. It may be a mixed response to be honest, but I do know that we were curious. And I will say that that's when the thread, itself, would really light up the most. That's when it would really light up all bright

whenever we just followed our own curiosity. That's when I, myself, finally knew that we were getting closer and closer to the center of the labyrinth. That's when I knew that we were nearly at the end of finding and then really confronting Asterius, himself.

In providing Theseus with a thread—or, sometimes with a ball of yarn—Ariadne is often seen as being complicit in the murder of what turns out to be her own monstrous brother. Carl Kerényi hints at this exact moment of betrayal when he, himself, explains in his own 1980 book, *The Gods of the Greeks*, that “[u]nder the name of Ariadne she was Theseus's accomplice in the slaying of his [sic] brother, the bull-headed son of Minos, who is chiefly known as a monster called the Minotaur” (269). As Kerényi goes on to describe it, I, quite like Ariadne, simply gave over the thread which supposedly served “[...] to rescue Theseus and the Athenian children who had been thrown to the monster” (270). I, like Ariadne, “[...] gave the hero the thread that enabled him to find his way out of the Labyrinth in which the Minotaur dwelt” (ibid). Vukovic Kresimir also emphasizes the following: “[t]he point not to be missed is that Ariadne is structurally opposed to her half-brother, whose murder she brought about. The dark monster and the fair girl are both offsprings of Pasiphaë and victims of the possessive tyrant Minos” (2013).

In offering up this Ariadne's thread of mine, I still sometimes wonder if I, myself, have committed a similar act of betrayal akin to what Ariadne had once done in her own myth. I sometimes wonder if I, myself, participated in the exact same kind of betrayal which Ariadne, herself, had already mythologically done to her very own half-brother. In the myth, Ariadne thus betrays her own half-brother, the Minotaur/Asterius, and in giving away the thread like I did, I, too, participated in a betrayal of my own. I, too, handed over the thread to my very own friend that day, and I, too, used it for the both of us. Just like Ariadne, I, too, passed it over to her in order to help her do what Theseus, himself, had once done and that was to slay the minotaur, to

ultimately kill Asterius, himself. We needed to enter into the darkness of the labyrinth, as that was our homework, and we had to then find its center, locate Asterius, and then confront him in a vicious combat to the death. Our task was, in essence, to subdue him, and I provided the thread— or was it the noose? For us at the time, Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* represented a dark and perplexing world in which the two of us would—and we often did—get lost. I'm not quite sure if we ever really found Asterius, though, as the darkness of that text was just too deep at the time, and the course, itself, was only some ten weeks total.

In spite of my own potential act of betrayal, I now think of that Ariadne's thread of mine as a certain kind of mnemonic device. That is, I think of it as a sacred thread that is, itself, both of and for remembering. We used it to remember that day not only where the entrance to the textual labyrinth was, but we also used it to remember where we had already been in addition to where it was that we had already gone. It helped us both to keep ourselves oriented and to keep ourselves focused as we continued to push further and further on into the textual, labyrinthine-like darkness. It was important in the art of keeping track our very own tracks, themselves, as we tracked something else. Ariadne's thread helped us to both remember how it was that we, ourselves, had gotten to wherever it was that we currently were. In the way that we were both using it there in the hallway that day, it helped us both to remember wherever it was that we once were once we were deep inside of its many chapters and pages.

I'd like to note that this particular path that the two of us ended up taking together that day, the one we both took in following Ariadne's thread, was not so much linear as it was non-linear, and that is mainly because we couldn't ever really foresee where it was that we would ultimately end up. The pathways into and through the labyrinth were, themselves, dark, and so we had to explore, and we had to take some necessary wrong turns. We had no clue as to what

connections we, ourselves, were going to make or would make for that matter, but we still undertook the journey anyway; and we were able to do so, because we, ourselves, were practicing a certain way of remembering in keeping the thread close at hand. Again, it was precisely this Ariadne's thread that had helped us the most to remember when and where exactly it was that we had originally started as well as when and where exactly it was that we had already been. In short, Ariadne's thread was the very thing that helped to lead us back to whence it was we had initially come. It was and it still is Ariadne's thread that would ultimately help us get back out and re-cross the entrance of the labyrinth.

Now, the myth of Ariadne, itself, is a myth that is not only rich, but it is also related to the many other myths that I, myself, have already mentioned elsewhere throughout this whole entire project of mine. According to Plutarch, there are many different stories of Ariadne, but, in the specifically Hellene version, Ariadne's myth and narrative largely involve the heroic figure of Theseus who is, again, the son of Poseidon. Theseus, therefore, is a divine hero, and he is also the founder of Athens. Interestingly enough, he is the one who will ultimately become Ariadne's abductor as well as her later abandoner. Theseus, in brief, is both challenged and charged with first going to the island of Minos where he is to then enter into the Minoan labyrinth and kill the Minotaur that is located there at its center. As a means to not get lost and as a way to eventually find his own way back out of the Minoan labyrinth, Theseus carries with him a (sometimes enchanted) ball of (sometimes red) yarn. This ball of yarn is what comes to be known, in short, as "Ariadne's thread," and this is only after Ariadne, herself, first gifts it to him as the intended means by which to defeat the Minotaur.

After having eventually slayed the Minotaur, Theseus proposes marriage and then he ends up taking Ariadne along with him aboard his own ship as he, himself, returns to Athens.

Unfortunately, Theseus ends up abandoning Ariadne in the middle of his own return trip home, and he does so by leaving her alone on the island of Naxos. The Latin poet, Catullus, for example, captured this moment here as follows: “[f]or, looking out from the wave-resounding shore of Dia, Ariadne watches Theseus leaving with his swift ship, her heart seething with uncontrollable passions” (Armstrong, 189). Sometimes the island Ariadne has been abandoned on is populated by a bunch of women, though there are often times men on the island as well. I’ll come back to this particular part of the myth with Ariadne left alone of this island of women inhabitants just a little bit later on.

For now, however, it is Ariadne who is the main focus of this myth and not so much Theseus, the heroic ego figure. As Kérenyi has put it in another 1976 book of his, *Dionysus: Indestructible Image of Archetypal Life*, “[f]or Homer, Ariadne was something more than a daughter of Minos who followed Theseus to Athens and was killed by Artemis” (101). Ariadne, herself—or *Ἀριάδνη* as it is in the original ancient Greek—first appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*, and then she appears yet again in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. In this ancient Greek religious and mythological context, Ariadne was the princess as well as the priestess of the island of Crete. As such, she was the “daughter of Minos.” This also meant that she was, herself, the daughter of the very same *King* Minos, who was, in turn, one of Zeus’ many different sons. Kind Minos’s own mother was also Europa. This makes Ariadne of partly divine lineage and, at least, a demi-god. When literally translated from the ancient Cretan dialect, “ari-“ means “most” and “-adnos” means “holy.” Ariadne, when put back together then, means something like “the most holy.” Kerényi even notes back in his own later 1980 text that “‘Ariadne’, originally ‘Ariagne’, meant the ‘holy’ and ‘pure’: it was a superlative form of Hagne, a surname of the queen of the Underworld” (269). But Kerényi also adds in that exact same text that “[...] she was also called

Aridela, ‘the visible from afar’, a name that she obviously acquired after she had been raised to heaven with Dionysos” (ibid). But we will get to this relationship with Dionysus and Ariadne’s ascendance in an upcoming paragraph here in just a bit.

Interestingly enough, Ariadne also has several siblings of her own—one of them being the very Minotaur, itself, who was born as a result of Poseidon’s rape of their mother, Pasiphae, when Poseidon was, himself, in the shape and form of a bull. The result was a baby that was in turn born as half-man and half-bull, the Minotaur, who is also known as Asterius again. Rebecca Armstrong describes this exact scene as follows in her own 2006 book, *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry*, “Pasiphae, whether through her own or her husband’s fault, conceives a savage and overwhelming desire for sex with the most handsome bull in the royal herds” (6). “Assisted by the exiled Athenian inventor, Daedulus,” she continues, “she climbs into a wooden cow in order to deceive her beloved bull into thinking her an appropriate mate” (ibid).

As already mentioned up above but in brief, the myth of Ariadne also connects to the myth of Dionysus. First, Ariadne, herself, is often narrated as being bacchic. In fact, Catullus describes her as “[...] a stone statue of a Bacchant” (193). Armstrong observes, moreover, how “Gaiser [...] comments that the image of Ariadne which follows the simile, standing, bare-breasted and wild-haired, has more in common with standard artistic representations of the Maenad than of the frequently languid, rather passive, depictions of Ariadne, and so links back to the simile to confirm it” (193). Second, Ariadne is also narrated as being aquatic like Dionysus who, himself, not only finds refuge in the watery deep but has the dolphin as one of his sacred animals. According to the German classical philologist, Walter F. Otto’s interpretation of the myth, “Ariadne, herself, is the woman of the sea, at home on the islands, carried away over the

sea by the son of Poseidon, Theseus, and taken up by Dionysos into his band like the women of the islands, who are said to have followed him to Argos and were known by the name of ‘sea women’” (57). In the myth, Theseus abandons Ariadne on the island of Naxos, and it is there that she fears both the animals as well as the foreign men who live there. She then falls asleep somewhere on the beach before she, herself, meets and then later marries Dionysus. At some point, we learn with Otto’s work that Ariadne becomes “[...] the queen of the women of Dionysus” (1965, 57).

Now, there are many different stories about how Ariadne and Dionysus first meet on the island. After Theseus abandons her as they were both making their ways over to the city of Athens, some accounts relay that Dionysus was already on the island and simply stumbled upon Ariadne there on the beach somewhere as she slept. Other myths say that Dionysus wasn’t originally there on the island at all but that he, perhaps, came to the shore from somewhere out at sea in one of his own pirate ships. Whatever the case may have been, Dionysus does, indeed, find Ariadne, and the two of them do finally meet. Now, when they both meet for the first time, it is Dionysus who ends up falling in love with Ariadne, which sometimes happens as she, herself, is just sleeping there on the beach.

In a 1994 article of his titled, “Ariadne’s Mystery,” Gilles Deleuze provides his own description of and comments on this moment in the myth. In a reading of his that puts his analysis of the myth in conversation with Friedrich Nietzsche’s four-volume philosophical book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), Deleuze writes:

“Abandoned by Theseus, Ariadne senses that Dionysus is approaching. Dionysus the bull is pure and multiple affirmation, true affirmation, affirmative will: he carries nothing, is burdened by nothing, and lightens all that lives. He knows how

to do what the higher men do not: laugh, play, dance, that is to say affirm. [...]

Ariadne had to be abandoned by Theseus: ‘For this is the soul’s secret: only when the hero has abandoned her, she is approached in a dream by the overhero’

(Zarathustra, 119).” (8)

In another section of that same text of his, Deleuze, further explains that

“[i]n the same way that any woman can be between two men, Ariadne is between Theseus and Dionysus. She passes from Theseus to Dionysus. At first she hated Dionysus the bull. But, when Theseus abandons her—even though she had guided him through the labyrinth—she is carried away by Dionysus and discovers another labyrinth” (ibid).



figure IX | Tiziano Vecellio (a.k.a. Titian). *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of London, c. 1520-1523.

Tiziano Vecellio was an Italian Renaissance painter who is often known in English simply as “Titian.” Titian’s painting up above called, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, presents us with a rather curious little scene involving the precise moment when Ariadne and Dionysus first meet there on the beach on the island of Naxos. We also see that Ariadne, herself, is left abandoned

there alone by her first husband and abductor, the great Athenian hero, Theseus, whose ship we can see just very far far off into the distance right there to the left and up above her own exposed, left-hand shoulder. Theseus' ship is just below the horizon, and we can see it sailing off there farther and farther into the distance. But here closer and nearer to the shoreline, where the land meets the sea, Ariadne walks both distraught and bare-footed. In the myth, she, herself is said to have wandered along the beach and even into the interior of the island, itself, all in spite of her own fear of the men who may potentially rape her. After she tires and begins to fall asleep from exhaustion, she meets and is finally greeted by Dionysus and his retinue. Kerényi describes this moment as follows: "the goddess [Ariadne], sitting on the island crag with a servant female companion beside her, welcomed the young god as he approached unattended from the sea. She held a bowl out to him, that Dionysos might fill it and the epiphany of wine might be his doing" (272). In Titian's painting, however, Dionysus comes in riding on his cheetah-led chariot followed by his wild, boisterous, and animalistic-like entourage. He has his own small little retinue of satyrs, nymphs, and maenads. The god of madness has come to her rescue.

Later on, the two of them get married, but the details of the marriage proposal are, themselves, a bit hazy. Sometimes it is Dionysus who gives Ariadne a crown to wear as a proposal for their marriage, and it is said that at their wedding all of the maenads and all of the satyrs of the whole entire island of Naxos attended. In a reading of Catullus' own work, Armstrong adds her own take on this precise moment in the myth. She writes, "[...] it may be worth noting that in one version of the myth, when Ariadne marries Dionysus she is given Thetis' bridal crown, which Theseus received from the sea-goddess on his dive to retrieve Minos' ring" (188). According to many other versions of this particular myth, Dionysus throws "[...] Ariadne's jeweled crown into the sky to create a constellation, the Corona Borealis."

Kerényi adds that, “[i]n a famous story she [Ariadne] attained to that very position which all Dionysiac women held in their own minds: that of the wife of Dionysos, his only true companion” (269).

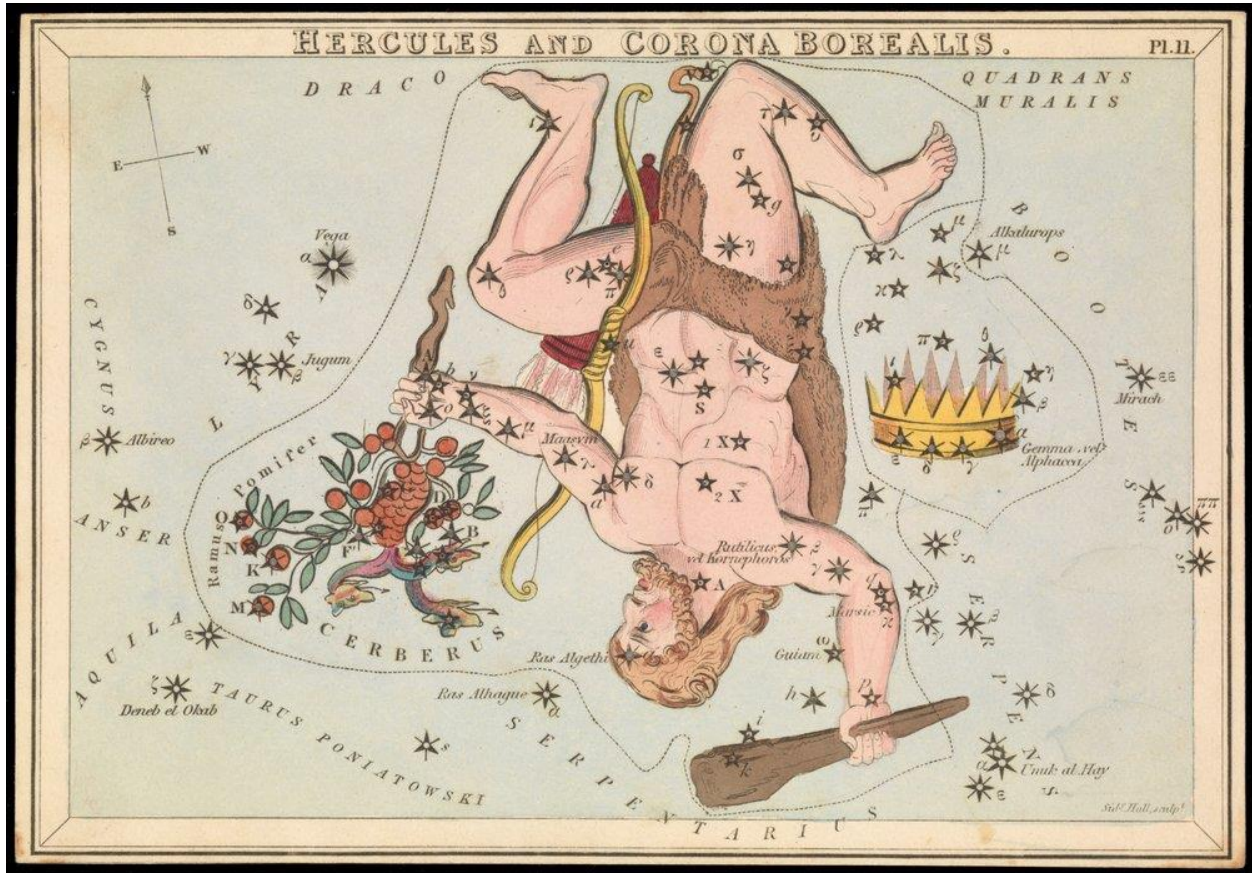


figure X | Hall, Sydney. “Hercules and Corona Borealis,” *Urania's Mirror; or, a view of the Heavens*. Restored by Adam Cuerden. 1825. Plate 11.

Susan Rowland, however, reads the marriage between Ariadne and Dionysus in a more symbolic-like way. For Rowland, Hillman, and for Jung, Dionysus is a form of *zoe* or “new consciousness” that emerges after Dionysus’ own dismembering in the famous scene involving the Titans. In this moment known as *sparagmos*, the divine shards of the deity are scattered throughout the material realm which, in turn, help to enliven and ensoul it. But because *zoe* is a form of partial and yet limitless instinctual life—or, what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life”—it

needs a means by which to become experienceable, bearable, or “creaturely” as others have called it. In a reading of Karl Kerényi’s own work, Rowland writes that “[t]o Kerényi, Ariadne wedding Dionysus is the marriage of instinctual differentiated life force with soul focus and compassion. Ariadne ensouls *zoe*, gives it humanity” (30). She then elaborates on this point a bit in stating that, “[a]s wife of Dionysus, [Ariadne] ensouls *zoe*, making instinctual life human and bearable” (41). Even further on, she adds that, “[i]n re-membered Dionysus, Ariadne can find her thread. Soul returns” (65).

She goes on to explain a little later on what she, herself, means by this. She says,

“*Zoe* must be ensouled, so that Dionysus enters the human world through compassionate love, rather than mindless sacrifice or sacrifice of our mind. Here Ariadne returns as the mistreated, undervalued, and abandoned feminine of our age. Stranded far from home, she has been divorced from her divine earthly roots and denied the hero’s embrace and queenly statu-

She then explains in greater detail:

“The union of Dionysus and Ariadne is a rare successful conjoining of human and divine. Becoming immortal herself, Ariadne ascends to the stars with her husband, the god. Just as Psyche’s wedding to the god of desire, Eros, signifies the union of soul and love, so does Ariadne’s marriage provide a soul-full tempering of Dionysus dismembered as *zoe*, Ariadne, or the feminine, makes Dionysian limitlessness creaturely, bearable, experienceable” (ibid).

For Rowland, she sees Ariadne “[...] as symbol of feminine ensoulment of *zoe* [...]” whereby “*zoe*” is “[...] the life force of the body in Eros [...]” (31; 29).

Gilles Deleuze also had his own take. He continues later on to state that, “[a]s long as Ariadne loves Theseus, she participates in this endeavor to negate life. Beneath the false appearance of affirming, Theseus [...] is the force of negation, the spirit of negation, the great fraud. Ariadne is anima, the soul, but the reactive soul or the force of resentment” (ibid).

Now, the marital union of Ariadne and Dionysus also results in the births of five distinct children. One of them is *Οἰνοπίων* [Oenopion] who is the personification of wine, itself. Kerényi calls him, “the Wine-Man” (272). He is the one who later on becomes the king of Chios. Another child was Euanthes, whom Kerényi calls, “The Blossomer” (ibid). *Στάφυλος* [Staphylus] who would later go on to be one of the very few crew members of the Argos known as the rather famous *Αριάδνη*, or the Argonauts. A third child is *Στάφυλος* [Staphylus] who would continue to stay and live on the island of Naxos, itself. Kerényi simply refers to him as “the Grape” (272). Cyramus would become a lord of an Athenian district, while Thoas becomes the King of Taurus. Peperathus does something that I don’t know.

Like Persephone, the daughter of Demeter who was kidnapped by Hades, Ariadne also has her own particular kind of relationship to the underworld. As Otto describes it, Ariadne is “[...] abducted and must experience terrible sorrow [...]” (ibid). With the appearance of Theseus, he also states that “[...] a dark destiny enters her life” (ibid). Ariadne, then and again just like Persephone, is first and foremost someone who comes to know the dark regardless of her own will.

Now because this is an ancient Greek myth, Ariadne’s thread is not so much meant to be interpreted literally. It is, instead, meant to be interacted with much more metaphorically if not anagogically. According to Andrea Battistini, Ariadne’s thread is a philosophical metaphor. It is a symbol of and for something else. Metaphorically speaking, then, Ariadne’s thread is often

interpreted as a method that is specifically used for and dedicated to solving problems and puzzles. This can include puzzles such as labyrinths and mazes, but also things like ethical dilemmas. Ariadne's thread can, therefore, be interpreted as a logical method that uses multiple means for investigating multiple routes. In this way, Ariadne's thread helps us to not get lost. It helps us to find our own ways back out of something like a labyrinth or a maze that is at once both complex and puzzling. It helps us to remember all of the paths that we have thus taken and all of the choices that we have already made. In short, Ariadne's thread helps us to remember. It helps us remember how to get back to where it was we started.

And because the labyrinth is akin to the descent into the deep and the dark of what is nothing other than an underworld, what we find in that underworld may not be what, in fact, we initially expected it to be. In fact, it might be something complete outside of our wildest dreams. Like in Louis Carrol's famous story, *Alice in Wonderland*, in which the main protagonist, Alice, descends down into a rabbit hole that then leads her into another world called "Wonderland," we, too, venture into an increasingly chaotic domain of "madness" and/or "unreason." And so, it would seem to me, that it would behoove us all to prepare ourselves well by remembering this particular myth of Ariadne and her thread so that we may revive the tradition and carry along with us one of Ariadne's threads just like Theseus did.

Let us now remember that Walter Benjamin's type of scholarly writing was not only experimental but surrealist inflected. It was thus quite different from the more traditional types of academic writing with which so many of us are accustomed. Throughout Benjamin's own life and throughout his own work, he increasingly saw himself as a literary critic who functioned more in line with what he, himself, called an "aesthetic engineer." As Graeme Gilloch beautifully states it, "The Arcades Project was to draw on the practices of polytechnical *aesthetic*

engineering” (24, emphasis mine). But we also know, as Gilloch observes, that there is “[...] a concern [in Benjamin’s work] that can be traced back to the first appearance of the aesthetic engineer in *Einbahnstrasse*” (194).

Now, *what, for Benjamin, did the aesthetic engineer do exactly?* As Gilloch explains it, “[t]he eclectic [sic] engineer juxtaposes disparate and despised artefacts, forms and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present” (4). Put another way and to rely now on the work of Michael Jennings, what exactly it is that the aesthetic engineer does is assemble together a variety of different fragments after having “[...] ripped [them] out of their ‘natural’ context and [then] inserted [them] in a collage or constellation” (12). But we must also remember that, for Benjamin, the work that the aesthetic engineer did was also historical, and that made the aesthetic engineer into an historian as well. Speaking to Benjamin’s own role as an historian who constructed constellations of his own, *The Last Sitcom* frames Benjamin’s approach to and understanding of the concept of History quite beautifully. They, themselves, read and they, themselves, explain that while “[t]he astronomer looks up and sees the night sky boundless and onyx black, but billions of stars poke through, beacons in an otherwise endless darkness; likewise, the historical materialist finds beaming in the depths of the past a series of burning glyphs that spell out the redemption of humankind” (5:51).

For Benjamin, there was one a specific person who did seem to provide an example of— if not *the* model for—what exactly it meant to be and do the work of an aesthetic engineer. That example and/or model of a person was his friend and contemporary, the famous German poet and playwright, Bertolt Brecht. In fact, Brecht appears as an exemplary figure in Benjamin’s own 1934 essay, “The Author as Producer.” As Gilloch writes, “[f]or Benjamin, the exemplary exponent of this polytechnic aesthetic engineering was the poet, playwright and potential co-

editor Bertolt Brecht” (148). Later on, he goes on to explain that “Brecht is an exemplary aesthetic engineer, because epic theatre both recognizes the meltdown of traditional artistic forms occasioned by the development of ‘new technical forms’ [...] and pioneers innovative practices and principles which correspond to them” (159). “For Benjamin,” Gilloch writes elsewhere, “Brecht as exemplary polytechnical aesthetic engineer expressed the decisive experiences and articulated the essential responses to the increasingly unstable, threatening political conditions of the time and the ‘implosion’ of traditional bourgeois culture” (160).

Gilloch then provides us with a list of quite identifiable tasks for the aesthetic engineer to accomplish. He writes and explains that “[...] translation, transcription, imitation, criticism, appropriation, (re)construction, reproduction, remembrance, redemption. These are precisely the tasks of Benjamin’s ‘aesthetic engineer’” (4). Speaking to the aesthetic engineer’s more specific, or perhaps more politically narrow use of photography, he also writes and explains a bit later on that, “[t]he vital question for photography is not whether it is an art form, but how, with the demise of the aura, a new form of political practice can be constituted. To answer this question, and to meet the political imperatives of the present moment, the task of the polytechnic aesthetic engineer is clear: ‘start taking photographs’ (UB, p. 95)” (180). The aesthetic engineer, in other words, is someone who takes and then arranges photographs in a politically motivated way.

Because *A Critical Caribbean Constellation* is a project whose form is entirely composed of a series of many different fragments that are all juxtaposed together, it is, therefore, a distinctively fragmented project. And “[f]ragmentary construction and devastating critique,” as Gilloch explains in the case and context of Benjamin’s work, “these two imperatives transform the genuine radical writer into a textual technician -indeed, into an ‘engineer’ of the aesthetic, the urban and the erotic” (90).

As is probably quite clear by now, the argument that I, myself, attempt to present here in this project is one that is not so much presented in the typical, direct, and/or linear-like way found in that of the traditional essay. To do so, to both write and to think in the traditionally linear form of essayistic argumentation, would be a move that, in my opinion, would distort the very truth of the matter, itself. In fact, to write in the mode and style of the argumentative essay, in the case and context of the Caribbean, is to ask one to express oneself and be mediated by a way of writing that was conceived of and designed by the very ones who helped to colonize the Caribbean region to begin with. In short, essayistic representation is but *one* of many different ways of representing.

The form that this project's argument takes, therefore, unfolds in a much more indirect, poetic, and even spiral-like way. I have chosen and tried to partake in this form of argumentation because it echoes the efforts and many advances that critical and queer scholars have historically made in the construction and theorizing of an alternative aesthetic practice with its own accompanying mode of knowledge production. Consider as a prime example the 1930's work of Walter Benjamin in *Das Passagen-Werk*, or the 1980s work of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. These two others of Europe and the U.S. develop their arguments in different and yet similarly deep and dark, poetic-like ways. They are both multilingual and they both rely on materials that are pulled together from different contexts and then (re)arranged on a page, juxtaposed against one another so as to make a montage.

This shift away from the act of *telling* with its use of quotations to the act of *showing* with its use of quotations reflects the project's adoption of a much more critical mode of representation—a mode with which Benjamin, himself, was experimenting in the 1930s. For now, suffice it to say that the shift away from a mode of uncritical representation that tells

toward a mode of critical representation that shows coincides with many of the other shifts that the project as a whole attempts to usher in and better facilitate.

The weaving is the act of threading together multiple different kinds of things. It is the process of collecting and then stitching those things together—those pearls as Arendt once referred to them—in order to then generate a mental constellation. It is a way of connecting the dots in such and such a way that it changes one's way of seeing. And this involves the act of weaving in what often times appears to be a sort of eccentric kind of way. Remember that both Benjamin and Bataille have been consistently described as “eccentric” people, writers, and thinkers. But this is a way of weaving that allows for there to be an image which appears.

But what exactly are we weaving together again? What is the product that I am trying to forge and produce here? Well, I think that, like Benjamin, I have been called to the task of weaving together a certain kind of constellation, and I assert that it is a *critical* constellation to be more specific. Like Benjamin, I think that I, myself, have been called to the task of threading together certain kinds of stories, ones which are here based on images, and I also think that the very critical act of weaving together these stories which are based on images into constellations is not just any old simple act. No, the weaving together of constellations and their storied images are anything but that; weaving is also a process as well as an experience that help us to learn something serious about those things that most likely upset and/or trouble us. This act, process, and experience of weaving together critical constellations, then, involves the act of tethering together seemingly disconnected stories as a way of unsettling our current complicity in and with the status quo of the present. Once a critical constellation is woven, the juxtaposition of its many different fragments promise—à la Walter Benjamin—to energetically deliver an electrifying, lightening-like shock and even an epiphany. It is as if the thread of the constellation that weaves

it all together creates something more like an Ariadne's web, and, what's more, is that because that thread is originally enchanted, Ariadne's web becomes animate and begins to glow, illuminating pathways and maybe even shortcuts all in the dark. While, indeed, revelatory, the downside to this method is that the revelation to be experienced is only ever temporary and forever fleeting, and so there presents the need for a ritual that must be repeated. Ariadne's thread and Ariadne's web, therefore, must be woven over and over again.

As a way of attempting to better facilitate my own reader's comprehension of this here project of mine, I have chosen to use the image as well as the myth of Ariadne's thread in order to both name and describe just a little bit better what exactly it is that I see here as my own critical and inherited method. Instead of simply presenting what may seem to some as many different and seemingly disconnected fragments, points, and paths—which is quite like what Walter Benjamin, himself, often did—I do try to use some of the major fragments and/or sections to narrate how it is that I arrived from point A to point B to point C and so on.

Throughout the process of writing up this dissertation, I have tried to regularly assume the position and responsibilities of what I see to be two very important roles. The first is that of the “aesthetic engineer” while the second is that of the “scholar-detective.” In terms of the first—that of the aesthetic engineer—this piece of writing is an experiment, and it is an experiment that follows in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin. As such, it often mimics so much of his very own writing. It, therefore, flirts with and attempts to revive some of the surrealist writing techniques as well as critical methods which they, themselves, first developed throughout the decade of the 1930s in Paris, France. Recognizing the difference in both time and space, I have tried to adapt these tools for the here and now of 2023 in Seattle within the United States. In terms of the second, I think Susan Buck-Morss' observation is spot on when she states that Benjamin's *Das*

Passagen-werk “[...] makes of us historical detectives even against our will, forcing us to become actively involved in the reconstruction of the work” (x, 1989).

Using my own version of an Ariadne’s thread, this project partakes in what has felt like the act of sowing but in the literary domain. It, therefore, has a certain kind of sartorial aspect to it—with special regard to its composition in particular. Quite like one of the lumpenproletariat’s most emblematic of figures, that of the ragpicker—the one who would collect the detritus which was regularly left behind on the streets of the many big and metropolitan cities of the United States and Europe—this text is a woven together piece of patchwork, of detritus and rags that I, myself, have collected and stitched together. It is ultimately a patchwork quilt that has been woven together, presenting a variety of different images and figures that are all ultimately impoverished, left, and/or abandoned—often for dead. While the project, itself, may initially appear to bring together figures and elements that seem completely disparate from one another, what I hope to reveal is the very stitching that we must see in order to reveal the grim intimacies that do, in fact, bind these seemingly disparate things and people together. I should point out here that one of the things that unites these Caribbean prostitutes and/or sex working figures is a shared history of having been deemed unworthy and valueless by the adherents to the worths and values of modern western civilization.

case a

Haiti-2005:

looking for Legba & Jane Doe

content warning:

This chapter discusses and displays images of premature black Haitian death.

“I was dead before my father was born. Why me?”

—*Denise Ferreira da Silva*, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xii

“[...] the inquiry into and concern for the bodies of others are inseparable from the concern for one’s own body.”

—Kris Trujillo, “Queer Melancholia,” *Representations*, 114.

0 - a mysterious murder in the middle of the night

I want to kick off this first case and this first body chapter by situating us somewhere in the dark, and I want to do that by considering and analyzing the specifics of an attempt at a murder mystery in addition to its associated repeating image of premature black Haitian death. At some point in what may very well be the middle of the night, somewhere near the beachfront of some small and local Caribbean resort, two unknown black (and potentially Haitian) men drive up in an unknown car. Their headlights pierce through the darkness as they, themselves, emerge from somewhere out of the black. They then proceed to stop, exit, and open up the trunk of their car before they pull out two lifeless and unknown black Haitian bodies. We then watch these two unknown black (and potentially Haitian) men carry over and place those two dead and unknown black Haitian bodies into a relatively shallow pool of water. Once they both finish dumping them there one by one, the two men then reenter their car, reverse it, and completely disappear—returning back into the darkness of the night from which they, themselves, initially came. As viewers of this scene, we are left here alone with these two dead and black Haitian bodies, abandoned as they both are there together, left side by side in a shallow pool of water

down by the beach—that liminal zone that I, myself, have already discussed as being situated somewhere between the land and the sea, the living and the dead. And so, what we are left with here is yet another kind of example of an attempt at a murder mystery, but one that is, this time, tied to or associated with the repeating image of premature black Haitian death.

But let's go on ahead and pause right here, because I, myself, think there is a need to first sit down, recount, and then just think about what exactly it is that we currently know and don't know at this very point in both space and time. In terms of space, we know, first, that the exact spot where this double homicide occurred is unfortunately unknown, which effectively means that we don't in fact know where the double homicide has actually occurred. What we *do know* for certain, however, is that the very spot where the two unknown black Haitian men dumped the two lifeless and unknown black Haitian bodies is located somewhere near the beachfront of a small and local Haitian resort. We also know, second, that that small and local Haitian resort is a little place which is both named and known as *La Petite Anse* in French, or "The Little Cove" in English. We know, third, that at this small and local, cove-side resort located somewhere on the western half of the island of "Hispaniola", one finds—as we will soon come to quickly see—predominately white and female tourists who frequently come down to Haiti from various different locales somewhere in the global north, and they often do so, because they are, themselves, frequently in search of sex and/or romance. It is worthy of briefly noting here that there are two of these white female tourists in particular, two middle-aged white women, who—as we will also come to later see—were both involved sexually and/or romantically with one of the two victims in question. Now, in terms of time, we do not exactly have a precise date of when this double homicide occurred, but the best that we can do for this particular case in question is to assume that it could have occurred sometime at night during one summer in the

late 1970s. But there are many problems with this whole entire case and the many ways in which it accounts for its own sense of time. In fact, there is a particular conception of time that is at work here, and it will come back as a particular conception of time that is, itself, very limited and, for some, rather dangerous. We'll, therefore, come back to this spatial dimension as well as this temporal ambiguity—if not outright temporal distortion and danger—a bit later on, but for now, let me just continue to elaborate on what exactly it is that we as viewers are supposed to know and not know.

Apart from what we know about this cases's spatio-temporal conditions, we also know that it was the resort manager/proprietor—a middle-aged black Haitian male by the name of Albert—who was the first to find the two dead and naked bodies in the early dawn hours of the very next morning. At the time, we also know that Albert quickly and unequivocally identified one of the victims as Legba—a local black Haitian male and frequent sex worker who was, himself, often seen hustling at and around Albert's small, cove-side resort. The other victim, however, remains a complete (and supposed) "Jane Doe," only her sex and her gender were "identified." It seems to be the case then that Albert doesn't—and I'm not quite sure if he could—identify her by name, and so speculation quickly spread. It is here, at this moment, where I feel the need to echo the following stance of my own fellow investigator, Martin O'Shaughnessy, who writes that "[w]e are not sure if they have been killed separately or caught together and shot" (98, 2015).

In fact, there is still so much that we simply *do not know* about everything that has been going on here. In fact, we do not know who exactly it was that killed Legba and his unidentified friend. We do not know what exactly the motive was behind their double murder and even what the purpose was in dumping their two dead bodies in a small pool of water there nearby at *La*

Petite Anse. There is still so much here that we do not know about what exactly the conditions of possibility were that led up to their two killings. *Is this other person beside Legba his lover? Or, are they someone else that he knows? Who exactly killed him, and who exactly killed his lover/friend whom we'll continue to call "Jane Doe" for now?* With an almost haunting-like quality, questions just like these continue to keep on coming.

But while we might not yet know many of the answers to these questions that I, myself, have posed here on up and above, there are still some other things that we do, in fact, know. We know that there are a few of the visiting (sex and/or romance) tourists, predominately located both in and around the local and fairly small, cove-side resort, who suspect that the two deaths in question are not at all coincidental. In fact, they firmly believe in their own different ways that the two victims in question *must* have known one another. They think that the two of them *are*, indeed and without any sort of doubt, related in some sort of way, but their inquiries are largely ignored. They are both shut down, and they are casted off for reasons that are largely due to not only sexism and heteropatriarchy but a sex negative or anti-whore discourse in general.

In spite of what might seem, at least to me, to be some of the most on-the-nose suspicions in addition to questions that could have very well led us into a much more fruitful direction and path, these other threads of critical inquiry are simply and repeatedly dismissed and, for some yet unknown reason, they are never again pursued. *How exactly did these two end up here, dead and alone together? What were the exact, step-by-step set and sequence of events that led up to the precise moment(s) of their two deaths? What were the specific conditions that made possible yet another set of premature and ultimately untimely black Haitian deaths and murders?* While questions such as these continue to inundate us as if they were, themselves, part of some kind of flood, something else ends up preventing *in advance* any kind of further pursuit into finding out

the answers to so many of the more critical kind of inquiries that I have just started to pose here and up above. It does seem to me to be the case that any kind of *official* critical inquiry simply gets quickly stopped, halted, and even arrested as if it were casted straight down and then left dead there in its own tracks. What a curious thing to both witness and watch.

In the subsequent hours of what is clearly a double murder, the local official investigation seems to quickly fall flat and then go completely cold. After having taken the two bodies off to some unknown destination in the back of a relatively ambiguous ambulance, both Legba and Jane Doe are never seen and/or heard of again. In a rather mysterious kind of way, the two of them completely disappear and vanish from our lives as well as from the lives of the visiting (sex and/or romance) tourists altogether. And yet what is all the more curious—and frankly disturbing—is the simple fact that any further *official* inquiry into the now double matter of their two deaths as well as their two disappearances is suddenly met with the simple rationale that “[d]es garçons comme lui ont mille raisons de finir comme ça” [boys like him have a thousand reasons for ending up like that].¹ Whatever the precise meaning and whatever the precise implication of this official statement may have been, it remains completely unsaid and, therefore, unclear—at least on the surface—as to whether or not the *official* investigation will continue to go on or, as is quite typical in such cases as these, to simply go cold. As I, myself, have already briefly mentioned up above, it is rather unfortunately the latter path, the path of abandonment, that seems to be the most likely.

The implication and meaning of the local Haitian investigator’s official statement which I, myself, have quoted for us up in the previous paragraph above is a statement that is, at the very least, ambiguous. Perhaps there are just *so many* reasons that further inquiry into the murders and matters of both Legba and Jane Doe is simply pointless. Perhaps there are just *so many* reasons

that the work is just not possible. Perhaps there are just *so many reasons* that we cannot even think of where to begin, and so, as the logic of it all seems to go, we are thus invited to abandon and ignore all of it. We are asked, in essence, to simply forget about them, to forget about both Legba and whoever it is that “Jane Doe” actually is.

Or perhaps there is a much more implicit (and likely) reason here, one that, I think, involves a certain kind of *moral* judgment and maybe even more specifically a certain kind of *moral* hermeneutics. And I think that we can both sense and see the hints as well as the whiffs of this certain kind of moral judgment and moral hermeneutics in the performance and pronouncement of the local Haitian investigator’s official statement. A veritable speech act in line with J. L. Austin’s own theory of speech acts: “[d]es garçons comme lui” [boys like him] is a statement that, itself, seems to me to surreptitiously allude to Legba’s engagement with sex work (the very reason for his regular hustling nearby at Albert’s local resort) and, therefore, his specific social status as a local Haitian prostitute. While its exact meaning is cloaked as a tacit assertion, it seems to be the case that a case such as *his*, that a case involving someone “comme lui,” is, as the local Haitian investigator has so emphatically said, simply not *worthy* of any kind of further *official* inquiry. And it is not worthy of any kind of further *official* inquiry because of his precise engagement with sex work and/or prostitution.

“Des garçons comme lui” is also, therefore, a statement that bears within it an implicit allusion. There’s something to which it alludes and which everyone else just seems to implicitly understand that enables the investigator in his distinctively *official* capacity to simply let Legba die and then let him remain dead as if he, the investigator, were, indeed, a sovereign. And so it is, right then and right there, that we get a glimpse of the supposedly Haitian variety and example of what the contemporary Cameroonian philosopher, historian, and political theorist, Achille

Mbembe, has called “*nécropolitique*” or “necropolitics” in English. Yes, we see it here both displayed and deployed in rather surreptitious and performative diction.

And so, just as a speech act is capable of doing, it was with the unchallenged pronouncement of this very statement that the local official investigator and the local officer who was in charge were able to make very *real* the foreclosure of our own current case in question. To continue to talk about it and/or inquire into it, a case that involved “[d]es garçons comme lui” would now be framed as “*unreasonable*,” perhaps even as “hysterical,” and/or “mad,” as we do suggestively see already beginning to happen in an interview that the official investigator has with at least one of the white women tourists. This particular tourist by the name of Ellen had originally suspected and insisted that the two of them, both Legba and “Jane Doe,” must have known one another. In short, what was just moments ago a case that was quite open to some sort of critical inquiry was now a case that was completely closed off and seemingly immune to it. And so as a result of this incredible foreclosure, any kind of sustained form of critical inquiry was now framed as a behavior that was suddenly and rather simply *out* of the question.

I do think it is important to note that up to and until this exact moment in both space and time, there has been on behalf of the official investigation the steady and increasing elision of any mention whatsoever of “Jane Doe.” “Des garçons comme lui” is a statement that not only dismisses and disavows, but it is also simultaneously a statement that elides as well. And it specifically elides the female, *femme*, and feminine. Notice, for example, how there is no proclamation such as “[d]es filles comme elle” [girls like her] or even any sort of attempt at something neutral like “[d]es gamins comme eux” [kids like them]. I know from being a reader of Caribbean literature and Caribbean history that quick erasure is tragically one of the frequent fates that befall specifically *female*, *femme*, and/or *queer* black Haitian sex workers. Throughout

the entire conversation with the local official investigator, it is “des garçons comme lui” [boys like him], boys like Legba, who become the *sole* focus of the investigator’s and, therefore, the investigation’s (lack of) critical inquiry and imagination. As a result, therefore, whoever it is that “Jane Doe” actually is ends up becoming an identity that is completely eclipsed, ignored, and ultimately left to dwell in a state of historical oblivion where she too will be largely forgotten if only because she too remains unidentified and unnamed. So not only does the local Haitian investigator’s official statement foreclose any sort of furthering form of critical inquiry into this specific case involving a double murder, but it would also seem to eclipse, ignore, and forget “Jane Doe” at the exact same time. With the powerful enchantment of spell-like words, the case that was once open to the critical investigation into a double murder is suddenly obfuscated and obscured, closed off and placed within the hold of a double bind. And it is here where I yet again echo something that my own fellow investigator, Martin O’Shaughnessy, has already observed: “[b]oth are essentially prisoners of their situation” (103).

What I see happening here with this local Haitian investigator’s official statement is the power of a certain kind of utterance—the power of a certain kind of speech act in the jargon of the field—that was capable of enacting certain kinds of perlocutionary effects. According to Austin’s theory of speech acts, “[a] perlocutionary act (or perlocutionary effect) is the effect of an utterance on an interlocutor” (1962). It would soon become quite clear that with this kind of utterance and with its words, the case currently *open* and *in* question had become quite the opposite: *closed* and now nearly *out* of question. And so, it is at this precise moment when the official inquiry that was originally leading the case goes rather eerily and unnervingly cold. With what seem to be the almost magic words of a stupefying magician, the secular rationalism of the

(Black) heteropatriarch, the official inquiry ends right then and right there, almost as if it were, itself, destined to be closed before it could ever even begin to be (re)opened.

This type of cold, official response to cases wherein the deaths and the murders in question are connected to the victims' engagement with sex work and/or prostitution is, as I have already mentioned in brief, quite common and, unfortunately, rather tragic. This is true both, here, in the United States as it is, there, in the Caribbean where this double homicide has supposedly taken place. I know this to be true from the related and rather important findings of a few of my own fellow scholars and fellow investigators. I, therefore, want to briefly offer up just a few of the many different insights that have come out of their own cases, because I think that these views pertain to and are quite similar to my own. We know from the work of another fellow investigator and scholar, Kamala Kempadoo, that sex workers and/or prostitutes—especially those who are black women in the Caribbean—have been historically viewed as sexually promiscuous, immoral, dirty, and/or unclean (5). We also know from Kempadoo that sex workers and/or prostitutes are often described as socially evil, diseased, (moral) criminals, and/or lost causes. We know that, in the worst of cases, sex workers and/or prostitutes have been viewed as outlaws who are narrated as in need of being brought back under the control and regulation of the law—even if that means reigning them in results in their own death. Building on this, yet another fellow scholar, M. Jacqui Alexander, tells us that in the Bahamas “[...] the categories lesbian and prostitute now function together within Black heteropatriarchy as outlaw, operating outside the boundaries of law and therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it” (65). Working within the context of Southeast Asia, Thanh-Dam Truong, has also observed how a similar “[s]tigmatization denies [prostitutes and sex workers] their rights as workers and as citizens, bring[ing] them into social isolation and expos[ing] them to all kinds of

economic and physical abuse" (53). Vern L. Bullough teaches us that "[...] usually the police are only reacting to media pressure, since periodically the media rediscovers prostitution and, instead of trying to analyze or understand it, uses it as a symbol of all the problems associated with urban blight" (viii). I think many of these reported dynamics are already at play here within our own case in question.

In light of such findings, it would seem safe to say that for the local Haitian investigator as well as for the many locals and tourists who were all around at the time of the discovery of the two deaths and murders of both Legba and Jane Doe, they kind of view it as totally normal and even acceptable. There is no riot. There is no collective outrage. There's only a small and select few of white women tourists who appear to be the only ones impacted. Framed in such a way, their two premature deaths are interpreted by many of the people who were around them as having somehow been merited, that the two of them were somehow *worthy* of such an early confrontation with their own murders and untimely their own mortality. In the normalization and perhaps even the naturalization of their deaths, there is the implication that both Legba and "Jane Doe" somehow deserved to be the victims of a double act in callous murder. The reason for and behind their own current deaths and absences from this life is somehow framed as "self-evident." It is made to seem as if their own two premature deaths were always going to be the inevitable outcome for them.

And yet concurrent to this case which has so quickly gone cold is a local resort that is now chock full of a community of people who are completely inundated with something else: trauma. In the immediate wake of the two deaths and murders in question, some of the locals as well as the tourists appear to be devastated. Others appear to go about living their own lives either by seemingly thriving or simply getting right back to work. For Ellen—an older white

woman tourist from the city of Boston, Massachusetts, a woman who was/is also a client of Legba's as well as one of the few people whom the local official investigator interviewed—Legba's death has suddenly stricken her with a profound sense of both shock and grief. Hit with the immediate desire to return home, Ellen must now not only mourn someone she has so suddenly lost, but she must (re)find herself and her own path not here in Haiti but somewhere back there, back "home" in Boston. Ellen must go back to what it is that she thinks and knows to be the hell of Boston, Massachusetts, instead of staying somewhere in the paradise of the Caribbean, in a small but pleasant little cove-side resort located near the capital city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. And so she returns. For Brenda—another middle-aged white woman tourist and client of Legba's from Savannah, Georgia—Legba's death has sparked and induced a sudden revelation followed by a subsequent self-transformation. It is with and through Legba that Brenda has been able to experience her own sexual (and quite possibly spiritual) awakening as well as activate and tap into her own erotic empowerment. Hit with the realization of her own latent desire and freedom, Brenda decides *not* to return home like Ellen, but to stay and continue touring the many other islands of the Caribbean. In doing so, she completely foregoes and casts away any and all of the "men from the north." Instead, she continues to further her adventure on down below, seeking to continue touring the whole region. Of course, this happens along with what is the implicitly-understood purpose of her future travels all across the Caribbean which will involve her both procuring and paying for even more sex/love. And so she departs. For some of the locals, like Albert, the deaths and murders of both Legba and Jane Doe seem to be tragic yet somewhat normal, expected, and even "natural." Despite being the one who found their two dead bodies, Albert continues to work while suppressing and/or repressing the individual and collective trauma that he, himself, carries. And so he stays. For each of these people—despite

their respective return, departure, and stay—there is no reason nor time to process the trauma let alone the possibility for any sort of emotional closure. Their lives simply demand that they *must* continue on because *Kρόνος* [Kronos] who is also known as Time seems to keep on ticking in spite of the untimely deaths and murders of both Legba and Jane Doe.

I should also note that in spite of all his faults, the local Haitian investigator did offer one off-hand and yet rather poignant remark just right before he, himself, seemed to outrightly dismiss the entire case. In so doing, I think that he inadvertently provided us with a rather curious little lead. It's a point that I, myself, think conveyed his own keen awareness that there was and is some sort of pattern that is definitely at work here. Originally said in Haitian Kréyol to Albert, who then translated it into standard French for Ellen, the local Haitian investigator voiced something akin to the idea that it is the tourists who seem to "never die."² According to Albert, the investigator stated something along the lines of "les touristes ne meurent jamais" [the tourists never die]. And so by implication, we understand that, for the locals, the deaths and murders of both Legba and "Jane Doe" are not so much exceptional, here in Haiti. No. It is just like we see and just like we intuit from Albert's initial response to having found them the very next morning. For Albert and probably many other Haitians like him, these latest two black Haitian deaths and murders are not anything new. They are, instead and indeed, suggestive of a rather grim norm. Haiti is not a place of exceptional death but a place wherein death and murder occur on the regular. As another fellow investigator, Bonnie Greer, has described it in a text of her own by the name of "Tropical Malady," Haiti is understood to be "[...] this world of death and desire" (24). And it is here, in the little cove of an ostensibly Caribbean paradise, where tourist desire mixes together well with the desire to regularly perform rape, death, and murder. With the convincing veneer and veil of a Heaven-like paradise, the reality of the situation is left

largely hidden from the majority of us. And yet, somewhere below the surface, there is the presence of an underground sexual economy that not only depends upon the globally northern sex tourist's dollar but their desire as well. That underground sexual economy also demands regular, if not ritual, sacrifice in the form of premature black Haitian death and murder. The biblical snake is no longer simply *in* the garden; the biblical snake *is* the very garden, itself.

But it is precisely this reality of regular (and ritualistic) sacrifice that is so hard for so many of us to see—let alone confront. I am reminded, here, of the image of the grim grin and mischievous smile that the cheshire cat gives to Alice while she is lost in the woods. You know, the one that regularly and mysteriously appears and then disappears throughout Lewis Carroll's well-known 1865 children's novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. "Welcome to paradise!" says Ellen to Brenda the very first time the two of them meet out on the beach as they both enter into competition with one another for Legba's time as well as his attention. As if a Cheshire Cat, herself, Ellen welcomes Brenda with riddles as Brenda returns for the second time to the wonderful world of Haiti. "You're gonna have a ball!" she exclaims as we as viewers witness the two of them being surrounded and attended to by a variety of locals, all of whom are predominately young and slender, black Haitian men. Ellen's cheshire-like grin as well as her cheshire-like smirk points us to not only a sinister reality but to a riddle whose answer is only hidden here just below the surface. And part of that riddle's answer involves sex.

But behind this particular grin and smile of Ellen's is, just like the cheshire cat yet again, a much more disturbing message than simply sex, itself, and I think that it is this kind of message which is in need of such desperate decoding. There is a much deeper riddle that is in need of being solved here. For some reason, the only thing that these globally northern white women tourists couldn't seem to see and/or detect—let alone read—is the *actual* reality of the situation

in which they are all implicated. Near the end of their trip, they are shocked and they are baffled by Legba's death all in different ways, and this is a result of not being able to see, detect, and/or read their reality. They cannot and could not come to *know, think, understand*, or even (*fore*)*see* such a double death and murder to come. These women have failed, moreover, to notice at all all of the necroerotic phenomena that so clearly enshrouds them.

As a result of their own inability to accurately read their own reality, their reality as they perceive it is, in fact, just a little bit *off*. Their reality is a slightly eschewed and/or distorted kind of reality. It is, in other words, an irreality with the appearance and name of "reality." It is here where I, myself, echo yet again what another fellow investigator has already keenly observed and stated. "[...W]hat Ellen promotes to Brenda as open paradise," writes James Williams, "is, as we quickly see for ourselves, a gilded cage of exploitation and a new front-line in class and race relations" (156). A veil seems to be at work here, and it is one that covers up a reality which seems, itself, to be only visible and understandable to those with *la facultad* and its accompanying awareness. Paradise here is in reality nothing but Hell.

And so it is precisely *this kind of reason*, the reason found in the reasoning of officials be they local or not, in which I, myself, am most deeply interested, and I am most deeply interested in this specific kind of reason for it is a reason that is, itself, completely ignorant of not only the context but the history of the place to which they've regularly and routinely come back. While the white women tourists may, themselves, understand something of the commodification of the local black Haitian sex workers and their bodies—as exemplified by one of Ellen's exclamations to Brenda during a dinner in which she, herself, proclaims that "they're a dime a dozen!"—they do remain completely unaware of the reality of the deathworld that is, in fact, the (neo)colony surrounding both them and their own little cove-side resort known as *La Petite Anse*. Together,

they remain collectively unconscious of the locally and globally systemic, neoliberal proliferation of racialized and sexualized morbidity. They, themselves, remain unaware of the erotic commodification of those black Haitian sex workers who are always and already imagined to be moribund. And so we, ourselves, witness and bear the traumatic effects of yet another hellish repetition in the ostensible paradise of the Caribbean, the nearly naturalized and normalized production and reproduction of black Haitian sex worker deaths and their murders.

I think part of the issue lay in the way in which Haiti in addition to black Haitian sex work and/or prostitution are paradigmatically imagined and thus framed by the “official” modern Western worldview. For the globally northern white women tourists, Haiti is a place that is undeniably and assuredly quite “different,” as Sue (one of the white women tourists from the city of Montréal in Québec, Canada) so frequently reminds us and the other women. For the three of them all together—Sue, Brenda, and Ellen—Haiti seems to be a place where they can go in order to escape from the sexist and sexual confines of a white patriarchal culture back at home. And so they all three come to Haiti in order to engage in a form of adventure that is, itself, predominately sexual and/or romantic in nature. Here in Haiti, it would seem to be the case that white patriarchy does not or cannot really reign. They are, in other words, here to find, center, and sustain their very own sexuality, their own sex, and their own pleasure—all of which has been largely denied them when and while “living” back at home in the Global North.

And yet while these globally northern white women sex and/or romance tourists continue to live and thrive in Haiti as they, themselves, practice exploring and expressing their own sexual drives and their own sexual desires, the globally southern black Haitian sex workers seem to be merely surviving, even prematurely dying, as they, themselves, continue to perform sexual and/or spiritual labor. And because that sexual and/or spiritual labor is incredibly devalued so as

to have become both cheap and readily available—or, a “dime a dozen” as Ellen, herself, says—they are the ones who are rendered disposable. In fact, they are imagined and represented here in Cantet’s film as laborers who perform a certain type of labor that is, itself, already moribund. This is an example of the historical double or the echo that continues to repeat and come back in the Caribbean: the various forms of something akin to what James A Tyner has called, after Karl Marx, “dead labor.” We might think, for example, of the undead labor of a zombie-like workforce which has especially haunted both Haiti and the Haitian people since at least U.S. colonization if not well before. In return for attending to the emotional, sexual, and/or spiritual needs of globally northern white women tourists, they are regularly murdered and die. For the keen researcher of the Caribbean, this is a common trope—that of the zombie, or better yet, the *zonbi*. It is a trope that has a particularly deep, dark, and rather dangerous history in Haiti. We will see more of this in the second case and the second body chapter wherein I, myself, follow Zora Neale Hurston’s 1930’s investigation into the mysterious reappearance of a zombified black Haitian woman by the name of Felicia Felix-Mentor. These are the supposedly necessary sacrifices for the maintenance and reproduction of a global racial capitalist system by the name of western modernity.

And yet in spite of this recurrently tragic and hellish cycle, many of the locals, just like Albert and his employees, don’t really seem to have any time off. Instead, they must simply carry on with their own daily work and their own daily lives. In fact, they *must* all get back to work, and they must all perform this necessary ritual of *a return back to work*. This is largely because their jobs and the neocolonial Haitian economy at large both demand it. They must, after all, all stay and continue to provide the necessary services—be they formal or be they informal, above ground or underground, sexual or non-sexual—to those very same globally northern white

women tourists who all continue to live, adventure, and thrive while they, themselves, and some of their own local fellows, friends, and lovers all try to survive, get murdered, go missing, and/or die. There seems to be no time, because things must, rather simply and rather crudely, continue to move on. The words of James Hillman come to mind for me here when he says that “[w]ithout time for loss, you don’t have time for soul, and then the losses mount up and you develop a terrible fear of the hollow places of your own soul” (8:10). I suspect that Albert, himself, shares here in some of that terrible fear of which Hillman, himself, has spoken, and it is Albert’s soul that has sadly paid the price. But there really is no time to mourn despite yet another two instances of premature black Haitian death and murder. And so with no time, there is no soul that is left to recognize and read the increasing pattern of a morbid sort of repetition.

Both *Thanatos*, Death, and *Kronos*, Time, seem to engage, here, in a somewhat queer and hermetic kind of embrace. They dance together as if the two of them were twinned snakes who lorded over an ostensibly paradisiacal garden—their own two faces so tightly tucked together that they, themselves, seem to adjoin and even mirror one another. Akin to the ancient Greek deity Hermes with his caduceus, *Thanatos* and *Kronos*, Death and Time, seem to be the two snakes that weave themselves not only around each other but the pole of the staff, itself. But just like one other ancient Roman deity by the name of Janus, both Death and Time are, indeed, made janus-faced. That is, they look outward and away instead of inward and toward one another, and they do so all while still being interwoven together. Here in Haiti, it would seem that while Death can be found in the cheshire smiles of grim tourist grins, Time is really in the hands of the one who holds the glock.

And so in spite of what is, for some, a clearly recognizable repetition in the appearance of necroerotic phenomena and with no time to think about and/or mourn it, the black Haitian lives

of both Legba and Jane Doe are not only brought to an end by premature death and murder, but their own two spirits are subsequently abandoned, left to be both ignored and forgotten. Each and every single person leaves them. Albert gets back to work while Ellen returns home, and Brenda continues to travel the Caribbean. *But what about Legba? What about Jane Doe?* Like so many fellow black Haitian sex workers, their spiritual afterlives are relegated to what Walter Benjamin has famously called “the trash bin of history.” Their spirits are thus consigned to a veritable historical oblivion and abyss. In the wake of their own two murders, two new black Haitian sex worker spirits cross over and join the countless and unnameable others who all reside there in the deepest and darkest parts of the great and vast chasm at the very bottom of the underworld: that chthonic realm and prison cell known as Tartarus.

It strikes me as quite odd that in spite of these many reactions that have emerged in the wake of yet another case of premature black Haitian death and murder, there are still so many critical and leading questions that are just *never* pursued. *How, for example, did things get to this deadly and murderous point? Who was the last person to see Legba? Who, exactly, is Jane Doe? How do the two of them know one other, if they did know each other at all? Do they have parents that are alive? Did anyone else see anything? Who are the two black men who dumped their bodies? Were they also Haitian? For whom might they work? How did the two victims come to be in these men’s possession? What were the exact steps that were taken in the unfolding of their murders? What were the steps that led up to it all?* And I could go on. If this is a repeating phenomenon—and a seemingly sinister one at that,—then *how many have been murdered and died before both Legba and Jane Doe?*

But because I am much more of a critical and interdisciplinary scholar-investigator, there are certain academic questions that also interest me here. *What, for example, made up the*

conjuncture—in the Gramscian sense of the word—that resulted in their murders and their deaths? What were, in other words, the conditions of possibility for their premature murders and their premature deaths to both manifest and occur? What matrix has ensured a double murder to not only take place but to be so easily ignored and forgotten? This leads us into the direction of a distinctively epistemological line of critical questioning: What epistemological system makes it possible to both know and think that no further inquiry seems a normal and legitimate path to take? Why? What might we learn from studying the specific kind of epistemology that makes it possible for not just the official investigator but everyone else involved to collectively ignore and forget these two murders and these two deaths? What might we learn about this particular kind of epistemology by intentionally studying and investigating how it is able to completely disavow the recognizable pattern of tourists who never die alongside the repetition of necroerotic phenomena that continues to traumatically affect everyone involved? What might pursuing our own kind of investigation into the deaths and into the murders of both Legba and Jane Doe tell and teach us about such an epistemology? What might a careful study of these peoples' ways of knowing, their thoughts, and their reactions to the two murders and deaths in question reveal? What epistemology has made it possible to not only ignore and leave to be forgotten their murders and their deaths but their lives and their spirits as well?

Rather unfortunately, these questions are largely left unasked and therefore remain unanswered. As a result, we witness and experience yet another hellish repetition involving the premature death and murder of two black Haitian youths, one of which is a prostitute and/or sex worker, and the other is presumably one as well. We also witness the hellish repetition in the lack of an official investigation due to an ambiguous, if not moral, judgment and hermeneutics which successfully framed the case as not worthy of any further and/or future inquiry. And so

what we are left with is not only a lack of any sort of investigation into their case, but a community that is simultaneously fragmented, traumatized, and desensitized—among other things. We are left, in other words, with a rather loud and unsettling silence, one that can only continue to haunt each and every single person who was immediately involved. But for those who can afford to go home and escape from it all, the ghosts may still try to haunt them from afar. And for the local people who must stay “back there” in Haiti, they must deal with the ghosts whose immediate presences will still be undeniably felt the most.

But I should be a bit transparent and make more explicit that the deaths and the murders, the lives and the spirits of which I have been talking and discussing this whole entire time—those of both Legba and Jane Doe—are not empirically real phenomena. Quite the contrary. They are not, in fact, actual people who have lived, died, and been murdered. Instead, they are a representations of them. They are, in other words, representations of their moribund lives, their untimely deaths, and their unsettling murders. This is how they appear, and this is how their stories are narrated within a feature-length film by the name of *Vers le sud* that was both released and circulated in 2005 by the white globally northern French film director, cinematographer, and screenwriter, Laurent Cantet.

While these representational deaths and murders may not, themselves, be empirically real deaths and murders, I do not value them any less. Nor do I find this representation and this cultural product, this film, to be of any lesser value in what it has to say and teach us—albeit in a limited fashion—about how female sex tourists, resort managers, official investigators, filmmakers, and even viewers alike are all capable of both ignoring and forgetting the historical repetition of morbid and specifically necroerotic phenomena, such as the premature death and murder of local black Haitian sex workers. If anything, my interest lay in studying cultural

production that seems to refract the reality and histories of black Haitian sex worker death. I'm also interested in how Cantet and his own film may abet and/or partake in a mode of representation that, itself, helps to naturalize this exact same repetition of morbid and necroerotic phenomena. If anything, I am interested in the ways in which Cantet's film ends up reproducing and circulating the simultaneously racialized and sexualized image of the moribund life, death, and murder of black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes.

I'm also interested in the potentially radical spiritual politics of practicing something like a critically queer necromancy here. *What does it mean to conjure up and sit with the spirits of sex workers and/or prostitutes that have been deemed so unworthy of our time? What does it mean to call out to them in their own confinement within the trash bin of history? What does it mean to search for them in the obsidian black darkness of historical oblivion? What does it mean to go out and attempt to find them confined there somewhere in the deep dark depths of an incarcerating abyss? What does it mean to pull them out of those most obscure and shadowy parts of the underworld that are, themselves, just so completely desolate and derelict that they are, themselves, left out of Time and, by extension, left outside of History?* In short, I'm curious about what this kind of queer necromantic ritual is capable of doing as a kind of counter-hegemonic discourse. I think it also serves as a specifically chronopolitical mode and/or manoeuvre of resistance to the demand for an adherence to certain kind of time and a certain kind of history that are, themselves, the Time and the History which the U.S. nation-state considers to be universal. That kind of Time and that kind of History are both conceived of as linear and progressive as well as teleologically straight and secular. I'm curious about what identifying and then practicing a different kind of chronopolitics will help us to remember and, if successful, what it also says about the modern Western culture in which we, ourselves, both live and die as

well as the epistemology that we, ourselves, predominately use in order to come toward anything like knowing both the lives and the deaths of anyone not just black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes—and this includes our own deaths.

In a way, Cantet's film does allow for one to reflect on how it is that we, as viewers, might sometimes be(come) complicit in reproducing and, therefore, perpetuating an epistemological pattern and its traumatic aftermath in "real life." In this chapter, I approach Cantet's film as providing a space within which to better examine and better analyze a representation that is, itself, capable of restaging a tragic but all-too common ending for black Haitian sex workers within the neocolonial context of Haiti in the early years of the 21st century. The film, itself, therefore provides an opportunity to flesh out at least a little bit of some sort of critical commentary on the global system of sex tourism as well as the encounter it makes possible between globally northern, white female sex tourists and globally southern, black Haitian male sex workers. It also allows for us to shine a better light onto the relationship that exists between the valuing of white female tourist life and the devaluing of black Haitian sex worker life. Lastly, the film's representation offers another opportunity for one to illuminate the underlying and often obscured neoliberal epistemology that serves as the underground to not only the characters within the film but to the whole entire discourse that we are provided by the very film, itself, in addition to the filmmaker as well.

I want to begin the body of this project by investigating this particular kind of image, which is, again, the image of the moribund and the murdered, black Haitian sex worker. This first case and chapter, then, involves the recounting of a murder mystery in addition to an analysis of its particular mode of representation. I, therefore, pay attention to its unique mode of storytelling, and, to my mind, Cantet's film is a story that does recount and, rather unfortunately,

normalizes the premature death and murder of black Haitian sex workers just as it is set up against the backdrop of a lustful cove-side resort which is, itself, located in a much larger and lusher, ostensible paradise known as “the Caribbean.”

This chapter—labeled as Case A and titled “Haiti-2005: looking for Legba & Jane Doe”—telescopes the larger project’s first Caribbean figure of sex work. It centers on and investigates the image of the moribund and murdered, black Haitian sex worker as represented in the French director, Laurent Cantet’s 2005 film, *Vers le sud*. In doing so, I aim to address just *why* it is that I think this particular image continues to circulate. In order to do so, I analyze both *how* and *why* it is that Legba and Jane Doe’s premature deaths and murders are represented, *how* and *why* they are imagined and visualized as already anticipated and once materialized then ignored and forgotten. In order to do so, I uptake and expand on Thérèse de Raedt’s reading of the very same film in which she develops a particular typology of violence (2008). With my own reading of the film, I aim to contribute to De Raedt’s typology by offering an analysis of a fifth type of violence: epistemic violence. After briefly explaining this fifth type of violence, I then offer a critical epistemological analysis of the film in which I discuss the film’s underlying neoliberal epistemology and neoliberal epistemic violence. Not only do I demonstrate how this particular epistemology operates by the means of disavowing historical context as well as the (neo)imperial and (neo)colonial systems of knowledge/power relations. I read, in other words, how the film’s internal narrative—or diegesis—as well as the film, and the filmmaker, himself, all demonstrate certain neoliberal epistemological features. These features, in turn, provide for

the possibility of a representation of, at worst, individual and collective disinterest and, at best, an ambivalence with regard to the premature deaths and murders of black Haitian sex workers. By critically analyzing the specific epistemic violences of neoliberal epistemology, my reading offers an account of *how* and *why* it seems so normal and natural to pursue no further inquiry into the otherwise mysterious reason(s) behind such a repetition of necroerotic phenomena.

The evidence compiled for and analyzed in this first body chapter is used to begin the process of building a case that both presents and performs a specifically *immanent* form of critique, and that specifically immanent form of critique is of neoliberal epistemology. I take my own understanding of “immanent critique” largely from the work of Nick Nesbitt in his 2013 book, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*. In the introduction to that text of his titled, “The Caribbean Critical Imperative,” Nesbitt first describes immanent critique as “[...] the fundamental tactic of modern dissidence” (4). He then lays out how his own understanding of immanent critique comes, in turn, from the work of Seyla Benhabib, and his own interpretation of her work situates it as something that “[...] bypasses the need for dogmatic normative grounds by seeking instead to reveal the immanent contradictions and inconsistencies of the material in question [...]” (4). “Immanent criticism,” Nesbitt goes on to explain, “seeks to destroy ideological illusion by demonstrating the fundamental non-coincidence of a world with its own professed criteria and self-understanding” (5). “The task of immanent critique is to reveal within the actual structure of the world, as only one, contingent formation in an ongoing process of historical transformation, the sketch of a truth still to be actualized” (8).

This immanent critique of neoliberal epistemology which I am attempting to build here in this case consists of two main parts. First, the evidence points us to the limits and deep

inadequacies of neoliberal epistemology in not only its attempt to know such things as “sex tourism” in addition to the deaths, murders, and spirits of black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes, but it is also inept at critically remembering them. It attempts to but simply can’t. The evidence, therefore, calls into question neoliberal epistemology’s legitimacy as the dominant, privileged, and *only* way of knowing and producing knowledge in the world. In fact, the evidence points us to the conclusion that neoliberal epistemology is, itself, *incapable* of knowing and producing knowledge about the increasing necroerotic phenomena that it has so regularly and ritualistically ignored as well as left to be forgotten. Neoliberal epistemology is, in short, inadequate in its own ability to perform the task of recognizing the historically sacrificial status of black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes and the role that they have played in not only the reproduction of the global “sex tourism” industry but also in the reproduction of the sovereignty of a global system of western modernity.

The second part of the critique involves revealing and illuminating just *how* it is that neoliberal epistemology occludes and, therefore, abets the reproduction of such necroerotic phenomena. In building off of the work of George W. Wallis and the contemporary queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman, I contend that neoliberal epistemology is able to do so through the wielding of a particular form of chronopolitics. In brief, I believe that neoliberal epistemology frames necroerotic phenomena as existing in a particular kind of ontological state, of *being outside of* linear, progressive time and, by extension, as *being outside of* linear, progressive history. In this way, black Haitian death is framed as specifically *untimely*. It is perceived as lacking a history, as, itself, being ahistorical. This atemporalizing as well as ahistoricizing gesture both ensure that subjects who rely on neoliberal epistemology in order to know and inquire may, however and in fact, *ignore* and *forget* in quite the ritualistic kind of manner the perpetuation, proliferation, and

otherwise alarming growth in the necroerotic phenomena that are currently taking place in the present all over the globe. And the reason for this, in short and in my own corroborated professional opinion, is the “time-perspective” of the neoliberal knower (Wallis).

The argument that I, myself, attempt to put forward here is one that is, itself, complex, and it, therefore, consists of three major interrelated parts. I first argue that *Vers le sud* is a film and, by extension, a form of representation that both evinces and engages in a specifically *neoliberal* form of epistemic violence. It does so by enacting a certain kind of chronopolitics by which the premature death and murder of black Haitian sex workers which occur *within the present* are framed as being *out of Time*, and, therefore, as being *outside of History*. As a result, they are, themselves, imagined as being *already moribund* in Cantet’s romantically re-envisioned past of Haiti during the late 1970s. In the process of adapting Dany Lafférière’s original novella and story, I argue, second, that Cantet, himself, engaged in a certain kind of recontextualization of Lafferrière’s original work that, itself, resulted in him ultimately participating in a process in and by which neoliberal epistemic violence was wrought—whether that be consciously or unconsciously, I am not yet entirely sure. But to speak more to the film, itself, as well as a bit more specifically, I argue that *Vers le sud* contributes to a distinctively *neoliberal* form of epistemological violence by means of a repetitive disavowal that ritualistically *ignores* and *forgets* the gendered and/or racialized violences of the present, and it does by chronopolitically framing and assigning those very same gendered and/or racialized violences of the present to the discursive realm of the past. In short and to rely on a neologism here, they are made to be a part of the past while still being in the present. They are, in other words, “pastified,” or discursively rendered as *being in the past* despite *occurring in the present*. I then argue, third, that it is the global prevalence and dominance of neoliberal epistemology that structurally enables and

secures the perpetuation of racialized sexual violence, such as rape, given that it can naturalize the violence through certain discursive techniques as well as conceptions that frame time and history as linear, progressive, and/or teleological.

There are a few things that are consciously at stake in this very first analysis of mine, and I'd like to make them a bit more explicit here on the page. What is perhaps most at stake is the incredibly dire need for us to be able to better identify dominant epistemic formations, such as neoliberal epistemology, and the necroerotic phenomena that neoliberal epistemology not only renders unintelligible but actively ignores and forgets. The second thing that is at stake here is the need to denaturalize, rehistoricize, and demystify that very same dominant epistemic formation so as to better know just *how* to intervene into it. The third thing at stake is the need to better render intelligible the relations of power—both present and past—between the dominance of an epistemic formation and the subjugation of alternative modes of knowing and knowledge production, which could include other epistemologies as well as entirely other ways of knowing and producing knowledge such as that which is found in different cosmologies and gnoseologies.

Insofar as this chapter is concerned with identifying and addressing neoliberal epistemic violence, it engages with a critical and interdisciplinary theoretical framework. That framework is, itself, largely informed by people who work and write in the fields of postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, women of color feminisms (including black feminist thought and chicana feminist thought) as well as that of queer studies. These fields have offered up critical and rather potent theories of modern western epistemology. In this first chapter, I bring together some of the work by Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kristie Dotson who all serve as the basis for my own understanding of “epistemic violence.” I then lean on the work of Grace Kyungwon Hong who frames and defines neoliberalism, in brief, as an epistemological system

of disavowal. One might, therefore, call and think of this chapter's approach as a critical and interdisciplinary, materialist and political economic approach to epistemology, one that recognizes the politics and relations between not only power and knowledge but among many different epistemologies, themselves.

What follows is a case and a chapter that are together composed of an intentionally assembled set of five specific fragments. After this opening vignette, I move on to the first fragment with which I, myself, provide a brief exposition of the relevant parts of a fellow film and French studies scholar, Thérèse de Raedt, who develops in her own reading of Cantet's film a useful but ultimately limited typology of violence. In this first major section section, then, I attempt to offer up a review of the list of violences that de Raedt names and analyzes before I move on to pointing out the absence of naming and analyzing the specifically *neoliberal epistemic* violence that is also quite prevalent in the film. It is here where I, myself, provide a working definition and understanding of what constitutes "epistemic violence" in general as well as within the specific context of this particular case involving Cantet's 2005 film. In doing so, I revisit and rely on some of the historical work already done on "epistemic violence" by those scholars mentioned above. It is also here that I offer a more specific definition of "neoliberal epistemology" and "neoliberal epistemic violence" by specifically building on Hong's work. In the chapter's second major section, its third fragment, I begin my own critical epistemological analysis of the film, itself, with a focus on its diegesis. It is within this section that I analyze a series of scenes while paying particular attention to what it is that each of the characters *desires*, what it is that each of them *knows* and *doesn't know*, in addition to what it is that they are *conscious* and *unconscious of*—individually and as a collective. In the third major section, the fourth fragment, I continue my own critical epistemological analysis of the film, but I shift my

focus over and onto the more formal aspects of the film, itself, in addition to the filmmaker. Here, I pay particular attention to the film's title as well as its renaming, the specific perspectives that the camera privileges, and the filmmaker's relationship to and conception of (Haitian) history. In the fifth section, I shift the focus back over and onto the film's diegesis in order to analyze the reactions and subsequent epiphanies of three of the main characters in response to Legba's death. Those include the epiphanies of Brenda, Ellen, and Albert. I then close with a fifth and final, conclusionary section in which I, myself, address the (known) limits to this case's investigation while sketching out a few avenues for further inquiry and future analysis that have been revealed to me throughout the course of my own critical and interdisciplinary inquiry.

Lastly, it is my hope that this first body chapter will serve—in conjunction with the other three body chapters and cases that follow—as the first of many different kinds of esoteric keys that are all required to open up the (hidden) door. That (hidden) door seems to serve as a gate which has been kept locked up for quite some time, and that locked gate leads us to a path which, if taken and taken quite seriously, may very well lead us to the restoration and the relegitimization of something like a “queer eschatapoetics.” I, myself, view this kind of a poetics as a practical alternative in addition to a more adequate way of interpreting, knowing, and thinking not just the moribund and the murdered but the ignored and the forgotten.

I - expanding De Raedt's typology of violence

In their 2008 article, “*Vers le Sud: de la violence, du pouvoir, du sexe et de l’argent*,” De Raedt identifies four specific types of violence that are evident in Cantet’s film. They are: 1) *la violence suggérée d’entrée* [the suggested violence from the beginning]; 2) *la violence intériorisée d’Albert* [the interiorized violence of Albert]; 3) *l’omniprésente violence urbaine* [the omnipresent urban violence]; and 4) *la violence verbale* [the verbal violence]. In this first section, I expound and expand on Thérèse De Raedt’s four-part typology of violence. After an enumeration and explication of De Raedt’s four types of violence, I seek to add and define another, a *fifth* type of violence, and I refer to this fifth type of violence as 5) the epistemic violence of the film and the filmmaker—or, in again keeping in line with the French, “*la violence épistémique du film et du cinéaste*.” In order to do so, I turn to previous work on epistemic violence before focusing on the more specific phenomenon of *neoliberal* epistemic violence.

The first type of violence of which De Raedt speaks is, again, *la violence suggérée d’entrée*—or “the suggested violence from the beginning.” For De Raedt, this type of violence mainly describes the somewhat “suggested” and even mysterious violence that we see so often alluded to in the opening scene of the film. While at an airport waiting for Brenda to arrive, an anonymous black Haitian woman approaches Albert—the local small resort owner who initially found the two dead bodies. The intention behind her approach—so we, the viewers, come to learn—is to “give” Albert her own daughter as a solution to ensuring her daughter’s survival in the wake of a sudden and horrific familial misfortune. What De Raedt precisely means by “suggested violence,” here, is the insidious violence that has already touched the anonymous woman’s family and which reigns over the country of Haiti as a whole³ (128). In speaking to

Albert, she recounts how, one day, her husband went to work but then never came home and mysteriously disappeared. De Raedt's use of "suggested" mainly captures the violence of this disappearance, to which the anonymous woman can only allude to and recount, *suggesting* to both Albert (and again, to us as spectators) that there is a very real threat of impending and sudden violence in the local environment. That environment, of course, is the deathworld of the 1970s under the neocolonial state and necropolitical dictatorship of Jean-Claude 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, commonly known for his nightmarish paramilitary force of Tonton Macoutes. This era is highly characterized by an alarmingly unknown number of other mysterious disappearances, murders, and rape. As I'll describe a bit later, the film doesn't dive too incredibly deep into this enveloping deathworld of an environment, but it is, at least, there superficially in the background. And so from the very beginning of the film, both Albert and us as viewers are admonished by this anonymous black Haitian woman's suggestion of violence. And yet, Albert simply dismisses and brushes her aside along with the entire issue of suggested violence. He does so, I think, because he views her ask and approach as an un-respectable breach of social norms.⁴ Perhaps recognizing that the violence will also come for him in time, the anonymous black Haitian woman leaves him admonished with a cryptic statement: "Les bons masques sont mélangés avec les mauvais, mais *tous* portent un masque" [the good masks are mixed in with the bad ones, but *everyone* wears a mask]. We see this motif involving the role of masks and the suggested violence they help to conceal repeat itself throughout the rest of the film.

The second type of violence that De Raedt identifies is *la violence intériorisée d'Albert*, or "the interiorized violence of Albert." This type of violence describes how Albert, himself, has taken in and contained, or "interiorized," both his shame and scorn, his *honte* and *mépris*. Already having demonstrated himself to be a rather respectable person in his refusal to take the

anonymous black Haitian woman's child, Albert presents himself as a character grappling with the corruption that not only surrounds him in Haiti but the corruption that he finds within himself. De Raedt writes that "Albert, pour qui l'argent fait plus de mal que la force armée, contient sa violence derrière un masque faussement placide (seul son regard trahit parfois sa révolte), car il se sait 'pourri' comme tout le pays mais il sait aussi que c'est le prix à payer pour survivre" [Albert, for whom money does more harm than armed force, contains his violence behind a false and placid mask (only his look sometimes betrays his revolt, because he knows himself to be rotten like the whole country but he also knows that it's the price to pay in order to survive] (129). Despite having come from a family of Haitian nationalists who had fought the U.S. soldiers during the U.S. occupation from 1915-1934, Albert must now currently work for and serve the U.S. tourists as well as the many others who come to stay at his small cove-side resort from the global north. He must wash their dishes, follow their orders, and ultimately cater to each of their desires. And so De Raedt interprets Albert as interiorizing his violence by not expressing it but by hiding it behind a false and placid mask—yet again the repetition of the mask motif. While he may appear rather calm on the outside, Albert is, indeed and internally, ruminating and fighting with the rottenness and corruption that he—along with many other Haitians just like him—must participate in in order to survive. And so the violence is kept buried somewhere deep down inside.

The third type of violence is *l'omniprésente violence urbaine*, or "the omnipresent urban violence". De Raedt uses this type of violence to describe three specific scenes in the film. These scenes, akin to the first type of violence—*la violence suggérée d'entrée*, or suggested violence from the beginning—point to and better paint a picture of the wide-spread and, therefore, *omnipresent* urban violence that surrounds the smaller cove, enclave, and seemingly paradisiacal

resort of *La Petite Anse*. It is worth noting here that despite the omnipresence of such urban violence, the main sex/love/romance touring characters—Ellen, Brenda, and Sue—seem to hardly ever see, notice, and/or clock it.

In order to provide an example of this third type of violence, De Raedt first reads a scene on the beach in the middle of the film in which Ellen mentions two people that she knows—Anna and Andréa—who were invited to a dinner one evening at the Haitian Presidential Palace. In her recounting of what her own two friends saw and experienced, Ellen immediately notes that there is a discrepancy between the extreme poverty that she sees and acknowledges as encircling them at *La Petite Anse* and the extreme wealth of the Haitian president's dinner party. She then goes on to recognize and comment on the immense luxury that is seemingly concentrated within the halls of the Haitian Presidential Palace. She observes, moreover, how the amount of food at the dinners that the palace usually has is enough to feed the entire city of Port-au-Prince. She then asks Legba if the (Haitian) people know about all of this money and about all of this waste. But right after she poses that first question, she also asserts and asks yet another more epistemological oriented question: if they *did*, in fact, *know*, then *why* would they seem to accept it? Legba does not take well to this type of question, which he, himself, may seem to view it as understandably quite ignorant. He responds in a rather curt manner, nearly cutting Ellen off before she can finish her own sentence: “qui te dit qu'on accepte?” [who told you that we accept it?]. In this moment, the violence to which De Raedt refers is, again, the wide-spread violence that encircles these two who are sitting here having a conversation on the beach, a type of violence that is, itself, immediately outside of their small resort. It's the violence that simultaneously enables the accumulation of food and other resources at the center that is the Haitian Presidential Palace, while the majority of Haitians outside of it go hungry and must beg

for food or sell themselves like Legba does in order to enjoy his own Tequila Sunrise as he sits here with Ellen and company on the beach.

The second scene that De Raedt offers up as an example of the omnipresent urban violence is one in which an altercation between Legba, Eddy, and two of the local tontons macoutes occurs. While hanging, chatting, and playing a game with a bunch of other peers and friends, their collective fun is suddenly interrupted and further disrupted by an older tonton macoute who, himself, steals a drink from an adolescent child vendor. He then refuses to pay for the drink and kicks the young kid's stand. When the adolescent kid attempts to resist, the tonton macoute proceeds to both physically threaten him and then go on to sanction him for not having the authorization to even sell drinks to begin with. This reveals the abusive man's status as not just any tonton macoute but a tonton macoute who is also a chief and/or officer—signaling the very corruption of Haiti's police force. We then see Legba hold Eddy back as Eddy, himself, attempts to go and stand up for his fellow child vendor who has now become the focus of everyone's attention. Here, in the urban city slums of Haiti, there is, yet again, a persistent violence that, according to De Raedt, "[...] scande la réalité quotidienne des habitants du pays" [scans the daily reality of the country's inhabitants] (131).

The third scene De Raedt cites as indicative of the omnipresent urban violence involves Legba who, in one scene in which we see him walking alone, is suddenly approached by a black limousine with tinted windows. With the door opened, the chauffeur—named Franc—demands that Legba get in. Once inside, Legba talks with someone who appears to be another friend and/or past lover, someone he does know and seems to know a bit more intimately provided that they speak in Haitian *kréyol* and seem to be somewhat intimate. There is an immediate and uneasy juxtaposition, here. First, there is the apparent luxury that Legba's high-femme friend

(our potential Jane Doe) seems to have found for herself and which she offers and promises to him. There is, second, the fear of not just Le Colonel Beauvais [the Colonel Beauvais], who seems to have bought and now controls Legba's fellow prostituting friend, but also Franc, their current chauffeur and his friend's supposed guardian angel. In this scene, we understand that both Legba and she (who is potentially Jane Doe) have had to and currently must prostitute themselves in order to survive. Whereas Legba's clients are the tourists, however, his friend's clients are members of the Haitian military and political elite, figures involved in the deadly and nightmarish Duvalier régime. This thinly veiled necropolitical power and threat, despite all of its omnipresence, does unveil itself later and if only briefly when Franc, the chauffeur, later attempts to both chase and gun down Legba while he is out away from the safety of the resort and on a date in town with Brenda. Yet again, the omnipresent violence of the urban space immediately surrounding the seemingly paradisiacal resort of *La Petite Anse* both lingers and looms.

The fourth and final type of violence, for De Raedt, is *la violence verbale*, or “verbal violence.” This type of violence describes the scene in which Ellen verbally assaults Legba after he suddenly reappears at the resort one night after having disappeared in the immediate aftermath of Franc's attempt to pursue and murder him. De Raedt uses “verbal violence” to name in this subsequent scene the vehement sermon that Ellen delivers unto him in the kitchen of *La Petite Anse*. In the name of worry and fear for Legba, Ellen verbally accosts him before she offers him money and a passport. As De Raedt points out, this offer is not so much a disinterested one; it is an offer driven by Ellen's own ego. She has long desired and competed to have Legba be hers and hers alone. She wants him to be with her and just her back in Boston. In essence, she sees Legba as someone—and perhaps something—to be bought with money, a

passport, gifts, and food. But within this entire formula and dream of Ellen's, Legba *cannot* and more than likely *will not* be himself. He does, after all, repeatedly tell Ellen during her sermon that she is not his mother. He then leaves and disappears yet again—this time, to go back home to his actual mother. With the violence now entering the resort and his more intimate relations with these tourist women, Legba, has no choice but to go to one who might perhaps best understand him and his current predicament. Unfortunately, this will be his last night alive, for he will not wake up in the morning. Instead, he will be left dead and naked on the beach of the very place where he has consistently sought and found a modicum of safety: *La Petite Anse*.

While there is so much rich insight to be gleaned and learned from De Raedt's four-part typology of violence, it does not provide us with the identification and analysis of a fifth type of violence, one that I, myself, argue is also quite prevalent within the film. I, therefore, want to expand on De Raedt's four-part typology of violence by offering to identify and then provide an analysis of another type of violence altogether. I call this fifth type of violence: "the epistemic violence of the film and the filmmaker"—or, in keeping with the French again: *la violence épistémique du film et du cinéaste*.

When oversimplified and explained in brief, "epistemic violence" can be described as a specific kind of violence, one that involves both our knowledge and knowing. In other words, epistemic violence is a knowledge-based kind of violence in so far as the violence in question is, itself, enacted through both an epistemic system of knowledge in addition to an epistemic way of knowing. It is this kind of epistemic violence that affects, attacks, and sometimes even kills our

ability to know. And so the expression, itself, “epistemic violence” is also an expression that attempts to name a type of violence which one cannot exactly see so to speak—at least physically and/or empirically. Epistemic violence is not so readily visible or identifiable. It is often difficult “to see,” “spot,” and/or “notice” the specific kind of violence that is epistemic violence—even for those who are the victims of it.

But this whole entire formulation and understanding of “epistemic violence” as simply “knowledge violence” is just a bit too simplistic and/or reductive. Indeed, to understand “epistemic violence” as simply “knowledge violence” is to grossly oversimplify the issue. This is true if only because there are just so many different kinds of knowledge in the world—especially those different kinds of knowledges in the world that all exist *outside* of the English language. To understand “epistemic violence” as simply “knowledge violence,” therefore, comes with a certain kind of cognitive cost given that the English word, “knowledge,” itself, both condenses and obscures an innumerable and incredible variety of very important differences among so many different ways of knowing and producing knowledge in the world. But the expression, “epistemic violence,” itself, does, however, give us a clue. It helps us to delimit a certain kind of knowledge, a knowledge with which the violence in question occurs. In this case it is a specifically *epistemic* form of knowledge that is involved in the violence. Put another way, the violence of which I, myself, and so many others speak is rendered by way and means of an *episteme* or what has been called an epistemic formation.

The now proliferating contemporary work on “epistemic violence” has largely been built on the main foundational concepts and threads that were all initially developed by some of the field’s key—if not foundational—thinkers, theorists, and writers. These people include scholars like Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kirstie Dotson, Enrique Galván-Álvarez,

Claudia Bruner, Grace Kyungwon Hong, and Walter D. Mignolo among others. In what follows, I, myself, want to begin with Foucault's discussion and conception of "epistemic violence," because he is the person whose conception Spivak later uplifts, critiques, and then further develops. I then move on to other scholars, such as Dotson, Galván-Álvarez, Brunner, Hong, and Mignolo, who, in turn, all build on the work of mainly Spivak.

For Michel Foucault, one finds a prime example of epistemic violence in the historical redefinition of the word, "sanity," and its meaning which occurred in Europe sometime around the late 18th century. In his dissertation from 1961, *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Foucault traces and sketches out the shift in the definition of the word, "sanity," and its meaning as just one of three total moments involving epistemic violence and epistemic transformation on the continent. This third moment of what Foucault, himself, considers to be epistemic violence is located at the transition to and birth of the specifically *modern* era. The redefinition of the word, "sanity," and its meaning is a redefinition that is, itself, indicative of a much more macro-level phenomenon. It points us to the encroaching process of modernization that is concomitant with the rise of reason as well as the drive of science. Foucault teaches us then that along with the historical process of modernization came an epistemic form of violence that resulted in the increasing confinement and marginalization of "the mad" in asylums all over Europe.

Prior to the emergence of modernity, however, madness and the mad were both perceived and treated quite differently. In short, they were both viewed as somehow connected to the divine as they, themselves, both seemed to provide evidence of the their own kind of *divine possession*. Madness and the mad prior to modernity were thus seen as states into which one was forced to enter irregardless of one's own will because one was actively being *possessed by the*

divine. Madness, therefore, was seen as a state of being *in divine possession*. Madness and the mad were once a sign of spiritual insight and/or creativity. They were often revered as part of the work of shamans or holy men, given that they, themselves, were believed to have special gifts or insights that connected them to the supernatural and spirit worlds.

Under modernity's new reigning realm of reason, however, both madness in general and the mad in particular became not only a problem and a danger to the successful process and progress of modernization, but they also became a threat to the whole entire modern order, itself. In turn, madness and the mad both became objects of knowledge and scientific inquiry, and they did so because both madness and the mad needed to be studied so as to be better and "more ethically" controlled. And they needed to be studied, because they also needed to be "known" so that they could then, themselves, be therapized and medicated, state regulated and managed, all surveilled and with so many experimented on—I could go on. The point is that this fact of the exclusion of both madness and the mad from the domain of the city as well as the domain of the human—which together serve as the two main domains of modernity, itself—was fundamental at the end of the day to the very establishment of an entirely new world order, one which was, this time, a specifically *modern* world order now ruled over by the legitimacy and the authority of a white patriarchal secular and scientific racism masquerading as a neutral and objective secular and scientific rationalism.

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one also finds epistemic violence in the British colonization of India that occurred sometime in the early 19th century. In her own 1988 article, "Can the Subaltern speak?," Spivak, herself, critiques and then further develops Foucault's whole conception of epistemic violence, and she does so, first, by pointing out its (geographical and economic) limits. She then pulls from the case, context, and history of India which, in turn,

expands Foucault's own limited geographical and economic frames. In what follows, I, myself, want to discuss just a few key points about the context in which Spivak is, herself, further using and developing Foucault's conception of epistemic violence, and I want to do so because it does affect how we may read, analyze, and come to understand it as I, myself, use it in my own critical epistemological analysis of Laurent Cantet and his 2004 film here on down below.

In the first section of that 1988 text of hers, Spivak writes what amounts to a critique and exposé of what she, herself, identifies as the common move to transparency that European intellectuals often enact. There are two intellectuals in particular that Spivak targets and discusses here, and they are the two prominent French theorists, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. These two European intellectuals and their radical criticism both betray, according to Spivak, a covered and concealed interest in the "[...] desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject" (66). In doing so, Spivak draws our attention to the fact that "[...] this concealed Subject pretends it has 'no geo-political determinations'" (ibid). In other words, the Subject—on behalf of which both Foucault and Deleuze deliver their critiques—acts as if it is, itself, transparent and therefore *not* influenced by its own surrounding geo-political context which, in this case, is Europe. The Subject with a capital 'S' to which Spivak, herself, refers is meant and imagined to be the Subject of Europe, that geo-political entity which has sought to name, know, and, therefore, colonize its Other. In doing so, the Subject of Europe is, in fact, an imperial subject that has been historically constituted through the production of Europe's own Other, understood here in Spivak's own writing "[...] as the Self's shadow" (75). But this constitutive process involving the constitution of the Subject of Europe through the production of Europe's Other institutes a suspended state of ostensible transparency whereby the Subject of Europe frames the Other of Europe as simply *being* Other and, therefore, not connected to or

being a part of the imagination and necessary production of the Subject, itself. The relation that exists between the two—between the Subject and its constituted Other—in addition to the whole entire constitutive process, itself, are both hidden away.

This move to transparency is what ends up sustaining and ensuring the reproduction of the Subject with a capital S. Spivak, then, points out to us the fact that this ongoing production of Europe's Other is still present and at work in the writing and thinking of both Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. She, herself, writes that "[...] everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe" (75). In short, both Foucault and Deleuze are ignorant of their own upholding of the Subject as Europe in their own work, and Spivak gives us a different perspective from which to think.

Spivak then builds on Foucault's use of the idea of "epistemic violence" as he, himself, once deployed it. In the second section of that same 1988 text, she does so by pointing to what it is that Foucault, himself, both ignores and disavows. She writes that "[i]t is well known that Foucault locates epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century" (76). But she then goes on to suggest that Foucault's analysis of this particular type of "epistemic violence" is only "[...] part of the narrative of history in Europe and in the colonies" (ibid). Foucault, then, offers us and draws our attention to just *one part* of what is a much larger historical narrative and puzzle. What Foucault—just like Deleuze—often ignores and disavows in his own historical work is "[...] both the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor" on which Europe lives and rests (84). For Spivak, Foucault's focus and perhaps his vision, therefore, are a bit too narrow. His own work is not global or planetary in nature, but it is, instead, Eurocentric,

which is what makes his work contribute to the ignoring and subsequent disavowal of his very own geo-political context. As such, Foucault's analysis of epistemic violence, while useful, completely ignores and possibly forgets not only the rest of the globe but all of the European colonies that have since been created outside of the continent of Europe. For Spivak, this intellectual omission is problematic in that it enacts, again, the move to transparency.

Spivak then goes on to use the expression, "epistemic violence," to describe a case and an example wherein two key processes historically occurred around 1835 during the British colonization of India. The first process involved the stabilization and codification of Hindu Law. The second was with the establishment of English education. Within this specific spatio-temporal and colonial context of India-1835, epistemic violence is first found in the process by which Hindu law was changed from what was, initially, "[...] four texts that 'staged' a four-part episteme defined by the subject's use of memory [...]" into, what would later become, a more British "[...] polymorphous structure of legal performance" (77). At base, Spivak draws our attention to how the epistemic formation that characterized the former instantiation of Hindu law is forcibly transformed into that of another, a secondary epistemic formation born out of a new instantiation of Hindu law that was then based on a British model and British structure of legal performance instead of "the subject's use of memory." In a close reading of Thomas Babington Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian education' from the same year of 1835, Spivak locates epistemic violence in the very process by which a class of persons was forged and then cultivated in order to function as interpreters. She quotes Macaulay when he, himself, asserts the need for people who are "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (ibid). This group of Indian indigenous elites, known as the Brahmins, formed an Indian intelligentsia that would, in turn, not only help to mediate between the English governors and

“[...] the millions whom [they] govern” but “[...] to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.”⁵ As part of the much larger educational transformation of India, these Indian indigenous elite intellectuals would work with British scholars to birth the disciplinary formation of Sanskrit Studies, a field “[...] whose authoritative scholars matched the epistemic violence of the legal project” (ibid).

Spivak ultimately uses the expression “epistemic violence” in her own text to describe the subsequent subjugation of (local) knowledges, their disqualification as being inadequate, and the establishment of a normative explanation and narrative of reality. But she also provides her own indirect definition of epistemic violence, describing it as “[...] the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (76). What is not made immediately explicit here in Spivak’s definition but remains rather implicit and known throughout the article, is the global imperial context in which this epistemic violence is manifested and then defined. Western European imperial powers—especially the British empire in this case—have played an historical role as the ones who have created such a “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogenous project.” The “project,” mentioned here, is imperial Europe’s—and more specifically imperial Britain’s—many different colonies around the planet whose aim is to “constitute the colonial subject as Other.” The now colonized subject undergoes, in short, a process of forced transformation, a process of metamorphosis into an identitarian relationship with the Other, the mirrored image of the Subject.

But what exactly does Spivak mean in her own use of the Subject and the Other with the distinct capitalization of each? We get a hint here in this definition of hers of Spivak having

worked with Jacques Derrida whose own scholarship was, itself, also concerned with something called “the Subject.” What I, myself, think Spivak as well as Derrida both mean by their use of “the Subject” with a capital S is that this was a category which was created and born out of the historical triumph of a secular and rational Humanism that occurred in the wake of the death of God. The Subject would seem to have been born and later grown alongside the birth of Man, himself. In those early days of an incipient modernity, the colonial subject who was located outside of Europe would be considered the Other. It was the imperial subject of Europe, itself, who would be considered the Subject with a capital S. It would be this Subject who would assume and thus assert the responsibility as well as legitimacy of representing and, therefore, constituting the Other, and I do mean to intentionally repeat and extend Spivak’s use of the capitalized versions and meanings of “the Other” by rendering explicit and thus adding its constitutive counterpart: “the Subject.”

Others have since built off of Spivak’s work, having further defined and elaborated on the expression of “epistemic violence.” Khan and Naguib, for example, define “epistemic violence” within the context of global business ethics as “[... involving] silencing, subjugating, diluting, and distorting Global South voices and the variegated epistemic resources from which these voices are marshaled [...]” (91). While this may be true, and while this may be useful to a degree in terms of providing us with a more digestible definition, there is the work of other scholars who help to illuminate different aspects of epistemic violence if only by studying it in different contexts.

Black feminist philosopher, Kristie Dotson, as another example, builds on Spivak’s work by studying and defining “epistemic violence” within the context of testimony. She, herself, writes that “[e]pistemic violence in testimony is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an

audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (238). This is a rather useful expression here: “pernicious ignorance.” She then elaborates on this description, stating that it is “[...] a type of pernicious ignorance that occurs when dominant hearers refuse to meet marginalized speakers ‘halfway’ or on their own or some compromised epistemic turf between them” (ibid). In its more extreme forms, it is a “[...] a type of violence,” she writes and further explains, “that attempts to eliminate knowledge possessed by marginal subjects” (ibid). The expression, “epistemic violence” for Dotson, has ultimately been helpful insofar as it has, quite like for Khan and Naguib, been “[...] a way of marking the silencing of marginalized groups” (236).

Claudia Brunner has started the transdisciplinary research project dedicated to “Theorizing Epistemic Violence.” As Brunner explains it on the home page of her website, this is a type of violence “[...] that is rooted in knowledge, itself: in its formation, shape, set-up, and effectiveness. [...] Epistemic violence” she writes “is deeply embedded in our knowledge as well as in the ways on [sic] which we strive towards it.”⁶

But this is but one definition among many other definitions of “epistemic violence” that are available on Brunner’s website. Take, for example, the next definition below Brunner’s by Sebastian Garbe. They define “epistemic violence” as “[...] a forced delegitimation, sanctioning and repression [...] of certain possibilities of knowing, going hand in hand with an attempted enforcement [...] of other possibilities of knowing” (ibid). In Garbe’s definition, epistemic violence points us to it being more than just “rooted in knowledge” as Brunner put it. For Garbe, “epistemic violence” also involves relations of power that exist between what they call different “possibilities of knowing”—be they relations of “forced delegitimation, sanctioning and repression,” or “an attempted enforcement.”

Even further down, we get yet another definition of “epistemic violence.” This time, it is Enrique Galván-Álvarez who describes it in the following way:

“Epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, I would argue, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination.” (12)

Galván-Álvarez’s definition of epistemic violence not only links to it issues of an imperial political economy and the military, but it also brings into relief the role that “epistemic frameworks” perform—such as legitimizing and enshrining—“those practices of domination.”

But epistemic violence takes on a particular shape when enacted under the influences and forces of neoliberalism. As such, the conjuncture of epistemic violence and neoliberalism produces a specific form of epistemic violence known as “neoliberal epistemic violence.” Primož Krašovec’s historical work on neoliberal epistemology helps us better understand this specific type of epistemic violence by “[...] show[ing] that neoliberal economic doctrine is inseparable from its basic epistemological [sic] theories and presuppositions” (63). They go on to provide “[a] survey of key early neoliberal thinkers and ideas [...]” that provides for a better understanding of the specifically neoliberal view for “[...] how knowledge is (and ought to be) socially produced, distributed and used” (63). According to Krašovec’s reading of Frederick Hayek’s thinking, a 20th century Austrian-British neoliberal economist, “neoliberal epistemology” conceives of and understands (the ontological status of) knowledge to be “[...] by definition fragmentary, imperfect and socially dispersed” (66). For Hayek as proponent of the

neoliberal view, knowledge is not unified but broken up, “fragmentary”; it isn’t perfect but “imperfect,” and it isn’t centralized but “socially dispersed.” Hayek viewed the free market, moreover, as the “[...] objective social institution, capable of integrating and coordinating dispersed and imperfect knowledges [...]” (67). In Hayek’s view, the market is seen as more ideal than the University. Krašovec then offers a rather illuminating point that reveals how “[s]ubjects, emerging from neoliberal schools, can well be creative, developed as persons, and intellectually sophisticated, but they are still politically conformist and ‘adjustable’ future ‘stakeholders,’ who see life as an economic challenge and no longer believe in a possibility of a collective political emancipation” (78).

With the globalization of neoliberalism since the 1970s, this particular epistemology known as “neoliberal epistemology,” has become globally dominant with the rise and spread of global capitalism. As neoliberal epistemology also rose to power, it has assumed the status of the *only* (legitimate) epistemology and therefore subjugated and maintained the oppression of those that participate in other ways of knowing, whether they be other epistemologies or not.

In order to better explain this conjuncture of neoliberalism and epistemic violence in the more contemporary moment of the early twenty-first century, I return to and lean on the relatively recent work of Grace Kyungwon Hong. In her 2015 book, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, Hong provides us with a useful definition of neoliberalism in her opening chapter titled “Neoliberal Disavowal and the Politics of the Impossible.” After an expository reading of a transcription of a talk that the famous, Audre Lorde—a self-identified “Black, Lesbian, Feminist”—once gave at a Malcom X Weekend event held at Harvard University in 1982, Hong defines “[...] neoliberalism foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past” (7 and

14). She goes on to immediately add that “[i]t does so by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death” (ibid). I want to unpack a few of these definitions immediately here below.

Hong’s discussion of neoliberalism relates to my own discussion here on neoliberal epistemic violence in two major ways. The first way in which Hong’s work relates to my own is in how she understands neoliberalism. That is, neoliberalism, for Hong, is not *just* an economic and/or political system, which is often the dominant way in which neoliberalism is framed, discussed, and/or understood. Neoliberalism is thus also an epistemological system, and, for Hong, neoliberalism as an epistemological structure hinges on the specific act of “disavowal.” What I interpret her to mean by this is that neoliberalism is an epistemological structure of and for knowing that, itself, claims to “know”—rather ironically and even tragically—through the often twinned acts of *ignoring* and *forgetting*. A “disavowal,” etymologically speaking, is the “denial, rejection, repudiation, action of refusing to acknowledge.” The verb, “to disavow,” means to “refuse to avow; disclaim knowledge of, responsibility for, or connection with” (Harper). Neoliberalism, then, claims to know something precisely through the ironic and tragic act of disavowal, through the denial and the rejection of an acknowledgement. It purports to know through the refusal to avow, to ostensibly know by disclaiming “knowledge of, responsibility for, or connection with.” Neoliberal epistemology is a particular way of knowing that knows by *not knowing*.

The second way in which Hong’s definition of neoliberalism relates to my own discussion on epistemic violence is in how she, herself, links it to both race and gender. Hong understands neoliberalism as not just “an epistemological structure of disavowal” but also as a

“[...] means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past” (7). That is, neoliberal epistemology disavows racial and gendered violences, and it is able to disavow these particular kinds of violences by chronopolitically framing them as *belonging to the past*. Despite the fact that these racial and gendered violences are phenomena that occur *within the present*, they are discursively consigned to the past, temporalized in a certain kind of way that renders them outside of the present and the now. Specifically *neoliberal* forms of epistemic violence, then, present themselves as the insidious enactment of a particular kinds of chronopolitics, or a politics of time that quickly and readily weaves itself into a politics of history.

I use the expression, “epistemic violence,” then and in what follows, in order to name, describe, and then analyze a few features of the film. These epistemologically violent features occur not only within the narrative of the film—that is, in its content and/or its diegesis—but in certain formal elements of the film, itself. These latter and more formal elements include largely visual aspects of the film such as the camera’s gaze as well as its point of view. I use the expression, “epistemic violence,” therefore, to draw out and bring our attention to several different aspects of the film’s content as well as its composition, or form.

But my use of and focus on “epistemic violence” in what follows doesn’t just stop at the film’s content and form. It also aims to name, describe, and analyze the epistemic violence that the filmmaker, himself, has exemplified. I refer to this as a specifically *neoliberal* way of knowing, one that enacts a specifically *neoliberal* form of epistemic violence. It is here that I leave my discussion of the film’s content and the film’s form in order to now turn to several interviews that others have done with Laurent Cantet. In these interviews with Cantet, I pay attention to and explore the ways in which he conceives of not only History with a capital ‘H’ but Haitian history in particular.

II - on the neoliberal epistemic violence of the film's diegesis

In this second section, I turn to and analyze the neoliberal epistemic violences that are a part of the film's diegesis. It is here where I pay specific and close attention to four scenes within the movie itself. Those particular scenes are 1) the dinner conversation; b) the four soliloquies; c) the conflict between Ellen and Brenda; and d) the later epiphanies. These are all scenes wherein we, as viewers, are better able to learn, across different spatio-temporal moments in the diegesis, much more about what it is that each of the main characters—Brenda, Ellen, Sue, and Albert—*desires*. We can also use them as opportunities to reflect on and learn from what it is that these characters *know* and *don't know*. In analyzing these particular scenes in the film, we are, in other words, better able to understand what it is that these characters in the film—and by extension Cantet as the filmmaker—are *conscious* and *unconscious* of both individually as well as as a collective. The goal here then is to offer up a critical epistemological analysis of the film that is attuned to desires, knowledges, and (un)consciousnesses of the characters in addition to the filmmaker, himself. I do so in order to ultimately account for the epistemological conditions of possibility that will eventually allow for them *all* to commit to a form of specifically neoliberal epistemological violence which involves the complete disavowal of—that is, again, the ignoring, forgetting, and ultimately abandoning of any further inquiry into—the premature deaths and murders of both Legba and Jane Doe.

the dinner conversation

The dinner conversation scene offers a rich opportunity to better know and come to understand the desires, knowledges, and consciousnesses of the three globally northern white women tourists. In this specific scene, the characters Brenda, Ellen, and Sue all share a dinner together as they discuss, problem solve, and even theorize about what is, for them, a variety of increasingly transgressive topics. These topics include their individual and collective relationships to things like sex/love, being middle aged and the fact that they are yet still ageing. There is also the mutual interest they all share in race, sex, and racialized sexuality. Because of their playful engagement with transgressive topics such as these, this particular conversation allows for the temporary surfacing and revelation of deeper truths, truths that are otherwise left buried and/or kept out of sight. As viewers who are watching and listening in on this conversation of theirs, we learn a bit more about another and perhaps more pertinent mystery: *why* it is exactly that all three of these white women tourists have chosen to travel *here* and *now*, to Haiti in the supposedly late years of the 1970s. And so we as viewers and eavesdroppers come to learn more throughout the course of this conversation about *what* it is that has driven them to come together in the *here* and *now*, as they sit and have dinner together on the beach-facing restaurant patio of *La Petite Anse*.

I think it important to start with a general overview and arc of the dinner conversation as it shifts from one topic to the next. The three women begin with an initial light-hearted joking about their individual and collective lack of attraction to (heterosexual) white men. The conversation then shifts to Ellen who begins to offer up more of her own serious and experiential wisdom—which is a wisdom that is mainly directed at Brenda who is framed in this entire scene as the more innocently and sexually naïve of the three of them. The conversation then turns to their attempts to theorize the potential reasons for their collective attraction to the specific

difference that is racialized sexuality in Haiti. They finally move on to giving each other further advice for contending with the shame involved in the payment and/or remuneration they give in exchange for access to what they refer to as “love/sex,” as my fellow scholar, Shirley Tate, has noted. But this ideal to which they cling—to “love/sex” is, in reality, a surplus of commodified and racialized black Haitian sexuality, the erotic and spiritual labor of those who are made moribund.

Because the conversation begins *in media res*, we, as viewers, aren’t given access to the entire conversation as a whole. Instead, the scene first opens up onto a shot of Brenda, Ellen, and Sue all sitting together on the patio at night right as they are in the middle of telling a joke. They laugh and are having what seems to be a fairly good time. Ellen, in spite of her distance from the camera, is first seen and heard teasing Brenda a bit: “Ooooo. We don’t know you yet, my dear!” Sue, too, quickly follows up with a playful but vague assertion to Brenda who appears slightly shocked and dismayed: “You will see.” What is immediately clear, here, is that the three of them have become and are currently becoming much more intimate with one another. This is in spite of the fact that at up to and until this very moment there has been an accruing tension in the competition between Brenda and Ellen over (access to) Legba.

And so straight from the beginning, the stage and tone of the dinner conversation scene are set for what is to come: a temporary and collective ritual of social transgression that allows for the three of them to discuss some of their deeper and more difficult truths. This conversation has now become fertile with the potential to more openly share, hold, and collaboratively illuminate each other’s more unconscious secrets. This relatively new safety, found among globally northern and fellow ageing white women who are all alone together abroad, provides for the opportunity to then confront some individual as well as potentially collective feelings of

shame and/or guilt. And they are able to do so while playfully rebelling and reveling in the more unbridled pursuit of their own sexual pleasure while here on vacation as single and financially-free, globally northern white women tourists at the small resort and cove of *La Petite Anse* in the globally southern city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

But we must remember as we proceed to focus on this conversation between the three white women tourists that these white women, themselves, are not the only one's in the room. After the initial shot of the three of them joking and laughing as they dine, the camera suddenly cuts away to remind us of not only everyone else surrounding them who are also dining, but there is an emphasis placed on Albert's presence who, like a vigilant hawk, is still there in the kitchen overseeing and overhearing parts of their entire conversation. We are reminded here, as he prepares a few cocktails, that he and his fellow Haitians are all politically and economically coerced into working for them—in spite of their class differences with Albert being the employer and they being his employees. They must all serve and take care of these globally northern tourists of which these three white women—or “les Américaines” [the (feminine/female) Americans] as he will later refer to them—form a major part. At base, it is their United Statesian and Canadian tourist dollars that pay both him and his staff a living wage. They are, in other words, representatives of a group of people who have economic and political power over Haiti and Haitians. From Albert's perspective, we can read their entire conversation through the lens and/or the framework of them being (unconscious) agents of a neocolonial project.

It is this shift of focus—from the three women onto Albert—that reminds us of the two different perspectives that are co-present here in the film. That is to say, the regular flights away from home that these white (heterosexual) women tourists take as well as their subsequent stay here in Haiti have two different meanings depending on whose perspective it is and through

which we, as spectators, come to think about them. For the women—as we will soon learn in greater detail—they are all in search of something that they can't get and satiate when back home. They are all in pursuit of satisfying, expressing, and/or un-repressing a desire that is and has been otherwise structurally denied to them. For these white (heterosexual) women tourists, their flight and stay here at *La Petite Anse* are about attempting to heal their own relationships to love/sex as ageing white women originally from different locations within the global north. For them, Haiti presents an environment and opportunity that allows for them to reclaim and tap back into their own erotic power—if only temporarily. For Albert, a local Haitian, their flight and stay mean something quite different. They are, first and perhaps foremost, part of an economic imperative, part of his job and livelihood. It is he who drives them both to and from the airport. We witness him first pick up Brenda in the beginning of the film and drop off Ellen at the very end. Their stay and patronage at his resort is what help him pay the bills and put food on his own table. But—as we will also come to learn much later with Albert's soliloquy—is that he also sees and understands their flight and stay in Haiti, second, for what it is both historically and in its much larger neocolonial force and form. For Albert, these globally northern white women—while maybe nice and sweet interpersonally—are nevertheless still tourists. They are, therefore and fundamentally, agents of a much larger matrix and neoimperial formation—even though he never calls it this explicitly. They are, to him and many other local Haitians, but part of the latest stage of the ongoing neocolonization of Haiti that began, at least, with the U.S. invasion and occupation that occurred in 1915—the memory of which he has retained through the stories that his grandfather used to tell him.

And yet, funnily enough, both of these perspectives are true, however contradictory or antithetical they may initially seem to be. The white women tourists are looking for sexual

freedom and awakening while at the same time contributing to the neocolonization of the country and, therefore, its status as a deathworld. It is in seeing and understanding them together that we, as spectators, gain a better understanding of the much larger and complex situation in which these two groups of people are deeply entangled.

When the camera shifts back to the patio table, it is now directly beside and behind the three women as they begin to discuss one of Ellen's main issues as well as her desire. There is a notable increase in intimacy here. After their initial period of teasing Brenda and establishing some camaraderie, Sue starts off the conversation with a more serious sounding tone. With Ellen framed in the center of the screen, she listens to Sue who attempts to pleadingly reassure her that she is, indeed, attractive. Sue proclaims: "Oh, come on Ellen! I am sure that in this room there are lots of men who are attracted to you." This remark hints at one of the seemingly ongoing threads that have been running throughout this whole entire conversation prior to our arrival: Ellen's declining attractiveness as the older woman among the three of them.

But Ellen quickly and playfully—perhaps even deflectingly—counters Sue's statement by shifting the focus onto sex. "Oh, I'm telling you," she says, "they aren't in the least bit horny." She then cheekily smiles and waits for their reactions. It feels safe to assume, here and now, that this conversation has been about their—and mainly Ellen's—relationship to not just her own "attractiveness" but to "sex" and "love" as well. Sue smirks in a sort of mutual recognition that what Ellen has so comedically stated isn't exactly wrong. Sue seems to agree, at least tacitly, that (heterosexual) white men "aren't in the least bit horny."

In recognizing that this truth about sex is both landing but also somewhat touchy, Ellen leans in as if to tell a rather taboo-oriented joke. As a way of easing the social (and subtly sexual) tension at the table, Ellen says to the others that "When I see them on the beach, they remind me

of big white whales wallowing in the sand. More red than white, in fact. But red whales can't be horny now, can they?"

The camera then quickly cuts to Brenda who blatantly stares with a mixture of being both mesmerized and in a state of awe. She scoffs and laughs with a bit of disbelief and embarrassment. In this very moment, she, like Sue, also knows that what Ellen says and jokes about *is true*, but she does not want to say or speak that truth outright just yet. And I think this is because she has yet to admit it to herself let alone to the others. Nevertheless, her body language betrays her as Ellen's taboo joke and social transgression gets us closer to yet another deep truth.

Brenda looks briefly and bashfully down before she then looks back up to Ellen who slightly shifts the topic and tone of the conversation to something that is much more serious in attitude. As if divulging a nugget of wisdom from her own personal experience, Ellen suddenly declares that "[i]f you're over forty and not as dumb as a fashion model the only guys you interest, are natural born losers or husbands whose wives are cheating on them. So thanks a lot!" At this point in the dinner conversation, Ellen shares her own experiential knowledge from being an older—and yet fellow—aging white woman. In sharing this wisdom, she sees—and perhaps foresees—in these other white women tourists, who are just a bit younger than her, a similar plight that they too will probably have to face one day—if not already. She offers this declaration to the those also sitting at the table—delivered with just a cheeky bit of transgressive humor—as a truth to be heard as well as received about what it is that she has learned regarding not only herself, but how the dominant patriarchal culture ruled by those very same “white whales wallowing in the sand” has the power to not only prematurely desexualize her but to also limit her options of and access to, what she would like to be, a pool of attractive and sexually-available men (who are horny).

It is with Ellen and this now-revealed truth that we are then invited to better understand the largely hidden reason behind her specific lack of sexual desire for white men. Her comedic-turned-serious form of criticism concerned with the horniless white men that surround her, “wallowing in the sand,” stems from her own emotional and spiritual wounds from historically being in particularly disempowering relation(ship)s with them. She has learned how to cope with this dynamic by expressing her not-entirely-processed feelings about them through a comedic wit that is accompanied by a contained intellectual rage—of which we learn much more in her upcoming monologue and confession. For now, there is a deeper, lingering sort of lament here, one that concerns the socio-cultural effect, the emotional and spiritual impact, of her own desexualization, devaluation, and erotic limitation. In short, Ellen has revealed an otherwise obscured connection among age, sex, and sexuality for older (heterosexual) white women who are living in a modern Western world that is dominated by the white male (hetero)patriarchal culture of the global north.

As Ellen divulges a somewhat harsh and sad truth, Brenda seems to detect a sense of self-loathing in her. And so Brenda attempts to reach out to her with care. She subsequently asserts that she thinks Ellen is “beautiful,” to which Ellen rejoins with the fact that she is “[...] fifty five years old, kiddo.” But Brenda reasserts the fact that she does find Ellen to be “quite beautiful.” The two then share a somewhat awkward but touching and even erotic moment of connection, causing Ellen to pause and then sincerely thank Brenda for the compliment and the reminder. “Well, thank you, Brenda,” Ellen says as she smiles with an uneasy grin.

The conversation then shifts yet again, but this time from being explicitly about the taboo of sex to being about the taboo of sex *and* race. Sue, in keeping with the socially transgressive vibe that Ellen has already established, brings back the main thread of the conversation while

adding a slight twist. “But at the same time, let’s be honest,” she says, “here, I don’t even notice whites. They’re pretty insipid beside the blacks, no?” In looking at Ellen and then to Brenda, Sue delivers a slight grin as she talks. She then leans down to take another bite of her salad in a more sensual-like way. The next stage has now been set for the transgression of yet another taboo and the illumination of yet deeper truths to come. Sue’s statement reveals her own desire for a specifically *racialized* form of sex and sexuality. But she is not alone here at the table. No, she has merely articulated what was collectively latent.

These white women tourists aren’t *just* here because of a lack of sex with white North American men; they’re also here because they get access to sex with black Haitian men. Ellen, still feeling transgressive and playful, chimes in to play along with Sue: “If blacks turn you on that much, you must have a ball in Montreal. There’s no shortage of blacks up there.” Sue willingly agrees and readily affirms Ellen’s astute observation: “Well, that’s for sure! At the plant in my workshop, there are at least *ten*.” Sue emphasizes this number in a way that seems to convey that she does, in fact, *know* all ten of the black men at the plant in her workshop—maybe well, maybe not. Nevertheless, the point is that Sue does not find *any* of them attractive.

Brenda, in picking up on this somewhat obscure point that Sue makes, then verbalizes a statement/question that seeks to gain further clarification. “And you never dated any of them?” she asks. Appearing both confident and quite self-knowing, Sue asserts: “No way! At home, black guys don’t interest me.” Her face suddenly lights up and that very same grin from once before returns as she says in an increasingly slow and punctuated way: “Here, they’re really *very* different.” Sue glances at Ellen and then back to Brenda before raising her eyebrows as if to hint at actively participating in what appears to be a somewhat taboo sexuality and secret: globally northern white women who regularly escape to the global south in order to have sex with black

Haitian men. Sue has now taken this conversation to a certain ledge and then she has tantalizingly left all three of them there, daring them to dive deeper.

At this moment in the conversation, this second social breach of taboo allows for the discussion to turn from not just sex to race, but the intersection of sex, sexuality, and race. We, as spectators, may come to better understand at this point in the film that Sue's desire—like the shared desires of these other white heterosexual middle-aged women at the table—is not just for specifically *racialized* difference but for a racialized *sexual* difference. And it is the specific racialized sexual difference that Sue finds *here*—in the spatial and geographical context of Haiti—to be “really very different” and therefore much more desirable than the seemingly *unsexualized* racial difference that she finds at home. Sue's discussion here also participates in and (re)produces a spatialized and globalized division between those who are racialized “at home,” meaning in Montreal, Canada, and those who are racialized “here,” in Haiti. Lastly, Sue implies through the playful raising of her eyebrows in addition to her more sensual eating of the food on her fork that the racialized ones who are located “here” in Haiti are different from the racialized ones who are located “back there” at home precisely because of their sexuality. A difference in sexuality is what marks the difference between the south and the north. Black Haitian male sexuality, in other words, is framed as desirable whereas black Canadian male sexuality is framed as “uninteresting” and therefore, by implication, not desirable.

While Sue's observation and desire for racialized sexuality *here* in Haiti as opposed to back *there* in Montreal both lands and lingers as a collective truth now exposed and laid bare upon this table top and patio, it is yet still enshrouded in a much greater mystery. What exactly is it that makes *this* specific difference, this *racialized sexual* difference that is black Haitian male sexuality, not only *so different* but a difference that is sexually desirable? What, in short, is the

reason behind desiring such a specific type of difference, a *racialized sexual* difference?

Whatever the answer may be, Sue doesn't immediately tell. Instead, her statement leaves both Brenda and Ellen eager to pursue and offer up their own answers.

And so begins a brief attempt to theorize the reason for their individual and now collectively recognized desire for racialized sexual difference. In light of Sue's assertion that "[h]ere, they're really *very* different," Brenda is suddenly struck with the ostensible veracity of Sue's statement. It is as if, just as Sue finishes speaking, she experiences a small and somewhat vague epiphany. She quickly ponders aloud and attempts to use reason as a way to account for their specific difference. In both perking up and rejoining with an increasingly staccato-like curiosity, Brenda states the following: "[i]t's true. You're right! I don't know why!?" She then turns her head as if confused but proceeds to think it through still aloud in front of both Sue and Ellen: "Is it because they're...they're closer to nature? Is it... is it the sun?! Anyway, they're more...gracious." She says this last line, especially the word "gracious," with a sense of acceptance and respect as she nods her head with satisfaction in having seemingly thought through and found a legitimate explanation. If we take Brenda's use of "gracious," here, to mean its most common definition, then she understands their racialized sexual difference to be not so much a product of the more structural relations of power/knowledge but as something that stems from nature. Their difference, according to Brenda's logic, is therefore something that makes them *naturally* courteous, kind, and pleasant. What she does not seem to consider or be aware of, though, is the historical role that Eurorope and the U.S. have both played as colonizing and neocolonizing powers here in Haiti. And so this lack of historical knowledge is what now informs her present relations with and understanding of black Haitian male sexuality more generally and Legba more specifically. They are gracious, not because they are closer to nature,

but because they are economically and politically coerced into performing graciousness. They must please and be pleasant in order to survive and make a living in an environment that has abandoned them and otherwise left them for dead.

The discourse on Haiti that seems to repeat and develop along with this group of globally northern white women tourists is that Haiti is a space wherein everything is “different.” And they encourage each other to lean into that difference, to transgress and accept it. While Sue seems to revel in this difference and what it permits, Ellen seems to simply enjoy it. Unlike the other two, Brenda is learning to lean into and accept it, despite the clear embarrassment and/or shame that she regularly feels. Here, where everything is different, these three women are invited to let loose, be free, and forego the societal norms that they may still carry along with them psychically, spiritually, and/or behaviorally despite being so far from home. And so for them, Haiti is not viewed as part of their own world. Far from it. Haiti, for them, is seen as the exception; it is a realm that is marked as existing *outside* of the normal dimensions of both space and time. Here, Haiti is seen as different, and it is precisely that difference that both lures and sanctions their transgression(s).

The discourse on Haiti in which these women participate also approximates Anne McClintock’s whole entire notion of anachronistic space. In her 1995 book, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, McClintock writes that “History becomes shaped around two opposing directions: the progress forward of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason. The other movement presents the reverse: regression backward to what I call anachronistic space [...] from white, male adulthood to a primordial, black degeneracy usually incarnated in women.” Under neoliberalism, however, the once primordial black degeneracy of black (heterosexual) male sexuality is now commodified. For

these white women tourists, their economic access now grants them a certain kind of rebellious freedom as well as the opportunity to satisfy their own otherwise restrained and/or unsatisfied desires. It allows them to venture outside of the expected confines of their sex/love relationships with predominately and globally northern white heterosexual males. They therefore desire, seek out, and want access to what is otherwise and historically considered to be a form of “black degeneracy” located within the global south.

In spite of their desire for and celebration of black Haitian male sexuality, these three women still participate in the hypersexual stereotype of black Haitian male sexuality and its own related (neo)colonial discourse on Haiti. Moreover, this discourse of theirs participates in and maintains an underlying neoliberal epistemic violence. This knowledge formation frames Haiti as located outside of both normal space and normal time. As such, they too are located outside of normal space and normal time. Their collective interest in the ready availability of young black Haitian men as a means to satisfy their own desires for racialized sex and racialized sexuality is still invested—however modified—in the figure of “the primitive” as the (neo)colonial Other to the modern (neo)imperial Subject. Altogether, this conversation constructs an image of black Haitian male sexuality as both needed, desirable, potentially primitive, and commodified. It is desirable given its difference, as distinct from the racialized sexuality of black men back home up in the north. In short, their collective belief in a spatialized racial sexual difference participates in a long and ongoing historical way of thinking that has located and framed Caribbean peoples as primitive.

After Brenda’s attempt at theorizing racialized sexual difference, Ellen assumes, yet again, the position of a more cunning, wittier, and wiser knower. She starts by playfully and straightforwardly asserting that “[t]he big difference, sweetheart, is that here you see them

stripped to waist.” Sue is heard laughing immediately on the side while Ellen sits there and smirks. She has cut straight through the more romantic and idealistic reason that Brenda—now so seemingly naive—has just put forth. In response, Brenda also laughs but quickly turns bashful. Ellen has, yet again, playfully transgressed the social norms of the dinner conversation with her direct address and rather astute observation that Brenda’s interest is not so much in their “graciousness” but again in their sexuality and capacity to have sex. She openly and unashamedly exposes Brenda’s lust—while implying her very own in addition to Sue’s. Despite Brenda’s attempt to hide it, Ellen intuitively knows this to be true.

Ellen then proceeds to dive deeper by metacognitively drawing her attention to Brenda’s own lack of self-knowledge. She asserts the following: “I know you don’t know, but I’m sure of it. And I’m also sure that’s precisely why you came back here.” The scene grows immediately tense but with an air of imminent revelation. Ellen, much more experienced and a bit wiser, is better able to see Brenda’s motivations much more clearly than she can potentially see them on her own. Brenda instantly scoffs in what may be a bit of disbelief. She is not ready for this truth. She is, instead, struck with the embarrassment of so candidly and crudely discussing the reason behind her own desire, her relationship to sex, and her own sexuality. She proceeds to hide her face within her right hand before rolling her eyes and avoiding eye contact. Ellen has, yet again, been able to reveal and lay yet another truth out and onto the table top.

But in response to Brenda’s reaction of dismay, Ellen turns much more caring and proceeds to offer her both wisdom and guidance. “So stop pretending. You didn’t come here just to get a nice tan. I mean, think of those cute guys, they’re a dime a dozen. Take your pick.” Ellen looks over to Sue with a somewhat devilish smirk. Sue is heard laughing yet again. With this attempt to connect with Brenda by also implicating herself, Ellen touches on and begins to dig up

the final layer of truth here: while these women may, indeed, be here for sex and racialized sex and sexuality in particular, they also have the economic means to easily afford it and readily procure it. They are, after all, as cheap as “a dime a dozen. Take your pick.” Brenda, a bit scandalized by all the frank conversation on sex and especially the idea of procuring and/or buying sex, says Ellen’s name as if to suggest that she has gone too far and crossed a certain threshold.

But Ellen pushes the conversation even further by addressing the situation metacognitively. She asks, “Am I shocking you? Why am I shocking you?” Brenda perks up and attempts to voice the reason for her quite visible state of shock. She stutters: “Well, it, it, it’s a bit...” But before she can finish, Ellen chimes in with what seems to be one more bit of wisdom as well as a more personal secret. She sits up and smiles before delivering a more serious kind of talk:

“Listen, I’m going to let you in on something: I’m crazy about love. Sex and love, I’m not really sure anymore. I always taught myself that when I’m old I’d pay young men to love me. I just didn’t think it was gonna happen so fast. Other than that, I have no problem with it. And Brenda—listen to me—you shouldn’t either. If you’re too shy to pay them, just give them gifts.”

With the tone of the conversation now having grown much more serious, Brenda sits quietly and bashfully with Ellen’s words. She tacitly recognizes and is being encouraged to accept how she—just like Ellen and Sue—is ultimately participating in a form of prostitution that is still too taboo to mention and name explicitly. In this small sermon, Ellen has reframed for Brenda her entire relationship with not just Legba but the many other young black Haitian men who are all so readily available to her. Brenda can buy, has bought, and continues to buy sex/love from

Legba today, but he is just one of the many local black Haitian sex workers. Without vocalizing anything, Brenda timidly looks up at both Ellen and Sue before lowering her head and continuing to silently eat. And so the dinner conversation scene ends.

Let's summarize by focusing on what we learn from this scene. Ellen's discussion of attraction and white men's lack of being horny largely disavows and yet hints at the role of race, Sue's later and more open discussion unites them in their differential and yet shared desires for the specific difference that is racialized sexual difference. It would initially seem, however, that, for Ellen, there is no spatial importance to her desire for racialized sexual difference.

At this point in the film what does each character know? Ellen seems to be the most knowledgeable here. She knows that they are all here for sex, romance, and/or love of some sort. She knows that this is due, in part, to how Western culture of the global North desexualizes them as white women after a certain age. She also knows herself, possessing a good degree of self-knowledge, as well as some aspects of Brenda. Sue comes in second as the most knowledgeable. She possesses another good degree of self-knowledge. She knows, for example, that she is here for not just sex but for *racialized sex* and *racialized sexuality* more specifically. Sue knows this because she is conscious of her own desire. While Brenda is undoubtedly a bit naive and refuses to name let alone admit her own attraction and desire aloud, she is slowly coming into greater consciousness about just why exactly it is that she has returned to Haiti. I do think that Brenda is quite intuitively aware of Ellen's own lack of self-love and the emotional and spiritual difficulty she has with feeling undesirable as an ageing white woman.

What does each character not know? Brenda—often in shock, dismay, and disbelief throughout the entire dinner scene conversation—doesn't seem to know much in relation to the other women. While she does offer up a brief explanation for the reason behind the young guys'

racialized sexual difference, she, herself, doesn't speak much throughout the majority of the conversation. It would also seem to be the case, though, that Ellen still does not know the fact that Brenda has come back to Haiti specifically for Legba. She doesn't know about Brenda's entire backstory like we have come to as viewers.

What do we glean from what it is that they, themselves, know collectively? Well, they collectively know, because they have made it explicit, that they are all here in search of some sort of sex, romance, and/or love. They also collectively know that Brenda is specifically here for Legba, but so, too, is Ellen. It would seem that they collectively know that Sue is here for Neptune as well.

What do they not know collectively? What they don't seem to know collectively is that they are all here to heal in some way. For Ellen, she is looking to heal from the sexual rejection and gendered oppression from her own culture back in Boston. For Brenda, it's healing from what she has been repressing and subsequently lost. Her touring the Caribbean is for sex/love is her searching for her own sense of self elsewhere. While Sue seems to be okay with the going and coming back and forth between Montreal and Haiti, one can sense a certain sadness in her alienation. All three of them are also ignorant of the current (neo)imperial and (neo)colonial conditions that make it possible for them to have access to and even be *here* in Haiti. They also ignore the long French imperial and colonial history of Haiti. It is also safe to say that none of them know that Legba will ultimately be murdered and, therefore, die. They are completely unaware of the morbidity that surrounds the small resort of *La Petite Anse* as well as how their lives are so soon about to change. Collectively speaking, the erotic empowerment of these three globally northern and middle-aged white women tourists, provides for the conditions of an

unawareness and obscuring of their own collective neoimperial power in the specific form of political and economic domination.

the four soliloquies

The four soliloquies are unevenly dispersed segments that occur at various points throughout the film. These soliloquies don't appear in Lafférière's original text, but sections of that text do appear in many of the film's soliloquies. In the film, they mainly range from appearing in the early to middle parts, and they interrupt the otherwise realist narrative and flow. These scenes offer greater insight into each of the main characters' desires and secrets, their knowledges and even worldviews. Each soliloquy begins with a title slide on which the name of the corresponding character appears in white, and over which we begin to hear their soliloquy. Staged as rather intimate scenes between the main character and us as spectators, the soliloquies each involve one of the main characters either facing and speaking into the camera directly, having the camera peer into and gain visual access to their room, or having the camera follow them while ostensibly gaining mental access to their thoughts. As spectators, we are invited to listen to them, to come to know each one of them better and even empathize with them. We first witness Brenda's, followed by Ellen's, Sue's, and, finally, Albert's, the "only one of the black characters to be granted a narrative voice" (Greer). As I have already hinted at above, Legba is, rather noticeably, not given a soliloquy of his own despite being a major character in the film. Provided that this second section is dedicated to analyzing the epistemic violence of the film's diegesis, I expound of the lack of Legba's soliloquy in the third major section dedicated to analyzing the epistemic violence of the film's more formal aspects. In what immediately follows,

I provide readings of each of the characters' soliloquys arranged according to the same order in which they appear in the film.

The four soliloquies in Cantet's film are a bit odd and, therefore, they're also a bit curious. Other scholars, like Williams, have observed how "[...] the voice-over soliloquies have an ambiguous [sic] status within the film's diegesis. Are they benign interrogations or confessions, and if so, is the viewer being positioned as a judge who can apportion blame, or perhaps as a priest who can absolve? Our role is made deliberately unclear, a fact enforced by the distancing effect of the camera and the excessive length of shot" (168).

In providing soliloquies to all three of the white women characters—Brenda, Ellen, and Sue—in addition to Albert, I cannot help but notice and question the reason behind the complete lack of a soliloquy from Legba. As Williams writes, "[...] the native male gigolos enjoy no individual screenspace or voice-over whatsoever" (168). And yet Legba is, after all, one of the major characters within the film and the narrative. While this could be related to the fact that in the novel, there is no section and/or fragment with Legba's name. Instead we get to hear from the same others like Brenda, Ellen, Sue, and Albert. In the case of the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that one of the possible reasons for which we don't get to read a section and/or fragment by Legba is because he is dead. This would imply that the entire set of fragmented texts that we read take place after he is already dead. In the case of the film, however, I feel like we could have gotten to listen to a soliloquy by Legba, himself. Instead of an opportunity to listen in on voiced or thought thoughts of Legba with his own soliloquy, we only get a simplified version of him, a moribund figure and ghostly presence whose story can only be inferred because we don't hear from him directly.

Because of this lack of Legba's perspective, the film seems to betray its favoring and even privileging of the perspectives of the more respectable and bourgeois characters in the film. This is, however, a more formal element to which I will return in this chapter's third major section. This lack of a soliloquy is all the more curious given the few scenes in which the camera follows Legba when alone and venturing out into the city of Port-au-Prince. We have these more intrusive and gazey scenes and shots, but not once are we provided with any of Legba's thoughts.

Nor are there any soliloquies from any of Legba's fellow sex workers, such as Neptune or Eddy, or from the young and anonymous female resort workers. These working-class and non-respectable characters all function as part of the film and narrative's background. As a result, they remain simple and flat, their perspectives left unheard and unknown. Such perspectives would probably offer an entirely different perspective and therefore reading of the necroerotic phenomena and events that take place in and around the small resort of *La Petite Anse* and Haiti come to know the deeper truths about the more stigmatized, unrespectable and even criminalized laborers, such as the many sex workers around the resort.

Brenda's soliloquy

Brenda's soliloquy is the first to occur in the series of four total soliloquies scattered throughout the film. Taking place within the first half of the movie, Brenda's involves just her sitting alone on the bed in the room that she has rented here at Albert's small resort on her second trip to Haiti. The story she currently tells—here and now on this second trip—is a narration concerned with revisiting some of the events that occurred on her very *first* trip here to Haiti. Throughout the duration of her soliloquy, Brenda largely speaks to and looks at the camera

directly. While she does occasionally glance off to the side every now and again, she seemingly focuses on nothing and goes nowhere. Instead, she enters into a certain trance-like state that is not exactly deep, but rather a shallow one.

Brenda's soliloquy serves as a sort of confession while her room is the confessional. Her soliloquy involves her divulging what has been up to this moment the heretofore hidden, background story of how it is that she and Legba first met and then came to better know one another. And the story Brenda tells—like in many confessions and confessionals—reveals a much deeper, darker, and dangerous secret, the truth of which she finally pushes through to naming, narrating, and seemingly only beginning to process just what exactly it was that she had done to him. As somewhat priestly spectators mediated by the camera, into which she looks and at which she confesses, we ultimately learn that, while on her very first trip to the island with her husband, Mark, Brenda not only met and befriended Legba, but she also raped him. We therefore witness, throughout this scene, Brenda confess to as well as reckon with herself and the truth of the act of racialized sexual violence that she, herself, had committed.

What do we learn about what Brenda's desires from her confessional soliloquy? I think we learn three important and interconnected things. First, we understand something of what initially appears to be her desire for Legba. It is she who suggests that the two go swimming alone. It is she who begins to caress his stomach. It is she who removes his cock from his bathing suit.

But this desire for Legba starts to quickly turn into something different, something more like a desire for Legba's body. Entering into an almost trance-like state as if to vividly reimagine it, Brenda describes him as he originally lay there in his bathing suit basking in the sun while on a rock. "His body fascinated me" she recites before she further paints the imagery of his body the

moment. From her perspective she describes it in slow, sensual, and punctuated detail:

“long...lithe...muscular...” She closes her eyes and looks off into the distance. As if passionately ignited, she states “[h]is skin glistened. I couldn’t take my eyes off him.”

But as she goes on, we come to understand that Brenda’s desire is not so much a desire for Legba or even a desire for Legba’s body. It would seem that what Brenda really desires is to simply transgress. From the very beginning of her soliloquy, Brenda starts by recounting when she first came to the island with her husband, Mark, how the two of them met and befriended a young boy by the name of Legba, and how a sexual relationship later developed between them. We first hear the following: “The first time I came here was with Mark, my husband.” From this first spoken line—and as we will come to greater learn and know throughout the film—we already witness a developing pattern with Brenda. She has, historically speaking, played less of a dominant role in her relationship with Mark, her husband. The language she uses—coming “with Mark”—often reflects her assumption and performance of a more passive and observing role. It is this traditional performance of the white house-wife as more passive and observing that Brenda unconsciously desires to transgress. Let us remember that she is currently here in Haiti on her *second* trip, recounting this soliloquy on her own this time and, indeed, without her husband, Mark. She has returned to *La Petite Anse* by herself and is in active search of something. What exactly that something is, I don’t think she—nor do we—fully know just yet at this point in the film. Nevertheless, it becomes increasingly clear that Brenda possesses a deep desire to both reach and then transgress a certain threshold. An erotic threshold to be more specific, one that will grant her the ability to perform a new active and ignoring role.

So what is it that Brenda knows and is conscious of in this soliloquy? First, it would seem that she knows that when she first met Legba, he was both “young” and “shy.” In an unequivocal

manner, she first and quite pointedly remarks that “[t]he boy didn’t look a day over fifteen.” This confirms that she knows and knows well that he was young at the time. After beginning to have all of their meals with him, she also explicitly notes that “at the time, he was very shy.” So both young and shy. Second, Brenda knows that his body fascinated her.

What does Brenda not know and is unconscious of? In the first part of the monologue, it would seem that Brenda is initially unconscious of her desire for Legba. The main drive for meeting him is placed on her husband, Mark, who invites him over to their table in order to feed him. Here, she mainly assumes the role of the passive observer, noting many things: Albert’s annoyance with inviting Legba to the patio table, his age, his “pretty smile,” how much he ate. But she doesn’t seem to notice or be aware of her own desire for him. After spending all their meals with him, discussing his future, and having “kind of adopted him,” it isn’t until Brenda suggested that he go swimming with her that she begins to be aware. Lastly, Brenda is still quite unconscious of the neocolonial context in which she pursues her desires for Legba, Legba’s body, and to transgress. She is, therefore and by extension, unconscious of her neoimperial power.

In this moment, Brenda is contending with both the grief of having lost so many years without having ever experienced and achieved an orgasm as well as the guilt and shame in recognizing the cold and hard fact that she has also committed an act of sexual violence. With the camera now closer onto her face, she looks off and to the left while experiencing what seems to be a bit of shame and guilt. She closes her eyes, taking a minute to sit, cry, and collect herself. Having gained a little bit more of her composure, she continues in a more softened and exasperated tone: “He opened his eyes. He was exhausted too—shy, frightened. I kissed him all over...” She pauses and has a bit of difficulty in fully voicing what follows: “[h]e was crying.”

Brenda then proceeds to breakdown before looking upward and entering into yet another moment of recognition concerning just what exactly it was that she had done. She then places her right hand over her eyes and continues to sob. The film's thematic music and leitmotif come back, closing out the scene with Brenda spying on Legba—who we see is much older now and currently walking with Sue and Neptune—from behind her shaded and shuttered windows. This truth of having committed sexual violence as the cost for achieving her first orgasm is a truth that will not likely leave this room. It is a truth meant to be kept between us, the spectators, and Brenda, herself. And while it ultimately remains unclear—but is, at least, fairly implied—Legba, too, may have come to know and/or recognize this truth.

Brenda stares off into the distance before further recounting other things she so keenly noticed that first day of their encounter: “The boy didn’t look a day over 15. I especially noticed his pretty smile.” This statement will not yet initially appear to be as sinister as it may, in fact, be. Us spectators gain a bit more knowledge that helps to better frame this statement in the very next scene that is worth briefly mentioning here. In short, Brenda is repeating a certain sexually predatory behavior, the memory of which comes back to Legba in the present as he witnesses, identifies, and emotionally reacts to such a repetition and pattern of hers.

So what do we learn from this confessional soliloquy of Brenda's? Throughout the entire soliloquy, we witness Brenda come to better recognize and reckon with—perhaps through the very process of delivering this confessional-type soliloquy—the incredibly serious fact that she had and has committed a form of rape, of racialized sexual violence, as the very cost for finally achieving and experiencing her first orgasm. Brenda's soliloquy demonstrates the logic that informs as well as epistemically and hermeneutically hides the regular practice and act of rape that often occurs with sex tourism in a neocolonial context, such as Haiti.

Ellen's soliloquy

Ellen's soliloquy is the second to occur in the film's four soliloquies. This one takes place in the late early part of the film, and, like Brenda's, it involves just Ellen alone in her room. Instead of sitting on her bed, we see her initially standing at her window before she eventually walks over and sits down on the right side of her bed. Unlike Brenda and as we will increasingly learn, this trip for Ellen is but one of her normally scheduled summer trips to Haiti.

Like Brenda's soliloquy, Ellen's also takes the form of a confession. While it doesn't begin in the same way, we do hear Ellen's voiceover begin with the title screen. The camera doesn't begin with a shot of her but, instead, watches Legba as if through Ellen's eyes as he walks along the beach and finds a spot to lay down just after Albert has shooed him away from the patio yet again. The frame seems to transition over from simply being the camera's view to also assuming Ellen's gaze. Unlike Brenda's English soliloquy, Ellen delivers hers in French. She starts by recounting just how old she has recently turned: "J'ai eu cinquante-cinq ans le mois dernier" [I turned fifty-five years old last month]. Again, her age proves to be a point of contention for her. She then addresses and informs us spectators rather directly: "Laissez-moi vous dire qu'il n'y a rien à Boston pour les femmes plus de quarante ans. Ne me dites pas le contraire. J'ai fait plus d'une centaine de fois tous les bars de cette putain de ville snob" [Let me tell you that there is nothing in Boston for women older than forty. Don't tell me otherwise. I have gone to all of the bars of this snobby bitch of a town more than a hundred times]. At this point, we come to understand that Ellen does not feel at home when back in Boston. Her age as a woman 15 years older than the apparent cut-off line of 40, has made the city of Boston feel both

unwanting and even hostile toward her. After the title screen cuts away, we get a shot of Ellen staring out of her blinds, potentially watching Legba yet again.

We learn from Ellen's soliloquy that she desires three specific things. The first is quite clear: she desires Legba. Her soliloquy begins with a shot of her spying on Legba out of her bedroom window as he goes to lay out on a spot somewhere on the beach. She tells us, moreover, that "[m]ais vraiment, il n'y a rien qui puisse de près ou de loin ressembler à Legba" [but really, there is nothing here nor there that can come close to resembling Legba]. We learn, second, that Ellen has desired the south. She tells us that "[e]n fait, j'ai toujours été attirée par le sud, mais je n'avais jamais pensé à Port-au-Prince" [In fact, I have always been attracted to or lured by the south, but I have never thought of Port-au-Prince]. Haiti, however, wasn't exactly on her radar. "Pour moi, Port-au-prince c'était pour les ploucs. Ça n'existait pas. Un parc à béstiaux," she confesses. [For me, Port-au-Prince was for hicks. It didn't exist. A park for and full of beasts.] But after having come here every summer for the past six years, she has finally come to see the local area a bit otherwise. When she tells us that "il suffit que j'arrive ici pour me sentir enfin chez moi," we learn—somewhat implicitly—that she has also desired to feel at home. This is her third and final desire that is revealed to the viewer: a desire for home.

So what does Ellen's soliloquy reveal to us about what it is that she knows? It would seem that Ellen knows quite well that she is ageing. She knows, by extension, that her value is decreasing back home as an aging and educated white woman. She also knows that there is nothing there for her back in the metropolitan city of Boston in the global north. She knows that she hates the way that her female students are taught, and that she thinks of the girls as stupid. She says: "Ça me dégoûte." She also knows that Haiti is a nightmare. She considers it a "tas de fumier, un parc à bestiaux" [a dung heap, an animal park].

Ellen's soliloquy also reveals to us what it is that she doesn't seem to know. Ellen doesn't seem to be aware of the social, political, and economic—that is, neoimperial power—that she, herself, not only benefits from but wields and enacts. Ellen seems to be unconscious of her own social position as an educated woman as well as a French professor who is able to speak French. We see in the sermon she gives Legba that her seemingly benign attempt to help and/or protect him is, in fact, a contract both imposed with economic conditions and imbued with the power of U.S. citizenship and a U.S. passport.

Sue's Soliloquy

Sue's soliloquy is the third to occur in the series. It takes place around the middle part of the film, and it involves just Sue who—like in Ellen's soliloquy—is also initially at her window but then turns to sit in the middle of her bed while speaking directly into the camera. It seems unlikely that this is Sue's first trip. Without her ever mentioning it, she has the air of being a seasoned tourist. Sue's soliloquy, while yet another a confession in a confessional, is much more light-hearted than the others. It begins with her looking through her window and shudders while speaking in French. Unlike Ellen's wherein she spies on Legba, Sue spies on Ellen. She begins the soliloquy with an assessment of Ellen's personality here in Haiti as another piece of evidence that seems to make the case, for Sue, that everything here in Haiti is “different.”

So what do we learn about what it is that Sue desires from this soliloquy? We first learn through her short anecdote about sleeping with a coworker that she just desires sex and not marriage. We learn, second, that she desires Neptune. In fact, she confesses says that she loves him.

Sue knows—and seems to constantly reiterate—the “fact” that here everything is different. She begins her soliloquy with how Ellen is quite different here. Back in Boston, Sue imagines Ellen as “une femme discrète qui se pense différente des autres à cause de son petit accent anglais” [a discrete woman who thinks of herself as different because of her small English accent]. But here in Haiti, Sue declares, “[...] elle est comme le soleil; elle fait partie du paysage.” [She is like the sun; she is part of the landscape.] She concludes with another seemingly convincing piece of evidence that “[o]n n’est plus le même quand on arrive ici” [one is not the same when one arrives here]. But Sue also knows that she, too, feels different here. For her, she feels like a “papillon,” a butterfly that is “libre, vive, et sans attaches” [free, alive, and without attachments].

Like the others, Sue, too, seems to be unconscious of the neocolonialism in Haiti and the role she plays in it. She doesn’t seem to inquire too much into the poverty that surrounds her. Instead, she seems to simply accept it as it is.

Albert’s Soliloquy

Albert’s soliloquy is the fourth and final soliloquy of the series, and his is quite distinct from the rest. Instead of being in one of the “private luxury rooms” by himself, he is located in the back room of the kitchen while washing dishes among his fellow employees (Williams, 167). This distinction—between the repeated intimacy and afforded privacy of one’s own room for the three white women tourists and the lack of one for Albert—marks a certain lack of privacy and even brings up the question of why we might not get a soliloquy of Albert when he is at home, alone in his own bed, like the rest of them. Instead, we get a soliloquy of Albert while he is at

work attending to the many guests he has, including the three white women tourists. There is, moreover, yet another difference: instead of the former soliloquy's that are delivered aloud, "[...] Albert is accorded only a voice-over as he goes about his duties [...]" (168). This is a voice layover that is meant to be Albert thinking. We as spectators gain access not to his speech, like we do with the others, but to his thoughts.

Albert's soliloquy provides the spectator with access to and knowledge of part of the neocolonial history of Haiti that is otherwise unnamed and hinted at in rest of the film. He is the only one that provides us with this framework. What Albert knows is that these three white women tourists—however courteous and/or nice they might be interpersonally—are and at base representatives of and agents for a much larger economic and political historical force still present in Haiti. They are part and parcel of the ongoing neocolonial project that began with the United States invasion back in 1915. Provided with the memories of his grandfather and the knowledge he bestowed unto Albert at a young age.

III - on the neoliberal epistemic violences of the film's form

As I have already mentioned briefly up above, *Vers le sud* is a feature length film directed by the white male French director, Laurent Cantet. As it has become quite clear, Cantet's *Vers le sud* is ultimately concerned with globally northern white women tourists and their differential engagements with sex tourism at a small, cove-side resort in the globally southern city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Whereas I, myself, have analyzed and discussed the neoliberal epistemic violences that are within the film's diegesis, I do believe that there are also a few neoliberal epistemic violences that we can also find in the film's form—especially given the fact that Cantet not only adapted but reconceptualized Dany Lafférière's original novel into a film.

In this third major section of the project's opening case and chapter at large, I explore these neoliberal epistemic violences that are, themselves, a part of the film's more formal elements. In order to do so, I want to pay attention to three formal elements in particular. These include 1) the film's title and Cantet's act of (re) naming; 2) the camera's privileging of particular perspectives over others; and 3) the filmmaker's relationship to and conception of (Haitian) history. In short, this third major section attempts to prove that, in Cantet's own process of adaptation and reconceptualization of the text into visuals and sounds, in the very process of his own transformation of the original novel into the film, neoliberal epistemic violence was both (unconsciously) enacted and wrought.

It is important to know that *Vers le sud* is not Cantet's first and only film. In fact, it is part of a history of his films. His very first film was *Ressources Humaines* released in 1998. The second was *L'Emploi du temps*, which came out in 2001, and *Vers le sud* was his third, released

in 2005. O'Shaughnessy has described Cantet's films in general as "social-realist melodramas" that also possess a certain kind of "investigative drive" (47).⁷ Emilie Bickerton describes Cantet's two films prior to *Vers le sud* as "analytical in character," engaged with "the labour-alienation relationship" as they "[...] focused on contemporary life in the French workplace" (2006). They consider his latter film, *L'Emploi du temps*, to be "a study of modern alienation." Françoise Lionnet also points out how much of Cantet's past films have been concerned with alienated labor, but she adds other topics such as "youth," "power," and "inequality" (235). After *Vers le sud*, Cantet went on to make two other films. *Entre les murs* was released in 2008 while *Return to Ithaca* came out in 2014.

O'Shaughnessy's work on Cantet as a filmmaker has gone on to provide us with a rather useful, four-part breakdown of his entire œuvre. First, O'Shaughnessy asserts that Cantet's films have a tendency to "[...] explore the relationship between the individual, the group, and the broader social context" (ibid). Second, they typically work "[...] to bring hidden power dynamics to the surface, not least through their investigation of the unevenness of shared space and the hidden barriers and inequalities it may bear" (ibid). Third, "[t]hey test out utopias, whether they are conservative (the possibility of individual freedom and inclusiveness within the status quo) or progressive (the capacity to make a new, more equal order)" (ibid). Fourth, "[...] they all work to unsettle their characters' (but also their spectators') sense that they know the world that they move in" (ibid). Altogether, O'Shaughnessy writes that Cantet's films "[...] constitute a set of devices for opening up and investigating a specific context, and challenging our preconceptions about it [...]" (ibid). There's much that I love here about O'Shaughnessy's breakdown, such as the attention to the three scales of the individual, group, and broader social context. I also think that Cantet does, indeed, attempt to "bring hidden power dynamics to the

surface.” I think that we see this most, for example, with both Brenda and Ellen. We come to increasingly see them as possessing more power than they initially seem to have. They, themselves, both come to wield great socio-economic power over Legba. Their relationships with Legba reveal “the unevenness of shared space and the hidden barriers and inequalities it may bear.” Haiti is also seen as a bit of a utopia for these Brenda, Ellen, and Sue, and they more than likely lean to the progressive side of the political spectrum.

Permit me to slightly repeat myself now as I slightly pivot here, but *Vers le sud* is, again, one of the latest films directed by Laurent Cantet. It was, itself, released in 2005, and it ostensibly takes place in Haiti while being loosely set sometime around the 1970s. Bonnie Greer has suggested 1978 to be more specific, but I’m not entirely sure what the reasoning behind that specific date is. Nevertheless and as I have already explored in a different section from a slightly different angle, the film, itself, largely follows Brenda (Karen Young), the white woman tourist from the city of Savannah, Georgia. However, there is also a focus on three other main characters. There is Ellen (Charlotte Rampling) and Sue, two other white women tourists from major metropolitan cities in the global north: Boston, Massachusetts and Montréal, Québec respectively. The third is Albert Lys Ambroise), the local black Haitian manager of the resort, *La Petite Anse*, at which all three of the white women tourists are staying. There are also a host of secondary characters, which include Legba (Ménothy Césaire), Jane Doe (Anotte Saint Ford), Neptune (Wilfried Paul), Eddy (Jackson Pierre Olmo Diaz) as well as the local Haitian investigator (Anatole Bonhomme).

When considered in relation to his other films, Cantet’s *Vers le sud* seems to stick out. O’Shaughnessy, himself, has framed this particular film of Cantet’s as both “quite different” and “representing several new departures” in addition to participating in a noticeably “new style”

with its treatment of an “altered context” that is not specifically French or broadly European. The film, itself, is trilingual and set in the past under the dictatorship of ‘Baby Doc’ Duvalier. As O’Shaughnessy puts it, however, “[...] the film chooses to concentrate its action on the interplay between tourists and Haitians,” which is an observation quite worth remembering (103). But, in thinking of Cantet’s films as a whole, O’Shaughnessy has also observed that “[...] there is something different about his films, something related to but not entirely dependent on his general preference for low-budget work with amateur actors” (1). For Cantet, “[...] his importance lies in how he makes his films (his ‘method’), with his egalitarian commitment to allowing different voices to be heard and participate actively in the production of his work” (ibid). In turn, this promise allows him to “open [himself] up to other voices without subordinating them to a central directorial authority” (ibid).

Cantet’s film is a visual adaptation that ultimately brings together many different parts of an originally textual document, and that originally textual document is the 1997 novella, *La Chair du maître*, by the Canadian-Haitian novelist, Dany Laferrière. I say “different parts of an originally textual document,” because I mean to emphasize the fact that Cantet took what was just a few parts of a much larger, greater, and complex whole, and then he used those parts to make a film. Cantet’s film is, in short, an adaptation of Laferrière’s work and, by extension, it is also a reconceptualization of the story that is told and the images that are shone in Laferrière’s original text.

Cantet’s initial inspiration for the film came after having read Laferrière’s novel. In an interview with *Cinéaste* magazine, Emilie Bickerton reveals how the film, itself, was inspired by “[...] Cantet’s emotional response to his trip to Haiti in 2002 and his reading of Dany Laferrière’s short stories” (2006). In fact, Cantet’s visual take and representation was largely

inspired by three of Laferrière's short stories in particular. There's also a variety of different elements that Cantet, himself, pulled from, blended together, transformed, and even reimagined in the film. The first of these short stories shares the same name as the film, itself: *Vers le sud* (Laferrière, 226-44). The second short story is "La maîtresse du colonel" (182-225), and O'Shaugnessy reminds us that, together, these two short stories "[...] clearly provide the backbone of the film, with the former also giving it its title" (100). [What is the third?] In short, Cantet's *Vers le sud* is a reconceptualization and a romanticization of what he, himself, saw as a "crude" portrayal of the sex tourism industry in Laferrière's original *La chair du maître*.

Whereas Cantet's first two films were more "[s]pare in their visual style" and "depended on actor-driven, linear narratives," Bickerton describes *Vers le sud* as seeking "[...] to reconceptualize the crude 'sex tourism' of the stories as 'love tourism'" (emphasis in original).

We can read, here, part of Cantet's own desire: to reconceptualize what he reads as "the crude 'sex tourism'" that is depicted in Laferrière's original novella, *La chair du maître*. And, it is precisely this desire of Cantet's "to reconceptualize the crude 'sex tourism' of the stories as love tourism" that sets the stage for the enactment of a certain kind of neoliberal epistemic violence.

There are, of course, certain similarities that we can draw out between the two forms of cultural production, between the film and the novel. In terms of their content, both Cantet and Laferrière's work explore the sexual dissatisfaction of middle-aged white women from the global north. In terms of their form, Laferrière's narrative is largely told through the perspectives of the three main white women—Brenda, Ellen, and Sue—in addition to Albert, the only local and black male Haitian who is the resort's owner and manager. Legba, himself, does not possess a soliloquy of his own wherein he, alone, talks, and this is the exact same case for Cantet. Both

artists are committed to a certain kind of multiperspectivalism here. I do see, however, that Cantet's adaptation and use of it may be a little bit more narrow than Lafférière's.

But Cantet's visual adaptation of Laferrière's originally written novel does share in some successes to a certain degree. Françoise Lionnet, for example, states quite outright in an article of hers that "[...] my point is that Cantet's *Vers le sud* succeeds in ways that Laferrière's original text does not" (234). For Lionnet, Cantet is able to "[...] combine multiple modes of perception—visual, aural, tactile, and multilingual—is able to integrate the sights and sounds of Haiti, whereas Laferrière's style, while it captures the voices and subjectivities of its Northern protagonists, neglects to convey the idioms and accents of Haiti's population" (ibid). This is, undoubtedly, a powerful observation. Unlike Laferrière who doesn't use creole, Cantet's film does portray people speaking Haitian kréyol on camera at least (ibid). Indeed, Cantet's ability to "combine multiple modes of perception" together is, itself, impressive and noteworthy. My own analysis of his film, however, aims to look at the epistemic politics that lay behind Cantet's filmic adaption of Lafférière's text.

But, let's now shift our gears a bit and ask another yet related question: *what are some of the main differences between the film and the novel?*. According to O'Shaugnessy, *La chair du maître* is an "[...] episodic, multi-character novel, it narrates a series of often sexual encounters between blacks and whites and Haitians and foreigners." It is "[...] overtly transgressive and vividly erotic while [*Vers le sud*] is more implicitly questioning and restrained" (100). "These are never simply erotic, although they are almost always that: rather, the flow of desire is used to highlight and subvert uneven power dynamics. In a country where a gulf separates rich and poor, sex can break down barriers and brings those who would not normally interact into intimate collision" (99).

In the very processes of adaptation and recontextualization, however, Cantet did actively change and/or lose certain key elements of Lafférière's original's text. The first is the loss of the characters recounting their own interactions with one another. The second is the loss of the characters recounting the events that have lead up to Legba's death. According to O'Shaugnessy, Laferrière's original chapter in the novel—also titled *Vers le sud*—“[...] consists of the polyphonic interweaving of four voices belonging to characters named Sue, Brenda, Ellen and Albert, who recount their interactions and particularly the events leading to the death of a young Haitian called Legba” (101). In Cantet's film, however, the characters, themselves, do not recount their own interactions. We, instead, see them. Nor do they recount the “events leading to the death of a young Haitian called Legba.” Instead, we end up watching the unfolding of the events that lead up to Legba's own foreshadowed death. O'Shaugnessy also observes this patten in the film whereby “[...] important parts of each character's confession from the novel are preserved as voice-over monologues but separated from each other and detached from the murder” (ibid). So, not only are the confessions, themselves, transformed into “voice-over monologues,” but they are also “separated from each other and detached from the murder.” As the monologues—which I refer to in my own analysis more as “soliloquies”—become more central and serve more as intimate reflections, Legba's murder, itself, is quietly displaced.

But Cantet also omitted several other elements from the novel as well. A third thing is the loss of certain religious and, more specifically, the religiously sexual dimensions to Brenda's own backstory. In Laferrière's original text, for example, Brenda is not a baptist but the wife of a methodist preacher named William—a.k.a. Bill or “le gros Bill” in French (226). In the film, Brenda's husband's name is Mark, and both of their religious affiliations are completely removed. Moreover, the sexual component to the religious dimension is completely effaced. In

the original text, Bill not only goes *with Brenda and Legba* to the secluded beach, but he is also the one who demands that Brenda have sex with Legba. In fact, in the original text it is Bill who takes and guides Brenda's hand onto Legba's torso. O'Shaughnessy points out that "[i]n the novel, Brenda's husband encourages her to have sex with the boy and watches events unfold. His absence from the film makes the episode less obviously perverse and blurs its unequal power dynamics" (102). A fourth change concerns the degree of emphasis that Sue places on the difference between "American Blackness" and "Haitian Blackness." In Laferrière's text, Sue makes an emphatic distinction between the two by stating that "[u]n Nègre pour moi, c'est un Noir américain" [a Negro, for me, is an American Black man]" (229). In Cantet's film, however, Sue only ever hints at this explicit conception of difference by stating repeatedly something along the lines of, "Here in Haiti, everything is different." It is only in the dinner conversation scene after being directly prompted by Ellen that Sue, herself, declares no interest whatsoever in black guys who are from the north.

Part of Cantet's adoption of a film-noir-like structure involves the use of piecing together of the stories of different people, places, and events that occurred off-screen in the present as well the past. And these off-screen happenings ultimately inform the characters' actions on a very deep level. Cantet desired for there to be a "background story," one that was present and which "[...provides] a glimpse into the events occurring independently of the women's pursuits." I think this assessment is true to the degree that there is the presence of a background story and even that of a mystery. Legba's life outside of the resort is a tantalizing mystery, because it seems to be both playful and sinister. He meets many other black Haitian characters in different parts and places of the city who remain largely unknown and mysterious to us as viewers.

But this background story and the mystery that goes along with it remain largely that: backgrounded. The two are never really brought into the fore. They aren't exactly central to the film, nor are they even explored in greater depth. Instead, they are a rather superficial background and superficial mystery that are ultimately left and abandoned to be both ignored and forgotten after presenting a series of tantalizing scenes with nuggets of information that will never be further pursued.

And while there is this backgrounded mystery, that mystery does not seem entirely intentional. The camera and a few of the white women tourists—mainly Brenda whom we are to follow the most—occasionally venture out of *La Petite Anse* in order to view, experience, and observe the seemingly dangerous and impoverished world that encircles them. What is seemingly missing here, however, is that there is no push on behalf of the film to go beyond this seemingly threshold-like limit. There is no push *to better know*. There is no desire to *figure things out*. Brenda is the first one who gets us close to something like that of a film-noir investigation right after Legba's disappearance, but her own search is undertaken more in the name of some sort of sexual and spiritual fulfillment than it is for a Legba who has now gone missing. At one point, we witness Brenda venture off into another part of town, to another more local and less touristy bar where she finds many other young black Haitian men who, in her eyes, resemble Legba. What begins as a desperate search for him quickly ends in the realization that Brenda's desire is not exactly to go out and look for Legba, himself, in the hopes of actually finding him after he has disappeared. No, Brenda's desire is, instead, to have her own sexual desire finally be recognized and satisfied, and centering on that more than Legba's own murder—no matter how disturbing it may be—does a certain kind of violence in the domain of knowledge, I think.

the film's title & naming

One of the effects of Laurent Cantet's adaptation of Dany Lafferrière's original novel was his (re)naming of it for the film. Whereas "*Vers le sud*" is the name of just one of Dany Laferrière's short stories within his much larger novel, the novel, itself, is titled *La chair du maître*, or *The Flesh of the Master* in English. Cantet, therefore, borrowed and took the specific title of one specific chapter instead of the whole entire title of the book, itself. While this may, at first, appear insignificant and/or inconsequential, this move merits a bit more analysis and exploration given that there is a certain kind of epistemic politics that are involved in the very act of (re)naming, itself. In fact, it is my contention here that Cantet's adaptation of and act of (re)naming the original story as he did resulted in a concomitant shift in the overall story's perspective and, thus, its epistemology.

As Williams has already pointed out, the title and the meaning of *Vers le sud* is, itself, polyvalent. In one sense, it can literally mean "toward the south," with the implication of someone or something heading in that particular geographical direction. We might think of the globally northern white women tourists, for example, who are all traveling toward the south which is, in this case, Haiti. In this way, there is still a power dynamic that exists and which comes out in the title. There are those who have the ability to travel south, such as these white women tourists, but what is still missing here is perhaps the more cruder colonial and sexual dynamic that Lafferrière attempts to capture in his title, "*La chair du maître*." But Cantet's title, itself, can also be understood in a more sexual kind of sense. *Vers le sud*, or "toward the south," can also mean, as James Williams has also already noted, "[...] the innuendo of 'going down' sexually to the genital region" (157). These white women tourists, then and per the innuendo

behind the title, are not simply traveling down toward the south that is the city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, they're also "heading south" in search of sex/love and/or pleasure. Nevertheless, Lafférière's original title, "the flesh of the master," anchors us in the viewpoint and the desire of the enslaved and/or the subjugated instead of the viewpoint and the desire of the tourist. For Lafférière, the complicated, conflicted, and crude desire for the master's flesh is put front and center, while, for Cantet, the more sanitized and somewhat naive or "pure of heart" desire of the white woman tourists for the flesh of the black Haitian sex worker is put into focus. In moving from Lafférière to Cantet, our attention has been diverted.

When put into relation with Lafférière's original literary text, it becomes clear how Cantet's visual adaptation of that specific text also reorients the original perspective that can be found in the novella. In Lafférière's original text, he, himself, largely indexes the viewpoint of the enslaved as I just mentioned; and, yet its form does still offer up multiple, completely different subjectivities in addition to their desires. The film, itself, participates in something much more akin to that of a neoliberal multiculturalism which focuses in on the lives and struggles of the three white women tourists in addition to just that of Albert. I think that the film does this and is much more akin to something that is neoliberal and multicultural here, because their collective dream really seems to be some sort of inclusionary sense of both gendered and racial freedoms which can only be gained through hard work, economic independence, (self-)development, and competition with one another in spite of them all being differently minoritized groups. The novella, however, participates in a certain kind of multiperspectivalism as the structure of the novella, itself, is divided up into and yet mixes together several different narratives. Translated rather literally to "the flesh of the master," this title brings together not just a different kind of subjectivity but an orientation and a direction that are all quite distinct from

that which we get in the title, “*Vers le sud*” and its English translation, “Heading South.”

Whereas the former titles hint at a globally northern subjectivity, this latter one hints at a more globally southern subjectivity. There is, moreover, a more explicit sexual undertone with its object of desire: the master’s flesh. “*La chair du maître*” expresses the subjective position of a subjugated and/or enslaved person and their expressed desire for “the flesh of the master.” Of course given that Dany Lafférière is, himself, Haitian and has, himself, discussed his own personal connection to desiring the white women that would often come to Haiti, this title is informed by his own experience as a black Haitian male.

While the film is still told in a somewhat multiperspectival kind of way—predominately through the multiple perspectives of three globally northern, white women tourists as well as that of Albert’s—it still privileges these two particular kinds of perspective. As spectators, we, ourselves, follow the camera as it allows us access to many of the characters’ lives, their most intimate confessions, their views, and even their understandings of the world around them. There are moments, for example, when the spectator assumes not only the perspective of the camera but that of the subjectivity of the camera’s supposed viewer as well. Williams both observes and makes the point that “[...] there are moments near the beginning where we are invited to match an eye-line shot of Legba walking up the beach with Brenda’s subjective point-of-view” (167). In turn, however, we can see that there are certain kinds of perspectives which are not exactly given expression, such as Legba’s. As Williams also observes and writes, “[...] this possibility [of being invited to match a shot with a character’s subjective point-of-view] will never be open to Legba or his co-workers, underlining the fact that he remains an undeveloped character who represents nothing more ultimately than an object of desire - an *homme fatal* whose body is his only capital” (ibid).

I would say then that Cantet participates not so much in the traditional gaze of the (cisheterosexual white) male but in the more minoritized gaze of the (cisheterosexual white) female. Williams writes that “[a]lready in *Vers le sud* much of the dramatic tension revolved around not only who is the subject of the gaze, but also who inhabits the frame. In a film where the only fully frontal naked shots are of men, the camera captures the women’s view of their young gigolos through point-of-view shots that linger on the male flesh” (167). While one does, indeed, get a glance of Legba’s body and flesh in addition to his life and his living conditions, I would add that they are usually seen and understood through a specifically neoliberal and even neocolonial gaze. We see primarily through the camera as well as through the two eyes of both Ellen and Brenda—the two white women who not only compete for Legba’s attention as he sells his body on the sex tourism market, but who also wield incredible amounts of socio-economic power over him. According to O’Shaughnessy, Cantet is, in fact, “[...]interested in probing the neo-colonial relationships at a general level and in a way with clear contemporary relevance” (100). However, I’m not sure if this attempt at probing at a more “general level” is ultimately useful, because it seems to be wont of both historical specificity and historical depth.

The film’s French title, “*Vers le sud*,” also privileges the perspective of those traveling from the global north and who are, thus, “Heading South.” The preposition, “vers,” in French often translates to “toward” in English. It is a word that stems from the original Latin word, *versus*, meaning “in the direction of” while also denoting some sort of motion. In this way, the word, “vers,” is most often used to designate an orientation, a direction, and a sense of mobility. In using this word, the subject is understood, therefore, to be oriented, directed, and moving—in this case “toward the south.” Whereas the destination is, indeed, avowed (i.e. “le sud”) what remains implicit in the title, however, is *who* exactly is oriented, directed, and mobile. In the

film, it is the three main tourist characters that make the trip *vers le sud*. Of course, for the local black Haitians, their mobility is and has been much more restricted. We see Albert, for example, who shuffles between the resort and the airport. Legba moves in and out of *La Petite Anse* visiting various unknown spots outside of the local resort. Neither of them end up leaving Haiti altogether. “Vers le sud,” then, implies the presence of a globally northern subject who is again capable of heading south. In this way, the film’s narrative centers on those who have the means to travel. In turn, the film largely sidelines or makes secondary the viewpoints and experiences of the black Haitian characters who must largely stay put.

As I mentioned briefly above, *Vers le sud* has been translated into English as “Heading South,” a title which as I have already noted privileges the same perspective of global northerners by indexing and centering their subjectivity as well as their mobility. There is a slight difference though, between the French and the English titles. The gerund, “heading,” in English connotes something more than the French word “vers.” With “heading,” the word’s root noun, “head,” offers the added notion of someone leading the way. In the film, the three main subjects *head south* for their own individual reasons— each one is, indeed, slightly different from the others. And yet, it is Brenda’s orientation, direction, and lead—ultimately her main desire—in *heading south* that the viewer follows and with which the viewer becomes most acquainted. In fact, the viewer is invited to better understand the underlying motivation for Brenda’s reason in *heading south* to begin with. While somewhat subtle, the difference between the words, “vers” and “heading,” indirectly point one to consider the spatial location as well as the mobility of those subjects who are able to head south as part of their touring/traveling during their leisure time.

Of course, not all subjects are oriented, directed, or intentionally headed for the south. And so at the same time, the title also draws our attention to those who must stay put, who must *remain south*: the local black Haitians. In the film, it is specifically globally northern subjects that have this spatial mobility and intention given their own access to the (sex) tourism industry. *Vers le sud*, then, tells us a story from the perspective and the trajectories of globally northern subjects intent on heading south instead of those local black Haitians whose dreams are, among so many others, to stay put and/or often get out.

the film's privileging of particular perspectives over others

In this third subsection, I discuss how the film's approach to multiculturalism and multiperspectivalism is not only shallow and selective, but it also privileges particular perspectives over others. In doing so, the film participates in both a liberal and neoliberal approach to multiculturalism that affords a particular depth and complexity for its neoliberal multicultural subjectivities while simultaneously denying the same opportunity to establish depth and complexity for its own local black Haitian characters who are, themselves, part of the neocolonial lumpenproletariat. This includes all those characters who must prostitute themselves in order to survive, including Legba, Eddy, Neptune, the limosine girl—or Jane Doe—the anonymous black Haitian woman and her daughter in the yellow dress.

At first glance, the film seems to offer up and represent a diverse cast of characters. Sue is a middle-aged white woman from Montréal, Québec. Brenda is also a middle-aged white woman but from Savannah, Georgia in the United States. Ellen is an educated older white woman and professor from Boston, Massachusetts in the United States. Albert is a local older

black man from Haiti. Legba is also young and local to Port-au-prince in Haiti. Whereas Brenda's character arc serves as the main storyline, Ellen's is second with Sue and Albert's taking up an indistinguishable third and fourth. Alongside three white women tourists—Brenda, Ellen, and Sue—who each hail from different locales in the global north, there are also the two major local Haitians: Albert, the resort manager, and Legba, the local black Haitian sex worker. Albert and Legba—along with the other black Haitian sex workers—are the two main trilingual characters who also speak Haitian Kréyol. But as O'Shaugnessy has noted, "[...] Lafférière's novel may in fact be much more multi-vocal than the film even if its voices are conveyed in French" (104). Cantet's characters are thus distinctively and undoubtedly a multilingual and, therefore, a multicultural set of characters.

But *Vers le sud*'s multiculturalism is still somewhat selective and, therefore, shallow. While there are a variety of different people and a variety of different subjectivities that we do, indeed, get to see in the film, Cantet mainly focuses in on just Brenda, Ellen, and Sue—who are all, again, globally northern, middle-aged white women. There is, admittedly, a secondary and emphatic focus placed on Albert, the only globally southern, older black Haitian man. While these two groups of characters may differ in terms of their geographical "home" and their socio-economic status, what unites the four characters together is their shared investment in a certain respectability. If you'll recall the opening scene of the film in which Albert, himself, denies and turns away the anonymous black Haitian woman who is attempting to "give" him her daughter so that she may, herself, survive. In response to the anonymous black Haitian woman's offer, Albert declares that "on ne peut pas faire ça" [we/one can't do that]. The multiculturalism that we get from *Vers le sud* is a respectable kind of multiculturalism. It is a sanitized multiculturalism, one that is invested more in the gazing in and onto the moribund heterogeneity

of black Haitian neocolonial lumpenproletariat life than it is in passing the camera and the microphone over to them. The film doesn't center the young and non-respectable. It is invested, invested, instead in maintaining a certain kind of image of them, one that imagines them as already dead.

Through this selected and shallow set of multicultural characters, Cantet does try to offer multiple perspectives on "sex tourism" within Haiti throughout the late 1970s. As O'Shaughnessey has put it, "[...] the film chooses to concentrate its action on the interplay between tourists and Haitians" (103). But upon further investigation, *Vers le sud* actually privileges two particular perspectives at the expense of others. The first is the perspective(s) of the white women tourists, with most of the attention paid to Brenda's perspective in particular. The second perspective is that of Albert's perspective. Albert is the only black Haitian character who is given a soliloquy. While the film does seem to give us viewers both insight and intrigue into the lives of the local black Haitian characters, that insight and intrigue are largely limited to these three which produces a group of black Haitian characters that are rather shallow and flat. In certain scenes, the camera functions more as the perspective and gaze. And that gaze is sometimes assumed to be that of the white women characters and at others that of a more general Western gaze into the lifeworlds of poor black Haitians.

But Cantet's film also participates in a certain kind of liberal multiculturalism. It does so by liberalizing the viewer's understanding of sex/love tourism by equating the two perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized. In the same interview with Bickerton, they, themselves, write: "*Struck by the simplistic polarity of colonizer and colonized in Laferrière, Cantet seeks in Vers le sud to reconceptualize the crude 'sex tourism' of the stories as 'love tourism.'* The desire exists, he argues, on both sides. His film portrays women in pursuit of more than forgettable,

faceless sex.” While I agree with Cantet’s observation that the binary poles of “the colonizer” and “the colonized” may sometimes be understood in rather simplistic ways, I do not think that Cantet’s attempt to reconceptualize what is referred to as a specifically “crude” form of sex tourism into something more of an ostensibly less-crude version better referred to as “love tourism” is the way to complexify and clarify the issue. In fact, I think it further conceals the (neo)colonial relations of power in its efforts to try and transcend them. Put another way, the reconceptualization of a crude sex tourism into a love tourism evacuates the (neo)colonial power dynamics that have long existed between the two parties that are involved. In this way, Cantet’s reconceptualization epistemically obscures more than it promises to illuminate. In this case, Cantet’s love is not a radical love but a bourgeois type of love.

We witness Cantet’s liberal politics with regard to the film yet again in another statement of his. In the same interview, the interviewer asks the following question as a way of addressing what Cantet’s film is attempting to make thinkable: “What does it mean to be the only white face in an entirely black environment?” This question—quite like the comment of desire as being on “both sides”—attempts to equate experiences of being a minority in a majority environment. For Cantet, it would seem that to be the only white face in a black environment is equivalent to being the only black face in a white environment. What is completely ignored and forgotten, however, is the whole entire history of the systemic (neo)colonial state and structure of Haiti, itself—not to mention the whole entire neoimperial statuses of both France and the United States given their own historical relationships to and with Haiti—which all allows for white faces to be able to enter into its predominately black environment. What is effaced is their status as part of a group of globally northern white (neo)colonizers whose subjectivities wield much more power than those who form part of the globally southern black (neo)colonized. The very condition of

possibility for Cantet as well as Brenda, Ellen, and Sue's ability to even visit Haiti, itself, is due to its history of having been colonized—over and over again. While indeed surrounded and forming part of a numerical minority there in Haiti, both Cantet and these white women tourists with whom he empathizes do have the opportunity, the economic means, and the passports, to ultimately leave any time they so wish and/or desire. The same, however, is just not true for those local and black sex-working Haitians, like Legba. The attempt to bring sympathetic attention to the white women navigating a largely black environment erases these very important differences and historical processes.

It is through these two dominant perspectives of the white women tourists and Albert that we, as spectators, come to ultimately understand—for better or for worse—the unfolding of the deadly events at *La Petite Anse*. This is quite different from the novel. O'Shaughnessy has also noticed and signaled an issue, for example, with how "[...] the novel's rounded exploration of social dynamics between Haitians, returning exiles and outsiders is pared down to a focus on the interaction of poor Haitians and tourists, *a potentially problematic shift*" (100, emphasis mine). The perspective of the "tourists," however, is given much more intimacy, depth, and heterogeneity than that of the many local Haitian characters among the neocolonial lumpenproletariat. Albert, again, is the only local black Haitian character that is given a soliloquy. We never hear from the other Haitian locals, such as Legba, Eddy, Neptune the anonymous Black Haitian woman, her daughter, or Jane Doe. We never know what it is that they, themselves, desire, know, and think. In a way, this suggests that Cantet likes to center the lives and struggles of the more respectable and bourgeois-like figures, the desires of the up-and-coming.

Vers le sud's narrative largely centers and privileges a particular group's viewpoint over that of others: that of the white women tourists. While the film does offer a somewhat multicultural set of characters, the Haitian characters are largely flat and shallow. The only Haitian character to be given a monologue is Albert. The other characters aren't afforded one. Instead, they largely remain as subjects—and even objects—to be looked at and gazed upon, whose lives are often enshrouded in dangerous but intriguing mystery. Take, for instance, the figure of the anonymous black Haitian woman, Neptune, Eddy, or the girl in the car. The film's narrative mainly centers on the experiences and stories of its three white women characters, with a specific focus on Brenda. As spectators, we learn about their journeys. We witness their confessions. We see and come to better understand their drives and their desires. As a result, these characters are afforded much more depth, complexity, and, therefore, empathy as opposed to the those we only briefly meet.

What is more, the film represents these white women tourists not in a homogenous or monolithic way, but as a more heterogenous group and set of viewpoints. While film does center the viewpoint and perspective of a particular globally northern subjectivity, it does not homogenize them. It offers, instead, a heterogenous set of white cis-heterosexual female viewpoints through which to think about the events that occur on the resort, their lives, and their conditions. In total, there are three major, white women characters. They are Brenda, Ellen, and Sue. At times, each of the women see and understand both themselves and the world around them in completely different ways. Despite being unified by their gender and sex, they are, in fact, afforded the depth and complexity of being distinct thinkers.

But the film does more than simply center these globally northern white women and their narratives; it often visually assumes their perspective and viewpoint—especially Brenda's. While

the camera does seem to be an independent onlooker who visits each of these characters on their outings and in their rooms, it does often assume their viewpoint. In the film's second scene, for example, the camera is positioned directly inside of the taxi looking outward and onto the impoverished streets of Haiti as they quickly roll by. In doing so, this is the first time among many to come that the camera will specifically assume Brenda's perspective and point of view. In the subsequent scene, when she gets to the resort and travels out onto the beach in search of Legba, the camera once again assumes her vantage point. In frequently assuming Brenda's and Ellen's perspective instead of, say, Legba's, the film repeatedly enacts an implicit value judgment. The spectator(s) is largely driven to identify with Brenda's perspective and understanding of the world around her. From this specific viewpoint, as Bickerton has written, their experience of the resort of *La Petite Anse* is framed as a "[...] little, rather utopian, world."

In assuming this white heterosexual female perspective and viewpoint, the film also repeatedly centers and enacts a particular gaze and desire. Bickerton has also observed this dynamic, writing that "Cantet provocatively [...] presents young boys in the ways they are seen by the women, thus making his camera a substitute for their eyes and implicating the audience in their desire." One of the most iconic scenes in which this particular gaze is most prevalent is in the photographing scene that occurs between Ellen and Legba. After just having had sex and per Ellen's request, Legba turns over and onto his stomach in order to lay completely naked on the bed before her. She asks that he stay and lay there with his buttocks exposed. There is a succession of important shots that occur here. [list them] In this moment, we spectators not only see what Ellen sees, but we see what she desires. She then takes a picture of him. This scenic moment and photographic image are highly saturated with not just sexuality and a gaze that desires, but a racialized sexuality more specifically.

While film does represent a variety of pauperized and/or prostituting black Haitians, it either does so by giving them a voice that is limited or little to none. This creates a host of rather flat characters that possess no depth or complexity, while the more respectable and bourgeois figures—such as Brenda, Ellen, Sue, and Albert—are granted much more depth and complexity. As such, the other Haitian characters become part of the film's background. They make up part of a mostly unnamed and unnameable heterogeneous group that is Haiti's lumpenproletariat. These characters include, per their (lack of) names in the film's credits: the airport lady (*la dame de l'aéroport*), the girl in yellow (*la fille en jaune*), Eddy, Neptune, the limousine girl (*la fille de la limousine*), Neptune, Jeremy, Legba's mother (*la mère de Legba*) and Legba's friends (*les amis de Legba*). The film can, therefore, only offer a partial and superficial account of the local Haitian necropolitics that were at play under the then Duvalier régime of the 1970s.

Because the film does not espouse and assume a fully multiperspectival perspective of the events that have occurred at *La Petite Anse*, there are certain characters who become flat and whose narratives are superficial. Of course, this includes Legba whom the camera frequently follows outside of the resort. However, we're never given an intimate confession scene to better know what Legba is thinking, processing, or emotionally contending with, like we do with the other white women tourists and Albert. Because of this lack of a confession scene, Legba's character remains less complex than the others. He becomes more of a visual and sexual object to be looked at, gazed upon, and followed. This is also true of other characters such as the anonymous black Haitian woman whom De Raedt mentions in their first type of violence. We are only given a glimpse into her world through a somewhat removed and hovering camera beside both her and Albert. There's also little Eddy, whom the camera frequently looks at but never assumes his viewpoint or follows him wherever he may go.

By often centering not only the literal viewpoint of white women but also their epistemic standpoint and understanding, the film betrays a valuation of a more neoliberal way of knowing. In turn, the film devalues the knowledges of those within the lumpenproletariat, such as the sex workers, themselves. What seems to be the underlying reason for having given the three white women in addition to Albert all monologues while not giving monologues to the other characters, such as Legba, the anonymous black Haitian woman, or even Little Eddy, is perhaps an investment in respectability that indexes and evinces a certain kind of French neoliberal multiculturalism. These characters are much more respectable and presentable while the others are simply viewed here as spectacles.

Because of the film's centering of the white heterosexual female perspectives and narratives, the characters as well as us, the spectators, are left hermeneutically bereft in terms of understanding many of the scenes that involve the oppressive neocolonial conditions and subsequent intra-Haitian violence. Instead, they are staged as intriguing and dangerous adventures outside of the resort with the camera following and continuing to peer into moments to which it and we are not entirely privy. This film helps to obscure the historical foundations for sex tourism, and these obfuscations which it helps to generate become much more apparent when juxtaposed with the analyses of other representations in the subsequent chapters. I argue, in short, that the film's secular and (neo)liberal multicultural humanism, which is anchored in a decontextualism and ahistoricism, are what help to rationalize Legba's murder.

But we can also find evidence of Cantet's neoliberalism outside of the film. This is corroborated in the same interview with Bickerton in which Cantet, himself, states having wanted to rework the polarity between the colonizer and colonized as originally represented in

Dany Laferrière's original novella. Cantet wanted, in his words, to "[...] reconceptualize the crude 'sex tourism' of Laferrière's stories as 'love tourism.'"

This reconceptualization of sex tourism—understood initially as a “crude” phenomenon to something that is much more about “love”—is indicative of a liberal politics that informs the film. In that it evacuates any understanding of the power dynamic(s) that exist among the characters in question. This point is driven even further in the interview with Bickerton when Cantet proclaims that “[t]he desire exists [...] on both sides” (emphasis in original). This is a common liberal argument that greatly reduces and simplifies the complexity of the given situation. “The desire” to which Cantet refers here is imagined and conceived of as singular and/or identical. I think his language use is important to note: there is no use or recognition of *desires* in the plural. There is no “their” as “their desires” but there is a “the” to mark “the desire.” There is only one, single desire, *the* desire which supposedly exists “on both sides.” While it is true that both Ellen and Legba share in the same desire for one another. This point still obscures much more than it reveals. This appeal to “both sides” equates and homogenizes the desires of the touring white women with those of the sex working, black Haitian males. With an emphasis placed on the desire being on “both sides,” the particularity of each party and person’s desire is lost—not to mention the economic coercion that informs the sex workers’ “desires.” In arguing that “[t]he desire exists [...] on both sides,” not only is the difference in perspective obscured and occluded, but it is equated. This then leads to the privileging and universalization—followed by the naturalization—of one particular perspective over the others. And yet, there are many characters in Cantet’s film outside of the main characters that experience the phenomenon known and labeled as “sex tourism” or “love tourism.” And their experiences are all completely different. And yet, the film does not grant these characters much

depth and complexity. These often black Haitian characters are given a degree of superficiality which, in turn, helps to naturalize their necropolitical conditions and ends.

Cantet's reconceptualization of Lafférière's originally "crude" version of sex tourism is liberal, second, in that it follows a logic that attempts to equate the (economic) statuses of Ellen, Brenda, and Legba. This is true on an interpersonal level in terms of, say, the economic power that both Ellen and Brenda wield over Legba. It is also true on a structural level in terms of their civic statuses as U.S. citizens and global northerners. Their national and geographic identities afford them very different opportunities and access to Haiti's resources, such as Legba's body and soul. This logic is specifically *neoliberal* because it, again, obscures the specific role, power, and impact of unequal economic relations.

For Cantet, these women are "[...] in pursuit of more than forgettable, faceless sex." In focusing on and privileging the desires and perspectives of the white women, Legba's desire is not only eclipsed but subsequently erased. His desire is equated with their desire in what amounts to a more palpable story.

IV - on the foreshadowing of Legba's death

In this fourth and final section of mine, I want to return to a select few of the scenes in Cantet's film in order to critically reflect on and then think about the foreshadowing image(ry) that we continue to see throughout and which points to Legba's death. In doing so, I want to discuss, in particular, how the film images, imagines, and foreshadows the premature death of Legba as a way of marking him as *already dead*, as *already moribund*. I therefore provide, here on down below, yet another critical epistemological analysis of a few more scenes and shots in which we first meet Legba in addition to the many ways in which *Vers le sud* deploys the image of the moribund black Haitian sex worker. In essence, the main question that I want to ask here is this: *what purpose does the repeated image of Legba's death serve in Cantet's narrative film?*

From the very first scene in which we meet him, Legba is both imaged and imagined as already dead and/or as already moribund. I am not the first one to have noticed this, given that Bonnie Greer, for example, has already made the rather acute observation of this morbid imagery. She has, herself, stated quite pithily that "[...] from the beginning we *know* that someone must die and are pretty sure the dead person will be black — the film needs a black death to add poignancy and a touch of tragedy" (25, emphasis mine). This quote gives us two important things: one, it points out that, from the very outset of the film, itself, we already "*know* that someone must die." Second, we are "pretty sure [that] the dead person [in question] will be black." So, not only is the opening tone of the film, itself, one that is of death but one that brings up the very real possibility of black death in particular. But this quote of Greer's also offers up a third and quite important little point, and that third point is that this black death is needed in order "to add poignancy and a touch of tragedy." In other words, this initial scene completely

foreshadows Legba's death to come. Legba is, himself, imaged and imagined as part of Haiti's long tradition of the living dead, for this is the very same beach on which Albert, himself, will later come to find Legba's actually lifeless body near the end of the film.

Now, when Brenda first arrives to the beachfront of *La Petite Anse*, we witness her drop off her things onto a chair that is designed for sunbathing, and she does so right before the camera continues to follow her down to the beach as she walks along with the crashing waves at the water's edge. Here in this moment, we can see that she, herself, is not fully relaxed but seemingly anxious—the reason for which we do not yet know as viewers since we have only recently met her. In short, we are not yet privy to this hidden knowledge. All of a sudden, though, something catches Brenda's eye and she quickly stops. Her body language completely changes from what is a sort of pleasant but anxious pacing to something much more like that of an inquisitive stare. Something has caught her attention. She then moves in for a better look but quickly breaks her own line of vision. She seems to do this either because she is unsure of what it is that she, herself, sees right there before her, or it is because she, in fact, wants to seem like she is just naturally walking along on an endless stroll. Perhaps it is both. Whatever it may be, it is clear here that she is suddenly intrigued by something that is located just over there somewhere beyond and somewhat behind the frame of the camera. She seems to recognize someone and/or something that is over there far off into the distance, but she also appears to be quite self-conscious here about it all. She doesn't want to be noticed. She doesn't want to draw in any kind of undue attention, and so she continues to walk out even further along the beach.



figure XI | A shot of Brenda in Laurent Cantet's *Vers le sud* walking along the beach with Legba there asleep in the mid-ground, off to the right.

As Brenda continues going about what is no less than her own feigned attempt at an innocent stroll, she soon slows down before the camera switches back to being just a few yards behind her. Off and a little further out onto the beach, just a tad bit there off to the lower middle of the upper right, is a young, nearly naked black Haitian boy who is not only possibly sleeping but potentially Legba. In this very moment and with this precise shot (Figure I), Brenda must think—and believe—that she, herself, *knows* this boy over there despite not being able to actually see his face. I think that she, herself, at least recognizes and/or hopes that this person who is located just further out and further off to the right side of the frame is someone whom she, in fact, does know. *Why else would she be trying to feign such an innocent stroll on this particular beach, at this particular resort, and in this particular direction?*

But the tone of this shot begins to quickly shift to one that, again, has a much more sinister kind feeling to it. This young, nearly naked black boy who is possibly sleeping there on the beach is also completely alone, and he doesn't seem to have any other possessions around him for that matter. All of a sudden, the seemingly paradisiacal imagery of the Caribbean, here at this idyllic and small cove-side resort, is now haunted by the very real possibility—if not reality—that this young and nearly naked black Haitian boy who is supposedly sleeping right there in front of her may, in fact, be already dead. It becomes increasingly clear to both us as viewers as well as Brenda as the protagonist that the reality of this situation might be a lot more grim and a lot more morbid than what we had all initially thought.

Some scholars have already read this opening scene of the film for its fairly obvious necropolitical dimension, and so I'd like to turn to some of their work on it. Shirley Tate, for example, has already clocked and provided a rather poignant reading of this particular scene in addition to this particular image of Legba as dead. Tate describes it as follows: “[w]hen Brenda approaches Legba, fifteen, asleep on the beach he could just as well be a dead body washed up on the shore, indicating what he in fact later becomes. This makes the sexual-economic exchange already necropolitical” (44). And Tate is quite right: not only does Brenda but also do us as viewers experience the possibility that this person might already be dead. This is, after all, near the same beachfront spot on which he will, himself, be found dead along with Jane Doe. With the combination of his naked black body laying there on the beach and the possible fact that he may, in fact, be dead, I would like to add that there is also a form of necroeroticism that is well at work here—especially as Brenda approaches him.

What Tate doesn't seem to emphasize in relation to Legba's death and the necropolitical dimension of his own sexual-economic exchange with both Brenda and Ellen is precisely this

erotic component that is also part and parcel of the necropolitical dimension. Their sexual-economic exchange, then, is not only *necropolitical* but it is also *necroerotic* as well. We might even blend these two words together in order to create the expression, “necroerotic politics.” Both Brenda and Legba have and will continue to engage in sexual-economic exchange, and he will, in fact, die. There is, in short, an eroticization of Legba’s death, of his morbidity. This shot and this moment both indicate yet another example of a necroerotic phenomenon. In fact, it foreshadows Legba’s death, for in the scene in which his lifeless body is dumped and then later found is not too far from where his body is now, already “washed up on the shore.”

As a sex-worker, Legba has become a commodity, and this is especially true of his body as well as his sexuality. He is, therefore, left open, precarious, and vulnerable to the whims and the desires of competitors who are all in search of sex/love on the global free market of sex and/or romance tourism. Within the diegesis of the film, itself, Legba must jostle between, meet, and accommodate the two main desires (and demands) of both Brenda and Ellen who are not only here as tourists but as buyers, consumers, and competitors as well. Not only is Legba caught then between the increasingly tense and rather competitive feud between Ellen and Brenda, but he is also pulled away by other women whom we don’t exactly know or see. In one scene with Ellen on the beach right after having chatted with Brenda, we witness her ask Legba outright who it was that had given him the necklace he now wears around his own neck. This is a moment of slight tension between the two (and three) of them. For in spite of Ellen’s desire for Legba and her own demonstrated ability to financially take care of him, Legba does have other women who are interested in him and who do buy him things. Of course, the implication, here and for Ellen, is that whoever this other woman and/or whoever these other women may be, he must also be having sex with her and/or them in return. For Brenda, we ultimately learn from her own

soliloquy that she, herself, views Legba as someone/something who is purchasable and, therefore, a replaceable commodity. We see this most in the scene in which she wanders off in search of him outside of the safety of the small cove-side resort and into the dead of the night. With no luck in terms of having located Legba, himself, she soon realizes that she is surrounded by several other young black Haitian men who all look quite similar to Legba and who could all, more than likely, both fulfill and satisfy her in the role that Legba once played. In this moment, Brenda begins to lean into the fact and reality that whatever it is that Legba has offered her—be it sex, care, adoration, attention, whatever—it is not unique to Legba, himself. No, in fact, Brenda, as a now economically liberated white woman, can pay many of these other young black Haitian men to give her exactly what it is that she needs and exactly what it is that she has sought in Legba.

Provided that Legba, himself, has become a commodity in the eyes of those who seek to buy him and his services, I think that we can see and understand the quick slope that drops him from commodity into a thing—a process known as thingification. This dynamic is reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's declaration and equation in his own 1955 speech, *Discours sur le colonialisme* [Discourse On Colonialism], that “*colonisation = chosification*” [colonization = thingification] (12). Given his initial appearance as a moribund image, the film reproduces Legba not as something animate and living, but as something that is already dead and without life—that is, as a thing. I would argue that we notice Legba's thingification most in the scene which takes place in the wake of Legba's murder and when Brenda has her own epiphany. We see it when Brenda, herself, realizes that it is not so much Legba whom she has desired, but the way in which he looked at her. It becomes clear, then, in this precise moment in the film that, at least for Brenda, Legba is ultimately a thing that can and will ultimately be replaced. He was, moreover, a means

to an end, a thing imbued with the spiritually healing capacity and power to facilitate an experience of her own unrestrained eroticism and sexual awakening. Caribbean men, like Legba, are viewed as things that allow her to reach a state of religious ecstasy, and thus to achieve the enlightenment that she, herself, so desperately desires to tap back into so that she can, in turn, have much more of it.

And I guess this is where one commenter's point becomes most salient, because it links us back to the more religious and/or spiritual components of the film. They write:

That Cantet succeeds less well with the Haitians is partly because the film becomes an exploration of Brenda and Ellen's different attitudes and partly because he's a director wise enough not to try to enter the heads of people he doesn't know. But his inability to explore fully both the black and the Third World robs his film of greatness. Legba's name, for instance, derives from Elegba, the changeling god of the Nigerian Yoruba pantheon. The character demonstrates this trait, but Cnantet never exploits the connection. We are left with the cliché of yet another young black man dead on screen, mourned by white people who didn't know him and by his own people, who remain invisible beyond the frame. (25)

Altogether, the premature deaths of both Legba and Jane Doe seem to function, at least to me, as secular forms of sacrifice. Legba and Jane Doe must both die, and they must then have their spirits both ignored and forgotten so that everyone else in the small-cove-side resort community near Port-au-Prince, Haiti, can continue to carry on with their lives, their leisure, and their work. The two of them, both Legba and Jane Doe, seem to function together here as the necessary exclusions and the necessary exterminations that are so fundamental to the working of

a secular and global western modernity. They exist within the necropolitical and necroerotic zone of what scholars like Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe have referred to as a "state of exception," which is mainly inhabited by a variety of different people who fall under the Marxist category of the neocolonial lumpenproletariat. This category includes people, like Legba and Jane Doe, who engage in activities such as sex work and/or prostitution. Legba and Jane Doe's bare life—or their *zoē* to borrow from Agamben—is sacrificed in order to maintain the biopolitical realm. They are but a means to an end, an unfortunate sacrifice to be made in the much larger and important pursuit of everyone else's own self-determination and every else's self-realization which Legba, Jane Doe, and so many others just like them help to facilitate via the sexual and the spiritual forms of labor they provide. And this includes not just actual romance and/or sex, but the religio-spiritual practices of sexual and spiritual awakenings.

The religio-spiritual consignment of black Haitian sex workers and/or prostitutes to the oblivion of the underworld goes as far back to, at least, the 16th century sometime during the earliest days of their enslavement by—what was then—the conquistadores of the Spanish empire who were not only funded but inspired by the religious Christian fervor of *La Reconquista* [The Reconquest]. Many more would come to join this oblivion throughout the 17th century under the rule of the French empire, which was then funded and inspired by their own tenacious "*mission civilisatrice*" [civilizing mission]. And despite the introduction of the philosophies of secularism, liberalism, and neoliberalism, with the United States empire and the United Nations, it would seem that a similar religious conquest would continue well into the 21st century but only in a renewed and somewhat cloaked form. Such is the specific plight of the "wretched of the earth," as Frantz Fanon had also recognized. But, I must say that the spirits of these black Haitian sex workers are not so much "*the wretched*" as some English translations would have it. They are,

instead, “*the damned*” of the Earth, a word with expressly spiritual and/or religious connotations. Frantz Fanon, himself, uses the expression of “the damned” in his own originally French titled text, *Les damnés de la terre*, from 1961. The name and the title of that work of his has often been translated into English as *The Wretched of the Earth*, which is a title that somewhat elides the religious connotation in the original use of “les damnés” [the damned]. I, myself, would like to actually (re)emphasize Fanon’s use of “*les damnés*” or “the damned” here, and so their continued obliteration as well as their continued consignment to the realm of historical oblivion would seem to me to continue only in a renewed form the religious conquest once led by Western Christian Civilization since at least the year 1492.

Altogether and to bring it back to the present, it seems to me that it is Legba’s commodification as well as his own thingification which contributes to the rationalization and the naturalization of his own premature death as well as his own murder. Not only is Legba’s death completely ignored, but, as I have already repeatedly said and tried to demonstrate, it is also left to be forgotten. It is rationalized and it is naturalized, because of his own seemingly apparent racialized sexuality and because of his overall difference—be it “primitive,” “deviant,” “backwards,” “more sensual,” “closer to nature,” or whatever—and we witness this rationalization when the three main white women tourists—Brenda, Ellen, and Sue—all discuss this in the dinner conversation scene. This type of discourse speaks of the riskiness of sex work as a particular way of life, a way of life that is “chosen” and, therefore, a way of life that is expected. Such a discursive framework is also naturalized, because Legba is already imagined here as being dead or, at least, as moribund from the very beginning, from the very first scene in which we, ourselves, meet him. His death is, therefore, both foreshadowed and expected. Legba, in this film, is imaged and imagined as moribund, as already part of the living dead. And this

makes me wonder if he really is just a twenty-first century secular version of the much older Haitian creole figure of the *zonbi*.

case b

Jamaica-2010:

looking (& waiting) for the black messiah

content warning:

This chapter discusses physical and epistemic violence as well as anti-blackness.

It engages with various historical depictions of slavery involving people
who are shackled, thrown over board, and drowning.

0 - a mysterious moment amidst the music

Late into the night of Saturday, December 31st, 1969, one of Jamaica's then top reggae singers, Cocoa Tea, took to the stage, and it was his next scene that really seemed to steal the show. Slated as part of the musical entertainment for the 20th annual Bob Marley Birthday Bash which took place in the small beach town resort of Negril, Coco Tea played what one writer for *The Gleaner*—one of Jamaica's leading newspapers—referred to as nothing less than a “brilliant performance” (Frater). And yet something was still a bit off as all the tourists, themselves, continued to dance well past the middle of the night and right on the beach next the water.

Somewhere in the middle of his clearly successful set list, Coco Tea decided to suddenly pause and then take a rather mysterious moment amidst the music. At one point, he thought it opportune to say something of importance, and so, after looking out and into the audience that was then and there made up of primarily tourists, Cocoa Tea quickened the tempo and then suddenly halted the music. The crowd reacted wildly in response to this as if ready for the next big song. The touring fans—many of whom were engaging in “sex tourism,” no doubt—had, themselves, turned ecstatic. I'm sure that, for the many people who were all there that night, everything and probably everyone around them must have seemed to be in *just* the right place at *just* the right time. Things must have felt *just* right. They must have felt so *kairotic* as they all danced to the rhythm that had finally allowed them some time and some space to really let loose, to really let themselves live while being somewhere else sometime past midnight.

For Cocoa Tea, however, his own sudden halting of the beat and thus the whole entire show, was opportune in a different sort of way. This mysterious moment that he, himself, took amidst the music was necessary to and for him. According to Frater, the journalist who wrote for

The Gleaner at the time, “Coco Tea [sic] took a short break from his singing to scold the ‘rent a dreads’ in the audience [...]”¹ In scolding them, not only did Coco Tea, himself, accuse them of “shamelessly selling themselves,” but he also simultaneously claimed that they were “[...] spoiling the vacations of some decent visiting husbands and wives with their *freaky sexual advances*” (emphasis mine, *ibid*).

From the discourse and narrative that is crafted here in and by Frater’s newspaper article, no one seemed to openly and/or publicly contest Cocoa Tea’s accusation or his own general claim that night. Ostensibly, the crowd and, above all, the suddenly interpolated “rent a dreads” both remained oddly quiet. So, “[a]fter [his] ‘burning out’ the ‘rent a dreads,’” Cocoa Tea got right back to the music, playing some four more songs before they all had to go back home or to their own rooms for the rest of the night—that is, if they had and could afford one. This was according to the police-mandated cut-off time that was set for the show, itself. Until then and while the concert continued to rave on, Coco Tea’s fans and the sex tourists all within the crowd—now ecstatic and increasingly wild—let loose by dancing the night away. At the end of the night and its many festivities, Cocoa Tea, himself, was finally rewarded with a commemorative plaque for having contributed “[...] to the growth and development of Jamaica’s music” (*ibid*).

In many ways, this little vignette and this little scene—one that was literally played out on a stage—enacted, what I, myself, imagine to be a certain kind of performance, and it’s a performance that makes an implicit (if not explicit) appeal to respectability. Cocoa Tea’s accusation that the rent a dreads were “spoiling the vacations of some *decent* visiting husbands and wives” makes an appeal to not only decency, which is a form of propriety, but to the

heteronormative, conjugal couple who travels from far away, typically as tourists from the Global North (emphasis mine).

In briefly sitting with this statement and Coco Tea's mysterious moment amidst the music, we as investigators bear witness to the powers and the demands of the neocolonial state made manifest. In fact, it was the neocolonial state of Jamaica that created the very conditions—material and otherwise—for this very performance of Cocoa Tea's to occur, a performance that was, itself, catered to and designed explicitly for those “decent visiting husbands and wives.” That is, Coco Tea's own energy was focused on the tourists, for those who regularly come to let loose in Negril. Coco Tea's music was meant for those people on whose steady income he and the neocolonial state both largely depended. The small beach town resort of Negril, the celebration, Cocoa Tea's own musical performance and diatribe, the collective catharsis and even the ecstasy as well as the police presence ensuring a timely closure. All of these aspects have been orchestrated and rehearsed, and Cocoa Tea played nothing but one role: his part involved the wearing of an epistemological mask which, itself, carries with it the power to channel and give voice to certain kinds of spirits. Few may have noted, however, that the mask of the neocolonizer, itself, comes and came with a pair of fearful fangs—fangs that intimate its own necropolitical power and potential.

In Montego Bay on January 28th 2016, under the juridical aegises of The Sexual Offences Act, The Offences Against the Person Act, and the Towns and Communities Act, the St. James police undertook a mass—and potentially sting—operation. Having “detained, warned and subsequently released” some 76 alleged sex workers, of which 43 were female and 33 male, the police later implied that there would be future surveillance. In light of the fact that the police, themselves, had not caught the alleged sex workers in the precise act of “prostitution,” they

could only arrest the “perpetrators” under “reasonable suspicion.” They would, therefore, continue to watch the formerly detained. They were tasked with searching for any “suspicious behavior,” the criteria for which remained simply ambiguous if not completely disavowed.

And here we have yet another scene put on by the neocolonial state: Coco Tea’s aforementioned targets and his own scapegoats were now coercively assigned their own masks and roles to play as well in what now seems to be a rather clear genre of a play: it’s a tragedy. To those with a keen eye and what Gloria Anzaldúa has, herself, referred to as *la facultad*, they may know that this potentially sting operation undertaken by the St. James police department was an injunction accompanied by the very real and the very physical ability to arrest. It was a disciplinary imposition to act “civilized,” for sex—especially when commercialized in a non-state-sanctioned form—would be had the way that the neocolonial state demanded and declared it to be had. It would otherwise maintain and police the already-established criminality or further the criminalization of any other sexual acts that fell outside of its mandated rhythms, rituals, and rubrics. In lieu of not witnessing the concrete act of “prostitution” itself and with the promise of possible arrest, the neocolonial state brandished with the backing and force of the police both the implication of future surveillance as well as the discipline of their future suspicious behavior.

On March 28th 2016, business stakeholders in Negril push to both recognize and regulate sex work. They publicly demand that prostitution be “[...] decriminalised and regulated in order to create safer conditions for sex workers and their clients.” Among their reasons, they state that “prostitution has always been part of the fabric of the town, albeit a big contributor to social disorder.” “Prostitutes” are numerous, they claim; not only do the sex workers operate underground but they are also quite efficient. They assert and frame the importance of decriminalizing and regulating this network as a means “to address safety concerns.” The

chairman of the Couples Resorts then proposes a “coexistence.” For the sex workers, however, this “coexistence” is oddly and simultaneously characterized as “confined, controlled and managed.” And yet any appeal to a more material understanding of “safer working conditions,” such as ameliorating the “prostitutes” (sexual) health, is met with a sheer logistical problem: Jamaica has a completely debilitated health infrastructure that is, itself, “[...] struggling to address even day-to-day health issues.” Despite the concrete means to take care of the very sex workers in whose profession and practice the business stakeholders have now taken ripe interest, they, the business stakeholders, continue to craft and wield a discourse of safety in order to set the stage for and justify yet another scene: bringing the underground network above and into the upperworld ruled by the neocolonial elite’s control over their glocal—that is, global and local—markets. In doing so, these sex workers are increasingly exposed to neoliberal global capitalism’s biopolitical sphere.

In a separate meeting just a day later on March 29th, the Negril Chamber of Commerce (NCC) and its police force come together to demand an increase in police personnel. The central concern on that day’s agenda was a supposedly new quality to Negril’s criminality. In short, this type of criminal activity was described as “now far more worrisome.” Citing the increased numbers of residents, both tourist and local, the organization’s co-founder, Daniel Grizzle, noted “an increase in cases of tourist harassment on Negril beach.” While he initially referred to the agents of said harassment as “harassers” both ambiguously and rather abstractly, he then quickly renamed and re-characterized them as “criminals” who would, furthermore, dare to come out at precisely the busiest of beach times. With an increase in police personnel, Grizzle would ultimately be able to control the sheer uptick in this new kind of “criminality.” With an increase in funds, he, himself, could start to address the “worrisome” tenacity to engage in “criminal”

activity at the height of the tourist beach-going season as well as the hour. In addition to the call for more police personnel, Grizzle and the Superintendent Adrian Hamilton would also ask for the “cooperation of residents and the placement of security cameras” as a tripartite effort in curbing Negril’s “social disorder.”

This meeting, as our third little vignette and scene, bore witness to a bait-and-switch tactic, or what is also known as a metalepsis. Not only was there no investigation into why the “street harassers” were “harassing” to begin with, but the “harassers” were deemed “criminal” and thus framed as the cause of social disorder instead of an effect of the very social order, itself. As soon as they were rhetorically deemed “criminals,” they somehow became inherently—if not “biologically”—guilty while the historical conditions that gave rise to their own “criminality” were completely erased. No one drew attention to the simple fact that the current “social order”—clearly in favor of the tourists, at least, but really the Chamber of Commerce—was historically and still is meant to extract, accumulate, and direct profit upward. In effect, the neocolonial state had naturalized the social disorder by eradicating its own material history, and then it used the naturalization of that social disorder as the necessary justification for more police personnel which would, in turn and ultimately, allow for it to further sink its own fangs—now twinned with both necropolitical and biopolitical potential—even deeper.

Four different events, four distinct moments in both space and time. The first image is that of Coco Tea’s impromptu diatribe at the 20th Bob Marley Birthday Bash in 1969. The second is the 2016 police operation, which is then followed by the third: the Negril business stakeholder demand. The fourth is the meeting between the Negril Chamber of Commerce and the Jamaica Constabulary Force. *But how does one make sense of the connections between these*

four seemingly different episodic flash points, these seemingly fractured images? What links them all together? What is the image or the mosaic as it exists as a whole?

My own goal in putting together these four little vignettes up above is, itself, twofold. In rendering them together like this—via the specifically surrealist-inspired technique of juxtaposition—I aim to first exemplify and then hopefully begin to generate if only in miniature what I, myself, have already referred to and further explained in my first methods chapter as a set of “dialectical images.” or what are more commonly understood, in short, as a constellation. In doing so, the act of juxtaposing together different fragments should, itself, be capable of providing for the creation and generation of a new historical framework and/or assemblage. And this is where the second prong comes in: this moment of the creation and generation of a new historical framework and/or assemblage only comes in temporarily instead of in sustained periods of shock. In a way, it’s quite like that of a lightning bolt: brief, bright, and fleeting. But however brief this epiphanic experience may, itself, be, it does allow for one to get a glimpse of the possibility that there is not just one single connective thread which exists there among the many different fragments that have all been collected and composed here through juxtaposition. There is, instead, an array of many different connective threads—a web of relations, if you will—that exists in between and among them.

In the vignettes above, I’ve sought recourse to two different types of analytical metaphors: the theatrical and the watery. In terms of water, I want to think critically about the representation of these socio-cultural happenings via the written media of journalism as “images” above as being fractured by ripples in a much larger pool that contains a much more complete image. Throughout this chapter, the prevalence of water will, itself, continue to reemerge and come back anew in both haunting and exciting ways. Yet, these fractured “images”

in a pool are more than mere reflections or the embedding of light on a photosensitive surface. They are, instead, socio-cultural happenings *represented* via the written media of journalism.

The theatrical—involving the scene, the stage, the mask etc.—occurs in two ways. On the one hand, I want to think both about the politics of *representing* those same socio-cultural happenings into the formation of a sellable story. Stories on sex work and the scandals they bring up sell quite a bit. And so, I've turned to using the constituent parts of storytelling: the scene, the stage, the mask etc. as a means to help better understand the rules and roles taken on in a larger expanding project of racial capitalism that initially reads as almost disparate happenings. This is no mistake, and admittedly, it lends itself to what some may deem a more “spiritual” approach. For water has historically been used as a tool for memory and remembrance. I want to explore what it is that causes the ripples and thus the fracturing of the image as a whole.

Leaving metaphor aside, I want to explore in this chapter how the evacuation of history or the structural amnesia racial capitalism induces functions as a technology for sovereignty. As a part of those technologies, I understand *subjectivation*—or, what Foucault referred to as *assujétissement*—or the establishing of subjectivities as a necessary tool. I am interested in understanding the expansion of racial capitalism as necessitating a set of differentiated subjectivities (some within a biopolitical sphere while others are in a necropolitical sphere) along with their respective performances not just a series of connections that links together sex work, the tourism industry, and the neocolonial Jamaican state, but a way or a method of reading these episodes or images that can precisely account for their linkages. I want to provide an account of, for example, what connects the 1969 music festival and the diatribe therewith to the qualitative shift in Negril's crime in 2016. Or better yet, I want to go back even further temporally and farther spatially: I want to showcase how even the seemingly most removed events of the past,

such as African slavery under the transatlantic slave trade, continues to inform the rationalized violence found in the scenes above. I want to also showcase how even the most spatially distant events, such as those found in the life-worlds and their respective practices of the 18th century French Second Republic's Parisian demimonde, continue to inform those very same events—especially those that unfolded at the 20th Bob Marley Birthday Bash. This endeavor is no simple task.

In order to do this work, I, myself, read J. Michael Seyfert's 2000 documentary, *Rent a Rasta*, through a synthesized theoretical lens that blends together Walter Benjamin's historiographical materialism with Christina Sharpe's historiographical epistemology. As such, this chapter provides a much broader frame for understanding Caribbean sex tourism—especially between white women and male rastafari sex workers—at the turn of the 20th century into the 21st century. Its aim is to contest certain discursive formations that 1) narrate sex workers as criminals; 2) seek to regulate sex work; and, 3) frequently center the white women who are involved.

This chapter—labeled as Case C and titled “Jamaica-2010: looking for the black messiah”—telescopes the larger project's third Caribbean figure of sex work and/or prostitution: the rent a rasta. It, therefore, centers on and investigates the image of “the rent a rasta,” which is, itself, an expression that is short for “rent a Rastafari.” “Rent a rastas” are also known as “rent a dreads,” both of which are common and often interchangeable names for a black and typically Jamaican male sex worker who is typically impoverished and frequently homeless. The twentieth

century sociologist and anthropologist, Klaus de Albuquerque, for example, elaborates on this particular figure as one that is also unique to Jamaica. In his own 1998 essay, “In Search of the Big Bamboo,” De Albuquerque writes that “[...] the average [rent a dread] has little formal education; they are typically migrants from rural areas; and they live in nearby shanties that ring the tourist location (52). I, myself, however, work with the figure and the image of the Rastafari pauper and that of the black Jamaican sex worker as they are represented in Seyfert’s 2010 documentary film, *Rent a Rasta*. In doing so, I aim to explain and explore not only the messianic mode of historiography that resides within Rastafari cosmology, but the director’s own use of dialectical images as an alternative mode of historiography. This chapter, then, is about *how* the cosmology of the black Jamaican Rastafari sex worker retains within it an historical method as well as an historical memory that, together, helps us to critically remember the global system that was and still is the transatlantic slave trade along with all of its racialized and sexualized violences both past and present.

This chapter hopes to offer up a reading of Seyfert’s film that provides for an ultimately a broader frame for the potential revisioning of the more contemporary global phenomenon of “Caribbean sex tourism.” That is, my own reading of the film hopes to show how this particular system is, itself, still alive, still well, and still functioning today, occurring in the some of the smallest of beach side towns as well as resorts on not just the island of Jamaica but all across the Caribbean and even the globe. Provided that Seyfert is a filmmaker who engages with montage in this film, I argue that Seyfert’s historiographical work sheds yet another and much greater light than that of Cantet’s film in the very first case and chapter. Just like in Cantet’s film, however, Seyfert’s also continues to represent the unequal relationship that exists between

globally northern white women tourists and the local Rastafari, black Jamaican male sex workers.

This case and corresponding chapter thus asserts that the image and the figure of the rent a rasta possesses three major arcana. The first arcanum to be found in the image of the rent a rasta is the potential revolutionary power of a messianism that allows for one to generate an alternative historiography and, therefore, an alternative temporality. This particular, messianic mode of historiography and temporality, itself, seems to not only contest the dominant bourgeois conceptions of both History and Time which are both imagined as being linear and progressive, but this particular messianic mode of historiography and temporality also reveals the presence of histories and temporalities that are, themselves, much more cyclical and spiral-like in nature. The second arcanum is to be found in the rituals of Rastafari prayer as well as meditation that both allow for followers to adopt a certain kind of collective memory with which the Rastafari sex workers in Seyfert's own documentary film engage as they, themselves, go about their own days looking (and waiting) for the next coming of the black Messiah. The third arcanum is to be found in the promise of what I, myself, call epistemic healing. In sum, the image and the figure of the rent a rasta not only presents us with an alternative historiography and an alternative temporality, but they also practice rituals that collectively memorialize the historical violence of racial capitalism that both neoliberalism and neoliberal epistemology have sought to both ignore and forget as well as obscure and erase.

This particular case and its own corresponding chapter, therefore, presents an argument with two main components. The first main component argues that black Rastafari sex workers—commonly known as “rent a rastas”—practice a certain form of spiritual discipline which enables them to both critically and collectively remember the violences of what is no less than a past that

has been dominated by a global system of racial capitalism. What is all the more impressive is that they do this in the wake and in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade which has, itself, lasted for more than some 500 years now at least. Put another way, Rastafarianism is not just an Abrahamic-adjacent religious and political movement. It is also a specifically *spiritual* movement with a distinctively Afro-diasporic cosmology that helps its own adherents to retain the memory of their very own collective dispossession from Africa. In doing so, Rastafarianism helps its own practitioners come to terms with and understand their own current as well as collective state of being impoverished, destitute, and diasporic while also providing them with the glimmering hope of some sort of redemption.

But my own argument, again, possesses a second major component to it, and it is this: the discourse of gendered liberation carries with it an underlying form of transnational neoliberal multiculturalism.² Put another way, it is precisely through an investment and participation in the tourism industry—or so the proponents of this discourse argue—that the past social ills of not only gendered oppression are eradicated, but so too is the racialized oppression done away with provided that there is now an uptick in interracial relationships. Moreover, the tourism industry is also stated to help eradicate national barriers by establishing transnational networks that “ameliorate” local infrastructure, essentially bringing the “underdeveloped” countries, such as those in the Caribbean, up to par with those of the “developed” world in the hopes of generating a new global citizenry. That is, if white women are not only able to explore the limitations of what was once a disenfranchizing gendered category, now they are able to explore, be limitless, and do all the more while simultaneously engaging in what is frequently pitched as meaningful cross-cultural and inter-racial relationships. In sum, the tourism industry frames itself as serving as the panacea for both gendered oppression as well as racialized oppression. My own goal here

is to not argue that no meaningful relations and/or relationships ever develop. Nor am I saying that these kinds of relations and/or relationships of care don't actually develop—or even that one should. I'm not interested in any moralizing. Instead, I want to focus the attention onto the uncritical uptake of this particular kind of assimilationist discourse and the way in which it continues to obscure and therefore further secure a global system of racial capitalism.

So what is at stake in this second chapter's analysis? What seems to be the most at stake in this particular case is the clear need at this point to really abandon dominant bourgeois modes of historiography. These modes of telling and teaching history participate in an often uncritical, linear, universal, and teleological orientation that is not, in fact, (materially) accurate or true. It would then seem important to adopt alternative historiographies, such as those that can be generated out of the assemblage and crafting of dialectical images, for example. We can then learn from what these dialectical images bring up, what gets illuminated from their juxtaposition, and we can then begin to use those once-buried but now critically remembered histories in order to better understand contemporary global phenomena, such as “sex tourism,” with which we continue to live today.

What follows is quite similar to the other three major cases and chapters that have already made up this book project in that this here case and this here chapter consists of an intentionally assembled set of five specific fragments. In terms of the more formal elements of Seyfert's film, I first pay attention to and offer up some of my own critical commentary on the ways in which *Rent-a-Rasta* partakes in as well as departs from the Griersonian tradition of documentary film. I then move on to analyze another important formal element of the film, itself: Seyfert's own use of filmic montages particularly within the scene of the film's very first opening montage. Here, I

pay close attention to how the film's use of visual montage enables it to both craft and enact an alternative historiography through the use of a select series of dialectical images.

I - on the film, the filmmaker, & the film's form

As I have already mentioned up above a few times now, this chapter's primary object of study is the image and figure of the black rastafari sex worker as it is represented in the 2010 documentary film, *Rent a Rasta*, by J. Michael Seyfert. But before I begin with my own more formal analysis of this particular image in Seyfert's film, I do want to address a few important and contextualizing things in the first section of this chapter which I have dedicated to exploring some of my own thoughts on the film, the filmmaker, and the film's form.

In terms of the film's content, Seyfert's documentary explores, exposes, and explains some of the lives, practices, and beliefs of several rent a rastas as they all relate to the religious and political movement of Rastafarianism. Combining together narration, interviews, oratory, musical performance, and historical documentation, this "eye-opening exposé," as it has been so often referred to online in quite the number of different places, weaves together what may very well be a radical discourse on "sex tourism." More specifically, Seyfert's documentary focuses in on and attempts to reframe with his use of an alternative mode of historiography that particular relation and form of (sexual) exchange which has historically existed and taken place between those globally northern, white women tourists who are, themselves, from predominately wealthy and Western countries and those globally southern, black and Jamaican male Rastafari sex workers who are, themselves, locals and often migrants who have been collectively as well as historically dispossessed of their own land. Whereas the former arrive both rooted and abundant, the latter are left both diasporic and destitute.

I do want to be clear that I do not read *RENT a RASTA* as any sort of account of "sex tourism" that is more veritable because of its documentary-like nature. I do not consider *RENT a*

Rasta to be a film that somehow provides some sort of “truer” insight into this sexual economy. Nor do I think that it offers us a clearer vision to use via the seemingly “unmediated” mouths of those practicing and/or engaging in it. After all the documentary’s scenes are, themselves, more devoted to explaining Rastafarianism, its history, its practices, and its concepts. It even explains how the Jamaican neocolonial state has long wielded this particular religion as a marketing device for its own tourism. In fact, the scenes involving sex workers discussing just *what* exactly it is that they do, *what* it is that they call it, and *why* it is that they do it are all quite few in number. Additionally, the scenes that explicitly discuss the phenomenon of sex tourism merely pose facts and numbers that while, indeed and on their own, are quite interesting, they are not my central focus here. Lastly, one cannot ignore the simple fact that the documentary possesses an entire narrative arc, one that is accompanied by an intentional visual composition of chosen shots. These chosen shots are all sequenced, edited, and arranged together. The film, therefore, juxtaposes digital renditions of historical materials with shots that were more than likely taken on site there in Negril, Jamaica. I think what I am trying to say here is that any approach to the documentary that somehow sees it as providing some sort of lesser mediated or even unmediated access to the utmost “truth” of “sex tourism” seems to be a completely fraught endeavor. This position also ignores much of the Foucauldian way of analyzing discourses and their production of the truth. My own project and its engagement with Seyfert’s film are not so much interested in whether or not Seyfert provides us with a truer account. It is, instead, interested in how it is that Seyfert produces his truth through the specific use of montage.

With that said, the documentary *does* provide access to a better understanding of *certain* aspects of “sex tourism.” From the vantage point of the neocolonial Jamaican state, Rastafarianism is seen as a commodity that is frequently sexualized and sold in the tourism

industry. While non-explicitly selling sex, disavowed. What is of primary interest to me is, in fact, the documentary's narrative construction. That is, I am interested in precisely how it approaches any narration of specifically Jamaican rent-a-rasta practices and thus sex tourism more generally. I am interested in the connections that it reveals, connections that have otherwise been obscured and/or rendered unintelligible. *How might the specific historical conditions that inform rastafari sex work in the early 21st century, help us think through the expansion of sex tourism across not just the Caribbean and even hemisphere but the globe? How does this specific case help to think through not just the material conditions out of which sex tourism is created, but also the ways in which sex tourism utilizes race, class, gender, sex, and sexuality among others in order to secure its expansion?*

But what about the filmmaker? J. Michael Seyfert is a co-founding member of an autonomous group of filmmakers. *Rent a Rasta* is, therefore, co-produced by Yeah But/Not Now Productions as well as CinePobre.com.³ I want to speak a little bit about the production studio and website before proceeding on to the content of the film, itself.

Cine Pobre is a Mexican-based film festival organization that supports a self-funded genre of filmmaking. The organization purportedly relieves filmmakers of any stylistic and/or format constraints in the making of their own films. According to the website, "Cine Pobre is a culture jamming grassroots initiative to help advocate self-funded filmmaking while working intellectually off-grid." It also states on another part of their website that:

"Cine Pobre proves there are more stories in the world, more eccentrics and visionaries, than there is film to capture them. Against all odds, we, the autonomous filmmaker go out with our cameras and a strong sense for justice. Autonomous means self-funded but not short in punch, because we somehow

manage to document our world and society's ills and beauty in compelling stories."

With *Rent a Rasta*, Seyfert won the award for best director at the Atlanta Docu Festival. He has since been quite the sensation and conversation-starter across many internet fora. In an IMDB mini biography, Seyfert has been described as a social justice filmmaker as well as someone who deviates from or "doesn't rely on old standards of filmmaking." Instead, the description goes on to add how Seyfert focuses on rather serious subjects, is thought-provoking, and produces material that resonates emotionally with folks across national borders.

Seyfert's other films do have a common thematic focus on issues of inequity, and he often approaches those issues of inequality usually through the vantage points of the dispossessed. His films mostly occur within the context of the early twenty first century in Latin America, but I doubt that his work is just limited to these regions of the planet. His films range from an exploration of the developments on the island of Cuba post-Fidel with *Bye Bye Havana* which was released in 2006 to *Waorani: Last of the Rainforest People*, which was released in 2005 and. That latter film exposes the unfair trading practices that take place between oil companies and indigenous groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon. His latest film, released in 2012 is called *Brazil Is Not Copacabana*, and it mainly satirizes the poverty in Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

The film's form seems to both participate in as well as break from the specific and somewhat long tradition of Griersonian documentary film. This particular tradition of film is named after the work and writing of John Grierson (1898-1972) who first coined the term "documentary" in a review of one of Robert Flaherty's films. That film of Flaherty's was his 1924 silent documentary film, *Moana*. The specifically Griersonian line of documentary as well as general ethnographic film work was also a reaction to Flaherty's key feature length

documentary film released in 1922, *Nanook of the North*. Flaherty often focused on the “exotic individual,” and he mixed that focus with a certain romantic style. While inspired by Flaherty, Grierson and his compatriots, in turn, focused more on things such as social concern and propaganda. The tradition of Griersonian documentary film, then, repositions the individual from an originally heroic frame to that of an alienated one, all while retaining the interest in the “exotic individual.” Grierson’s filmic style also demonstrates, as Winston observes, “[...] an aesthetic allegiance to Soviet silent cinema,” with particular interest in its use of montage (766).

The push for social concern, the role of propaganda, the interest in the “exotic individual” as well as his alienation, these are all the same elements that we see in Seyfert’s film mixed together within various different montage sequences. In fact, a description of the film on its main website captures these specifically Griersonian characteristics well. It reads: “In sight and sound, *RENT a RASTA* portrays the many fronts in which Babylon fights the Movement of Rastafari in Jamaica. How slavery continues until this very day.” Utilizing both “sight and sound” the spectator is intimately brought into the socio-economic plight of not just the rastafari male but the rastafari male sex worker as a sort of exotic and yet political individual. It is this latter figure whom the Jamaican neocolonial government along with the many countries of the Global North which make up what rastafari adherents refer to as “Babylon” continue to systemically expropriate for his racialized sexual appeal and monetary promise in the form of the tourist dollar. Among the “many fronts in which Babylon fights the Movement of Rastafari in Jamaica” which the description cites and the documentary will, itself, explain is the history and ongoing legacy of the African slave trade as well as its now contemporaneous version in the form of the sex tourism industry. In this way, Seyfert’s traditionally Griersonian-inspired documentary seeks to focus in on and expose a major set of socio-economic problems in 21st century Jamaican

society so as to then show and educate the viewer in the hopes that they may then go off and do something about it (Winston 766).

dialectical images of & in the wake: or, watery imagistic theory

Before moving into my close reading of the film itself in order to detail *how* and *what* it offers in terms of an understanding of sex tourism as a sexual-economic mode of exchange in a larger system of racial capitalism, I want to expound on the method and analytic of two key scholars that inform my reading of *RENT a RASTA* in this chapter. Those scholars are the philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, as well as associate professor of English and African American Studies, Christina Sharpe. I want to pull two key ideas from them that I use throughout my analysis: the method for enacting a materialist historiography known as “dialectical images” and “the wake” as a useful analytic for both focusing one’s attention on and analyzing specific content generated out of that same materialist historiography. In what follows, I’ll move through an explanation of Benjamin’s method, Sharpe’s analytic, and how they work together before I begin my reading of *RENT a RASTA*.

Walter Benjamin develops his concept of “dialectical images” in his *Arcades Project* which was a collection of writings on the city life of 19th century Paris and written between 1927-1940. He discussed it, in short, as a method for performing a new critical materialist historiography.⁴ While Benjamin himself never offers up an explicit definition for what he understood “dialectical images” to be, he does provide an account of *what* they allow one to do, see, and/or understand (Pensky 178). In short, they serve as a means to better write the obscured histories of material objects while under capitalism. The reason for the newness and “critical”

aspects of Benjamin's "dialectical images" as historiographical method is that he developed it alongside other available methods (both Hegelian and Marxian) of his time. Nevertheless, I would like to provide my own definition of what I think Benjamin was attempting to capture with the expression.

I would assert that "dialectical images," for Benjamin, is the conscious juxtaposition of certain images from the present with those of the past so as to invoke within the viewer a paradigmatic shift in the way that they conceive of history. In order to jolt the viewer into a new reconceptualization of history, the juxtaposer reveals to the viewer the precise historical connection between images that at first seem to be completely disconnected and/or even antithetical to one another (hence the use of "dialectical"). The viewer, then,—and in theory—undergoes a shock of sorts as their understanding of history is, in the words of Benjamin, "shattered." In its place emerges a "fuller" history wherein an unimaginable and unquantifiable new array of connections and/or constellations are both forged and revealed.

While it goes without saying that the histories generated out of "dialectical images" are quite distinct from the original history with which the viewer approached these images, it is important to note how Benjamin qualified that *original* history as a disavowed *bourgeois* history. It is "bourgeois history" that—in its attempts to maintain hegemony through its regular assertion to being universal—renders time as linear; its major periodic events are divided by ruptures that disconnect each period from those before and after. Yet an intellectual progression (*viz.* evolution) continues accordingly through each and every one of those very same periods. Furthermore, it is this "bourgeois history" that actively and violently obscures not only conceptions of history as non-linear, relative, and/or multiplicitous among other features, but it also obscures—insofar as it is articulated with racial capitalism—the very material histories of

objects and ideas. “Bourgeois history” forcibly induces an historical amnesia, an epistemic trauma that severs knowledge of the material origins of objects and subjects and their development over time. This is incredibly important for one to situate themselves, to know thyself, in the current socio-political context of their own space-time configuration. “Bourgeois history” erases the various contexts within which material objects, subjects, and ideas were deployed (especially when under postmodern conditions); it distorts the alliances with and resistances by those in or out of power; and it shifts their meaning of things over time and space. “Dialectical images,” therefore, is the precise tool that helps the viewer as an interlocutor, assumedly invested in “bourgeois history,” come to terms with the fact that that history thought of as empirically and universally true is, in fact, a mere epistemic construction for social control.

I want to take a moment to just elaborate on Benjamin’s understanding of “dialectical images” and its use as a method for accomplishing a materialist historiography. For Benjamin, it was the Surrealists’ use of montage as a technique with the capacity to disorient, shock, and defamiliarize bourgeois ways of seeing that he found somewhat useful. By taking seemingly meaningless objects from the contexts that determined their meaninglessness and then placing them in new contexts and constellations (i.e. *découpage* and *collage*), they rendered those same objects oddly meaningful. Whereas the Surrealists would irrationally juxtapose various images together via this *principle of montage* that seemingly made no sense whatsoever to the common viewer, Benjamin noted that it would not lead to a greater historical consciousness unless they “carr[ied] the principle of montage over into history.”

By using the technique of montage and intentionally “carrying it over into history,” then and as Benjamin says, one is able to “[...] assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual

moments the crystal of the total event” (qtd. in Pensky, 185). That is, whereas the Surrealists used an array of images that by themselves were seemingly “free-floating” and history-less, arranging them with other images in order to generate odd, peculiar, and curious meaning, Benjamin’s use of this very same montage technique took intentionally chosen images across history (i.e. “the small individual moments”) and arranged them in a new configuration that would begin to situate the images in relation to one another across time and space. The result is, again, instead of a “free-floating” history-less object, the generation of a situated and “deeply” historical and historicized image that is placed in relation to other, now “deeply” historical and historicized images. The interlocutor’s conceptual frame theoretically expands and a new account of a much longer historical trajectory emerges (i.e. “the large-scale construction”). What was once just small individual history-less moments now become precise points in the intricate epistemic lattice-work of a much larger crystalline structure.

I would add here that in order to be even more effective in shocking the viewer out of their investment in “bourgeois history,” the juxtaposition of images would also have to be intentional or conscious over irrationally or unconsciously pulling various images together. That is, one may generate “dialectical images” by selecting historical fragments that are, first, researched and, subsequently, removed from their seemingly unimportant historical context—what Benjamin called the “trash bin of history.” To perform “dialectical images” without such an intentional or conscious approach would merely replicate the work of the Surrealists, embracing the creativity of the absurd.

I want to briefly revisit what “dialectical images” are, what they can do, and how they function, because *RENT* a *RASTA* as a film enacts this very Benjaminian materialist historiography. It pulls historical images that have been confined to the “trash bin of history” in

order to subsequently and consciously redeploy them via the principle of montage. By then mixing segments of “dialectical images” with other segments concerning the present, the entire film effectively “carr[ies them] over into history.” The result, then, is a situating of the Rastafari sex worker in space and time, generating again a much larger epistemic crystalline structure. By the end of the film, the viewer is hopefully shocked out of their initial conception of history and their understanding of the reasons for why Rastafari sex workers do the things they do. Instead and moreover, it asks the viewer to contend with the specifically occluded, historical socio-economic structural conditions that allowed for the possibility of the conjuncture of Rastafarianism and sex work while throughout the 20th-21st century under the Caribbean tourism industry.

Apart from Benjamin’s method, I also want to discuss Christina Sharpe’s analytic of “the wake.” For Sharpe, generally speaking, “the wake” is a conceptual framework and new analytic for approaching the past, present, and hopefully changing the future. It is, specifically and in short, a way of making sense of the qualitative depths and persistence of anti-blackness and black being since, at least, the transatlantic slave trade. In her own words, she explains that “the wake” is, “[...] a conceptual frame *of* and *for* living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery” (emphasis mine, 2).

Sharpe understands and uses “the wake” as a polysemous term. It possesses several definitions, some of which sometimes appear to be seemingly at odds with one another—Sharpe does claim, after all, that the wake is, itself, a paradox (14). In any case, Sharpe provides five major definitions for her own analytic. The first defines “the wake” as “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow” (3). The second and third

offer an understanding of the wake as, “the state of wakefulness; consciousness” (4) and “in the line of recoil of (a gun)” (8). The last two and somewhat related definitions are: “a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking” (10); “grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental too this” (11). It is with all of these definitions in mind—this capaciousness of the term—that I, too, understand, uptake, and utilize Sharpe’s analytic.

One key qualitative aspect of “the wake” that I, myself, explore in this case and chapter is its specifically anagrammatic character. This is a qualitative phenomenon to the wake, or what could be called the nature of its repetition. For Sharpe, blackness in “the wake” does not simply repeat itself as a faithful copy, as an exact replica and redeployment. “The wake” causes blackness to “ripple,” to rearrange itself as “the wake” expands through space and time. Sharpe states that “anagrammatical blackness [...] exists as an index of violability and also potentiality” (75). In other words, blackness is both literally rearranged into new configurations while simultaneously allowing for the proliferation of new meanings “[...] or a secret message is discovered through [its] rearranging [...]” (76).

Personally, I understand Sharpe’s use of “the wake” as an onto-epistemological phenomenon. That is, “the wake” is, on the one hand, the ontological or material fall-out of Atlantic chattel slavery, encompassing its corporeal and institutional aspects—the latter of which having morphed into differentially arranged institutional modes (i.e. sharecropping, mass incarceration etc.). On the other hand, “the wake” also accounts for or renders intelligible what

Sadiya Hartman captures when using the rubric “afterlife of slavery” to mean the “[...] skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (6). But “the wake” is also epistemic insofar as it is equally a tremendous amount of violence done unto thought and thinking (4). In the afterlives of slavery, violence has continued not just onto differently racialized bodies in differential ways, but it has also continued to violently impact our epistemes, the very systems of thinking and ideas we use to narrate the material world. It is the epistemic trauma wrought by bourgeois history, for example. It is a problem *of* and *for* thought, of thinking *of* and *in* the wake itself. “The wake,” then, is at once a concrete *and* abstract phenomenon.

Despite all the violence *in* “the wake,” Sharpe also tells us that—upon acknowledging the legacies of the wake’s historical impacts—it is also a healing tool *for* that very same thought and thinking. The wake is ultimately an opening up to our interlocking, submerged and/or eradicated multiplicitous histories; it is a self-reexposure to the pains of the past as a way to heal in the present. Indeed, “[...] the past that is not past,” Sharpe writes, “reappears, always, to rupture the present” (9). If we are not conscious of not only the event(s) that caused the wake nor the ways in which the wake’s history hits us periodically in the present with tsunami like force, then we are more than likely sitting with and in unacknowledged, repetitive trauma. Moreover, we sit with the conceptual tools and frameworks given to us by normative and canonical pedagogies that can and, more than likely, will never simply account for what that trauma, in fact, is in addition to why it exists to begin with. To do wake work, as she calls it, is to think *in*, *of*, *with*, and *for* “the wake,” as a means to be conscious *of* and thus heal *from* and *in* the “afterlives of slavery.” Quite beautifully and quite pithily Sharpe writes the following:

“I want to think 'care' as a problem for thought. I want to think care in the wake as a problem for thinking *of* and *for* Black non/being in the world. Put another way, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a work that insists and performs that thinking needs care ("all thought is Black thought") and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake" (5).

For Sharpe, her main concern is the way that the wake informs blackness and black being. And so, I, myself, take up Sharpe's call to undertake *wake work*. She says:

[...] we think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness) and we join the wake with work in order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic, we might continue to image new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. (18)

I want to use Sharpe's analytic of "the wake" as a means to, first, reveal the many ways that it articulates with and repeats within the socio-economic formation that is sex tourism. My hope is that in doing so, we are better able to address the epistemic and material violences of the contemporary period that include—but are not limited to—the severing of a collective historical memory and the dangers of uncritically inhabiting the biopolitical category of whiteness, specifically white womanhood. But whereas Sharpe uses "the wake" to think up a way of healing *from* and *in* it, to do *wake work* "[...] as a theory and praxis of the wake; a theory and praxis of Black being in diaspora," I want to use this chapter as a means to answer her call to think and to contribute sketching out that thinking from a different context. Sharpe, too, doesn't have the precise language to describe "this work;" she is actively thinking language anew, to "sound a

new language.” I would wholeheartedly agree, especially with my training as a comparativist in the three major colonial languages, French, Spanish, and English, whose grammars were constructed with imperialism and social control in mind (Mignolo). If Sharpe asks the question: “How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state?” My first response, and what I feel I can best contribute is an identification of the ways in which that violence functions and may not be so easily registered as violent. Instead of building the theory, I am deploying it in order to focus our attention on what the wake has done from the vantage point of sex work in the Caribbean tourism industry.

So, what does it mean to engage with a “dialectical images” *of* and *in* “the wake”? If Benjamin provides us with a more materialist historiographical method, then Sharpe’s analytic of “the wake” allows us to critically assess the new content. And if bourgeois history has epistemically severed the material histories of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, then to utilize “dialectical images” is to begin revealing, reclaiming, and remembering that history. It is to actively pursue an epistemic healing. What material history is then generated by carrying out “dialectical images,” can be met with Sharpe’s analytic as another tool for epistemic healing. “The wake” draws our attention to the qualitative damage, the deathly repetitions, the violence of living, thinking, being, and doing, *in* “the wake.” Together, they engender a new method for performing a materialist epistemology. Its character is a sort of watery, imagistic theory and praxis. *RENT a RASTA* not only enacts “dialectical images” as a documentary film, but, as representational media, it helps to better make sense of the specifically qualitative nature of “the wake” in the context of 21st century Caribbean sex tourism and racial capitalism at large.

I think what is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspect of Seyfert's film, is that it actively engages with an alternative mode of historiography. And it is this particular, alternative mode of historiography that, I think, helps to shift our own perspective on and better situate the global phenomenon of "sex tourism" as, itself, an ongoing part of a much deeper, darker, and complex history. *That* history, moreover, is the history of the Transatlantic Slave trade. One of the primary contributions that Seyfert's documentary provides to any understanding of sex tourism in the contemporary moment is, first and foremost, its deep and complex engagement with this particular history. Instead of providing an ahistorical account of sex tourism or engaging in universalizing histories—such as Jamaica's national history as a neocolonial state or the tourism industry's industrial-economic history—the documentary offers a history that focuses on the conditions of emergence for the black rastafari sex worker. In doing so, the film not only performs an alternative mode of historiography but a specifically messianic mode of historiography that simultaneously and implicitly acknowledges the possibility, presence, and importance of *multiple*—if not *plural*—histories.

The documentary form, just like this very project, itself, utilizes a series of narrativized visuals that function together as a set of dialectical images. The juxtaposition of these images then allows for us, as the viewer, to not only better see but to hopefully better understand the current impoverished conditions of the black Jamaican rent-a-rasta through a reconstruction of their shared history of systemic racial violence under the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, the documentary's use of dialectical images as a means to enact a messianic historiography that reveals the connections among rent-a-rastas and the African slave trade provides insight into what I want to call a deep-seated *repertoire of structural repetitions* both material and epistemic.

What enables Seyfert's documentary film to both acknowledge and trace these multi-historical accounts of rastafari sex workers is predominately his formal use of dialectical images. This is exactly the same method and methodological cornerstone that I, myself, have chosen to use in this project, *A Critical Caribbean Constellation*. But whereas my own work is more literary-oriented in its use of dialectical images, Seyfert's use of them is much more filmic. His images are filmic in the empirical sense that a viewer can literally see them on a screen.

II - contesting bourgeois history: revisiting the African slave trade with dialectical images

Seyfert's film is—in a matter that is quite akin to this project of my own—a film that both crafts and creates alternative histories. But what I think marks Seyfert's film as different from my own way of writing alternative histories is that he does so through the use of a specifically *filmic* as opposed to *literary* type of montage. While sometimes accompanied by music and prayer, Seyfert's filmic montages are, at other times, accompanied by an audible commentary. These different elements are simply not possible in literary montage. The unique effect, then, is that Seyfert's specifically filmic montages function as a set of alternative historical expositions.

To reiterate and just elaborate a bit further, Seyfert has crafted and created a number of important filmic montages that are, themselves, scattered throughout the film. The very first montage—which I, myself, will call and consistently identify as “the opening montage,” here further on down below—takes place at the very beginning of the film, and it will make up the bulk of my own upcoming analysis. The subsequent montages occur at or around the 3:55, 10:45, 19:36, 21:09 and 39:20 minute marks. The second montage, taking place at around 3:55, exposes and explains how the African slave trade directly connects to the country with which the film, itself, is concerned: Jamaica. The third montage, which takes place around 10:45, details the rise of the former emperor of Ethiopia, Hailee Selassie I. We learn from this part of the film that many Rastas viewed Hailee Selassie I as their religious savior, the advent of the black messiah. The fourth montage, around the 19:35 minute mark, covers the influence of the early twentieth century Jamaican political activist, Marcus Garvey. The fifth and final montage, at the 21:09 minute mark—details of the then Ethiopian emperor, Hailee Selassie I's, arrival to the island of

Jamaica in 1966. In the sixth and final montage, at the 40:33 mark, the narrator discusses reparations and repatriation while a set of historical sketches, seemingly encyclopedic entries, photos and even more illustrations appear one after another with a typical slide and zoom fashion.

In what follows, I want to take a sustained moment to analyze two specific things. The first thing that I want to analyze is just *how* it is that the opening filmic montage of Seyfert's film crafts an alternative historiography of the image and the figure of the rent a rasta. The second thing that I want to analyze, here below, is *how* it is that Seyfert is better able to communicate the repetitive and exploitative nature in which sex tourism is anchored in the contemporary moment by utilizing images.

The opening filmic montage lasts from about 00:23-1:55, and it overlays a specific series of primarily 18th- and 19th-century art. These include a mixture of illustrations, drawings, paintings, and engravings, which I, myself, have chosen to reproduce here further on down below and in digital form for easy reference. There's also the addition of certain audio: there's contemplative music and then there's the audio of a Rastafari prayer. Unfortunately, I cannot reproduce those audio elements here, but I encourage one to find the film online. In any case, I do focus more on the visual elements in my own analysis of this montage than I do on the elements that are audible.

Whereas the opening montage uses and frequently returns to J. M. W. Turner's 1840 Romantic maritime painting, "The Slave Ship" (see figure XII below), as its primary, anchoring image, it does combine this specific image with a variety of other specific and repeating images. While I, myself, have not been able to locate all seven of the different illustrations in this particular sequence, I have been able to locate quite a few of them—enough to at least serve the

purposes of my own analysis of them here.



figure XII. This is J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 Romantic maritime painting, *The Slave Ship*, which depicts what appears to be the horizon. The view of the horizon that is split by a rather turbulent body of water—presumably the ocean—in which there appears to be several people and fish thrashing about. It is unclear whether or not this is sunrise or sunset. Perhaps it is better understood as a moment in-between, like that of twilight.

The other specific and repeating images that appear in Seyfert’s opening filmic montage first appear in the following order. As I have already pointed out above, the very first image that we see is J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 painting, “The Slave Ship.” The second image is Joseph Swain’s wooden engraving, “ON BOARD A SLAVE-SHIP,” which is from the 1900s (see figure XIII). The third image is yet another wood engraving by the name of “The Africans of the

Slave Bark-‘Wildfire’,” which was first published in *Harper’s Weekly, A Journal of Civilization* on June 2, 1860 (see figure XIV). The fourth image is an early nineteenth century woodcut named, “Africans Thrown Overboard from a Slave Ship, Brazil, ca. 1830s” (see figure XV). The fifth image is an 1845 watercolor by the Lieutenant Francis Meynell’s which he, himself, titled, “Slave Deck of the Albaroz, Prize to the Albatross” (see figure XVI). The sixth and last image is that of a South Carolinian newspaper advertisement from the late 1700s (see figure XVII).

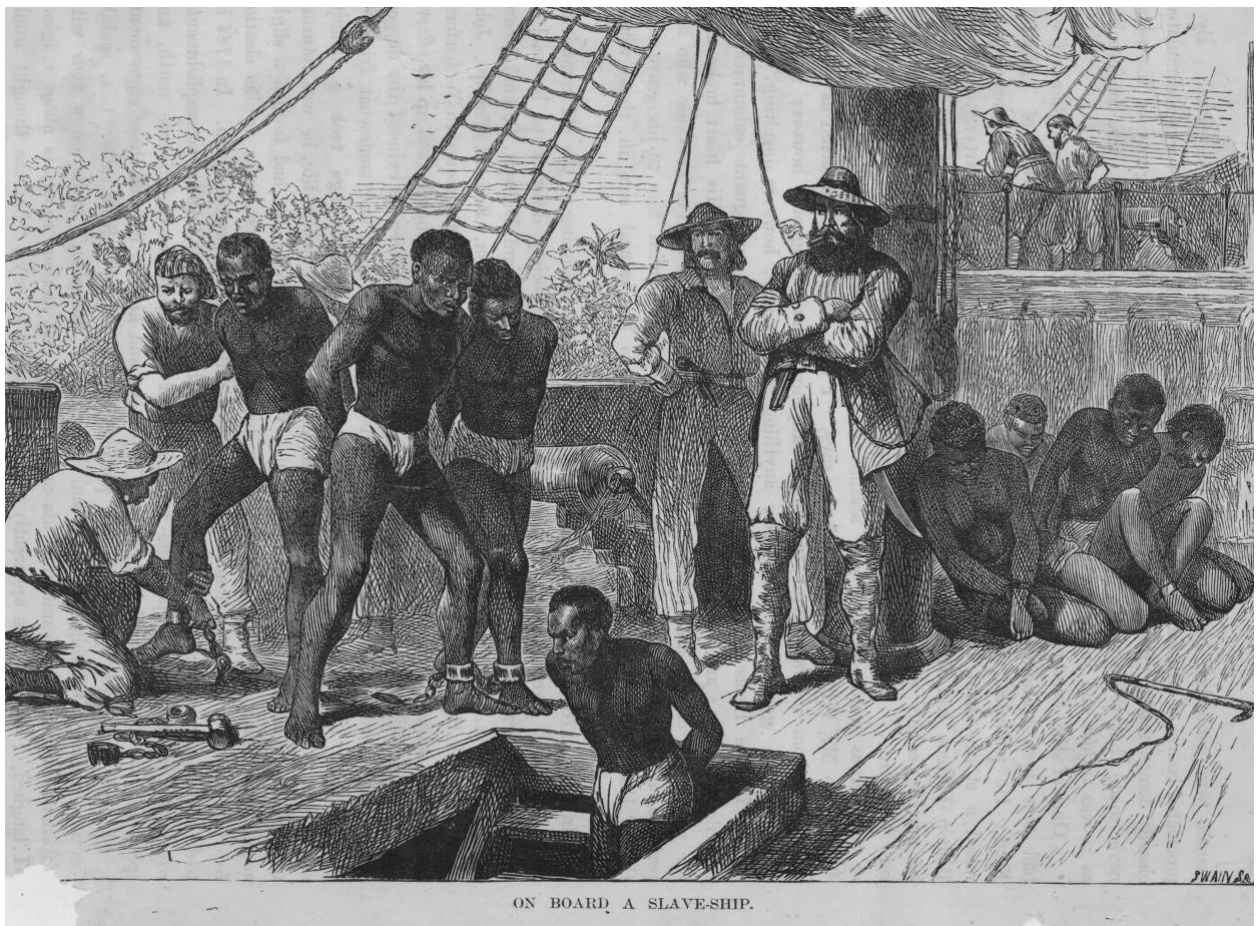


figure XIII. This image was originally one of Joseph Swain’s drawings that were used to illustrate what it was like “ON BOARD A SLAVE-SHIP.” It dates to sometime around the year 1900.



figure XIV. The Africans of the slave bark "Wildfire" [graphic] / M.N. published June 2 of 1860.

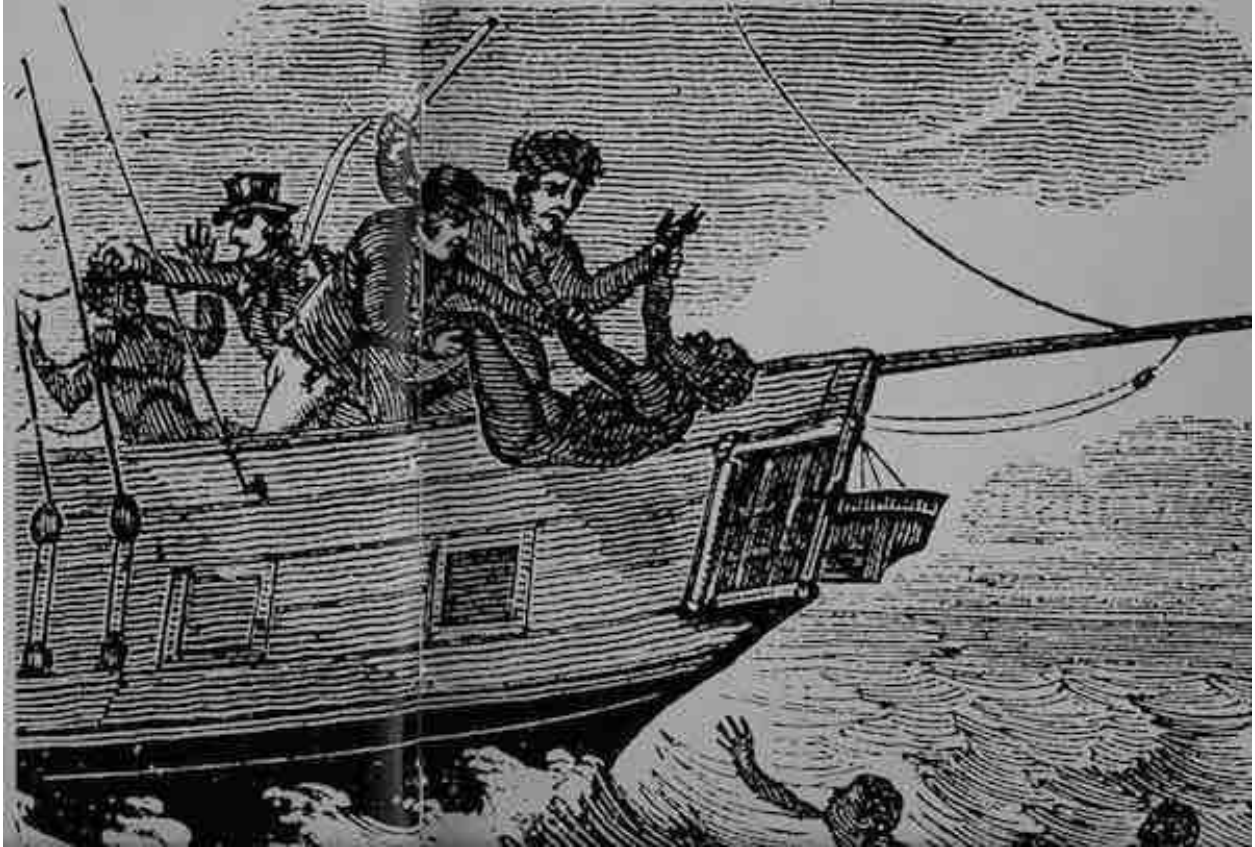


figure XV. This image was originally a woodcut that was later turned into an engraving which was then used in a particular publication of *The Liberator* on January 7, 1832. It depicts, as alluded to in its title, some of the "Africans Thrown Overboard from a Slave Ship, Brazil, ca. 1830s."



figure XVI. This is a water color by Lieutenant Francis Meynell depicting what he saw when he descended down into the bowels that were located directly below the “Slave Deck of the Albaroz, Prize to the Albatross.”

TO BE SOLD, on board the
Ship *Bance-Island*, on tuesday the 6th
of *May* next, at *Afbley-Ferry*; a choice
cargo of about 250 fine healthy

NEGROES,

just arrived from the
Windward & Rice Coast.
—The utmost care has
already been taken, and
shall be continued, to keep them free from
the least danger of being infected with the
SMALL-POX, no boat having been on
board, and all other communication with
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.

N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the
SMALL-POX in their own Country.



figure XVII. South Carolinian newspaper advertisement for the sale of some 250 enslaved people.

Now that I have covered what the specific images are and the order in which they all initially appear, I do want to give a brief description of Seyfert's opening filmic montage so as to

note its flow as well as its feel. The segment begins with the concurrent striking of a muted bell and the image of a bright ball light which is, itself, reminiscent of something like a star. Given the film's avowed interest in Rastafarianism, perhaps this bright ball of light is meant to be that celestial body we call "the sun." This sun, may, in turn, be representative of something like that of a solar deity, and so perhaps this bright ball of solar-like light is also representative of Jah, the Rastafarian name for their monotheistic God.

In the film, the image of the bright ball light is also enshrouded in a hazy, gas-like substance. This looks like something quite similar to the stellar nursery of a single star. The view, here, is undoubtably cosmic—or it, at least, invites us into a cosmic and even meditative feel. The visuals are also accompanied by some music: orchestral strings and maybe even a synthesizer that sustains several whole notes. I think we are invited to meditate, here, to become one with this star if only momentarily. There is an invitation to become one with Jah, which is an important and integral rite both of and for the Rastafari. This moment of meditation is, perhaps itself, an invitation to learn about and then partake in the spiritual practice and even the spiritual discipline that comes along with the search for a mystical union with the divine.

The image of the bright ball of light then begins to fade out after a while. What we see next is the image of some more distinguishable clouds that are, themselves, moving upwards. We are now quickly descending down from the heavens up above. Perhaps we are now materializing, moving from the divine idea to the material reality of things. But we do not land, unfortunately, all firmly footed and well secured there on the land of the Earth. Instead, the film has us drop down and then sink even further into the sea.

As we, ourselves, seem to descend, moving from up on high to deep down and below, we do seem to further materialize in a way. We shift from the image and the state of a bright ball of

light among some sort of stellar nursery of cosmic clouds to what is, at first, the tip top of what ends up being the sails of an unknown ship on the rocky waters of the ocean. We then quickly see and come to understand, as this newly materializing image of the unknown ship is, itself, overlaid with a variety of other images of enslaved people, that this specifically unknown ship is not only a slave ship, but it is a slave ship that is, itself, tussling with the waves of the ocean while tossing a few of them overboard.

It turns out that the clouds as well as the bright ball of light that we initially see are all just small sections of a much larger image which we only get to see, here, divided up throughout this whole entire opening sequence. That much larger and anchoring image is, again, J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting, "The Slave Ship." The small sections of that painting, which we see in the film, are mainly part of the central section of the piece, that which is saturated in yellow, orange, and increasingly reddish-like colors. When we are descending in the film, we are also descending in this specific painting.

Turner's painting then fades out yet again but at a much faster pace as the camera, itself, shifts over and onto the image of a group of enslaved people who all seem to be on a different and yet probably similar type of slave ship. In quick succession, several images of enslaved people are interwoven and faded over onto Turner's original and now-recurring image and painting of the slave ship. As they are, themselves, woven together, they are punctuated by the periodic plucking of a stringed instrument. There is a degree of haunting here.

Enhanced by various slides and zooms, the frame emphasizes certain aspects of each image. Some illustrations display and zoom in on the parts of the image that emphasize the fact that these enslaved people were not just enslaved individuals but they were part of a group that was enslaved altogether *en masse*. In order to further communicate this message, Seyfert utilizes

parts from both Meynell's "Slave Deck of the Albaroz, Prize to the Albatross" and "The Africans Aboard the Slave Deck Wildfire." Through a variety of related images, Seyfert communicates with and emphasizes for the viewer the historically mass nature of the Western European enslavement and trade of specifically African peoples.

Other illustrations offer up just one or sometimes two enslaved individuals who are often seen together. One shot, in particular, zooms in on the foot shackles of the enslaved person that we see just center left in Swain's "On Board A Slave Ship." While drawing the viewers' attention to the fact that the enslaved person, in this case, is flanked by two white men, the woodcut emerges with an emphasis that is, itself, placed on yet another white man. We see that other white man who is seemingly in the process of violently grabbing another enslaved person by the hair.

Interspersed among these images are more illustrations of ships of various sizes. The tacit assumption here is that they, too, are slave ships. Their quantity and the amount of enslaved people they all hold captive on board seem to grow quite rapidly. Establishing a narrative thread now, another series of illustrations begins with the wood cut that shows two men throwing yet another enslaved person overboard. The second shot shows the other enslaved person's head as well as their hand, thrashing about just there above the turbulent water. The montage then transitions over to Turner's painting yet again. As the image slides upwards, we see monstrous-like fish and even birds that surround and consume the body of the enslaved person. We see a single leg stretched out above the water with a shackle around the ankle. This, too, is both the same enslaved person and yet, in fact, a different one. Their fates, nevertheless, are deeply intertwined. On top of the meditative music, someone in a Jamaican accent begins to preach, speaking aloud some sort of Rastafari scripture.

The opening filmic montage starts to end by first fading out to white before it then fades, yet again, onto the digitized image of the text from the late 1700's South Carolinian newspaper advertisement that depicts the sale of some 250 enslaved people. The border to that text is notably absent in the film, as is anything below the final word, "prevented," which is located at the very end of the main body of the text. Also excised from the frame are the signatures of "Austin, Laurens, & Appleby" in addition to the footnote "N.B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the SMALL-POX in their own Country." What stands out here is the difference between the regular and enlarged text as well as the two flanking depictions of enslaved men, who are, in turn, clearly understood to be "NEGROES," given the centrality of the word on the page, and the fact that it is written in all caps. They are, moreover, meant "TO BE SOLD," as the second largest part of the text in the upper left-hand corner announces to us.

We then see the title of Seyfert's film, "RENT a RASTA," as it is transposed over and onto the word, "NEGROES," from the South Carolinian newspaper advertisement. It does so in the same exact spot and font as the original word. While the majority of the rest of the text from the newspaper simply disappears, fading away into a more textured background, there is a small portion that does remain. What emerges on screen, then, is a mash-up or juxtaposition of Seyfert's title with some of the remaining text from the newspaper. What results is the creation of a new text entirely that consists of three lines. The first line reads "RENT a RASTA" while the second and third lines seem to continue the sentence: "just arrived from the Windward & Rice Coast." In this way, Seyfert draws and even reveals a temporal connection and continuity between the enslaved African people that were once captured, shipped over and then advertised for sale in the 1700s and the more contemporary status of the impoverished and sex working/prostituting rent a rastas of the twenty first century.

The images of the two flanking enslaved figures begin to move outward toward the edges of the frame. They then grow in size as the two drawings of enslaved people, flanking on each side, slowly move out of the frame before they finally disappear altogether. The remaining text from the South Carolinian newspaper advertisement also disappears. While those two elements both disappear from the image, there is another image that is emerging simultaneously, an image that will eventually become recognizable as that of a flag. For now, the enslaved figures are located, move, and then disappear within the central, whiter bar of the flag, itself. That white bar is, itself, sandwiched on the top as well as on the bottom by two other bars that are not only thinner but greyer in shade as well. With everything having disappeared except for the name of the film, “RENT a RASTA,” the remaining text slowly grows as it steadily moves into the center of the frame. From black and white, the colors of the Jamaican flag begin—Green to saturate the flag as well as the frame. The title of the movie fades away as the opening credits now begin.

I think that one of the primary contributions that Seyfert’s documentary provides to any understanding of sex tourism in the contemporary moment is, first and foremost, its complex engagement with history. Instead of providing an ahistorical account of sex tourism or engaging in universalizing histories—such as Jamaica’s national history as a neocolonial state or the tourism industry’s industrial-economic history—the documentary offers a history that focuses, instead, on the conditions of emergence for the Rastafari sex worker. In doing so, the film not only crafts an alternative revisionist history, but it simultaneously and implicitly acknowledges the possibility, presence, and importance of *multiple* histories.

What enables the documentary film to both acknowledge and trace these multi-historical accounts of Rastafari sex workers is predominately its use of dialectical images. Composed of various digitized illustrations taken from a variety of contexts, the opening segment juxtaposes these images in montage fashion. They fade over and onto one another, jostle back and forth, and even repeat. For the viewer, the images begin to craft not only a new constellation and framework but a narrative for the rest of the movie.

Whereas the dialectical images provide the method for establishing a more materialist historiography of the rastafari sex worker, the content engages with a certain kind of messianism. Used in both Rastafarianism and akin to what Walter Benjamin, himself, used and discussed in his own work on Jewish-notions of messianic time, the film complements its own use of dialectical images with this specific kind of spirituality in order to craft a much more material kind of history—which initially seems to be at quite odds with its spiritual nature. And yet because of its detail, spiritually materialist mode of historiography reveals the way that bourgeois historiography actively evacuates, forgets, and/or replaces those very same details with another, fabricated, more idealist, and singular bourgeois history. It is this specific form of bourgeois history, then, that simply cannot account for—and intentionally obscures—the historical reasons for the presence of the rastafari sex worker, and thus frame them, in effect, as exceptional, immoral, and/or criminal. The replacement of a more material knowledge of history and historical events with that of a fabricated bourgeois history designed for social control then serves as a necessary tool for the production and reproduction of the tourism industry as just one sector of a much larger racial capitalist project. It is in using a messianic historiography, then, that the film is not only able to provide a more material and anti-bourgeois history, but to also implicitly reveal the violence of a structurally coerced form of forgetting.

The film's use of messianic historiography situates the figure within a specific period in time and space. As a result, one moves from judging the figure of the Rastafari sex worker by the criteria of the present, to qualitatively reassessing their current socio-economic condition in light of their historical pre-conditions. Therefore, a large part of the documentary consists in visually and audibly communicating a variety of historical pre-conditions that were all necessary for the emergence of and shape of the present condition of the rastafari sex worker. The film crafts these histories predominately by means of montage—sometimes accompanied by music and prayer and in other times an audible commentary. These montages also function as a kind of set of historical expositions. The very first montage takes place at the beginning of the film and will make up the bulk of my analysis immediately below. The subsequent montages occur around the 10:45, 19:36, 21:00 and X minute marks. Whereas the first explains how the African slave trade directly connects to Jamaica, the second and third detail the rise of Hailee Selassie I as the Rastas' savior and messiah as well as the influence of Marcus Garvey. The last of the historical expositions details Hailee Selassie I's arrival to the island in 1966. I want to now take a sustained moment to analyze *how* the opening montage crafts an anti-bourgeois history of the Rastafari sex worker and demonstrate—in bringing together both Benjamin and Sharpe—the repetitive exploitative nature in which sex tourism is anchored in the contemporary moment.

III - from the film's montage to the film's messianism

I think Seyfert's opening filmic montage—if not the whole film, itself—not only engages with but is informed by messianism. To be more specific, the opening filmic montage engages with messianism insofar as it participates in a specifically messianic form of historiography. It also engages with messianism insofar as it flirts with monotheism and eschatology. For Rastafari believers, Emperor Hailee Selassie I was the divine incarnation of Jah. At a more bird's eye view, the way that the entire narrative is bookended captures these messianic, monotheistic, and eschatological characteristics well. Whereas the montage opens with an aesthetically cosmic ball of light accompanied by meditative music, it ends with a slow zoom onto the image of various painted fish that are, themselves, in the middle of actively consuming a thrashing and mostly submerged enslaved individual. This is in addition to the fact that all of what I have just described is overlaid with the recitation of a potential prayer from Rastafari scripture. In this third section, I'd like to flesh out these messianic and monotheistic components a bit more before moving on to the opening filmic montage's more eschatological aspect.

The single ball of light that emerges at the very beginning of the sequence serves as a visual representation—or, more specifically, a metonym—for the monotheistic Abrahamic tradition out of which Rastafarianism, itself, grew. In the 1930s, Rastafarianism became its own kind of distinct faction of this particular monotheistic and Abrahamic tradition, and, for Rastafari believers, Jah is the considered to be the one supreme and overseeing deity.

Seyfert's film participates in the long line of monotheistic representations that attempt to represent “the One.” The One is most often represented as both a formless and yet unified ball of light, usually accompanied by disseminating rays of some sort. The rays, then, come to

symbolize the division of the “the One” as God into the many and incarnated people, animals, plant life etc. that all exist and live on the earth.

Scholars of all kinds have long recorded and commented on the vast variety of representational modes that artists have historically used in their many attempts to represent the One. Some representations of the One are so old that they take us back to those representations of a similar deity, the ancient Egyptian deity, Aten, which was a part of the religious system of Atenism under the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh, Akenaten. These ancient representations of the One can be dated to around the years 1549-1069 B.C.E. during the New Kingdom era. While the history of this particular representation is not a part of this chapter’s main focus, it is worth briefly detailing that Jah is the shortened form for and Jamaican patois pronunciation of “Yahweh,” the ancient Hebrew deity whom the Rastafarians as well as their fellow Rastafari brethren consider to be their God. Akin to other Jewish followers, Jah is said to partially reside in each individual, and he has been historically represented as “weather and solar deities” (de Hulster).

This emphasis on “the One” will come back in later segments of Seyfert’s film whose main purpose is to explore, expose, and expand on certain Rastafarian beliefs and practices. In other, later parts of the documentary, the film continues to capture an array of Rastafari practices that maintain and/or simply recognize their connection with “the One,” such as the verbal emphasis they place on words that contain the letter, “i.” The Rastafari word, “ital,” for example, comes from the word, “vital,” which refers to agricultural foods that are more natural and/or typically non-processed. By dropping the “v” and emphasizing the “i,” Rastafarians “[...] signify the unity of the speaker with all of nature. ‘I and I’ means that no person is more privileged than another in the basic truth of life” (32:27). In this way, Rastafarians end up verbally ritualizing their

connection to “the One.” To return, though, to the narrative crafted by this opening filmic montage, the film suggests that the enslaved individuals whom we initially see submerged below the water—and by extension, the rastafari sex workers to come—are all just individual parts of “the One” that is, itself, divided up to make the many.

However, it is the advent of the messiah—also known as “the redeemer” and/or “the savior”—in particular, that is of the utmost importance, for the messiah’s incarnation on Earth will alter the flow of time by inaugurating what is commonly referred to as “an eschatological period.” While I discuss just what exactly eschatology is with much more depth and complexity in the epilogue to this very project, suffice it to say for now in this chapter that any period of time which is known, described, and/or designated as “eschatological,” is done so because it marks, in brief and in short, “the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell.”

While the Rastas, like other Jewish followers, understand Jesus to be the first incarnation of Jah as the messiah, they do differ from Judaism in that they see the once Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, as Jah’s second incarnation. That is, Haile Selassie I was understood to be not only the *second* messiah but the specifically *black* messiah. It does rest unclear, however, if time according to the Rastas has gone through at least two eschatological periods now, or if it is the case that the emergence of Jesus *and* Haile Selassie I proved *not* to be the coming of the end with the arrival of the eschaton. In any case, I am most interested in the way in which Rastafari eschatology conceives of and organizes time, especially with its attention to flow and futurity.

According to the rastafari preachers whom we see preaching in Seyfert’s film, they will be freed to live in time anew when the era of their enslavement ends. And that time anew will come through the possibly natural and eschatological means of things such as plague and/or

pestilence. The documentary better captures this exact sentiment in a later testimony that one of the rastafari preachers delivers. He says the following:

We are not teaching violence, not crime. You know, we are completely against, you know anyting, you know, to deal wit weapons [...] and the destruction of people. What we are interested in is that, ya know, people turn from their sinful way. And ya know, [...] to the right way of life. In a way we can respect each other and love each other. However, God has certain weapons, like God create lightnin' and tunda, brimstone and fire, pestilence and disease that, ya know, we are acceptin' to, ya know, *bring out certain times*. Just like all de American [...] with dem bombs, and dem nuclear weapons against a nation. We call for dose tings too, against the ungodly. So that is what we want in the world with today. That if they don't give us our freedom, den we continue to go on our knees, an pray and fastin' fuh dem. Ya know? An one day, [...] the world wind will come one day and blow dem away. (22:12, emphasis mine)

In this testimony from the film, the preacher notes the eschatological period that comes after the deployment of God's natural weaponry. While not explicit, he alludes and refers to this period when he, himself, states "to, ya know, bring out certain times." What is also of note here is how it is that until the arrival of those "certain times," they will continue to practice non-violence and non-crime; they will "[...] continue to go on [their] knees, an pray and fastin' fuh dem." The "dem" to which he refers are, of course, the oppressive forces of Babylon—or, in short, the hegemonic Western State—that have historically and systematically enslaved them. What remains unclear, however, is how this rastafari-messianic interpretation of time may relate to and narrate the uptake of sex work. In essence, these discourses may be split. What I mean is that

while rastafari sex workers may share this understanding of messianic time, I'm not quite so sure that rastafari preachers share an understanding of sex work as "non-crime." While I am sure that certain rastafari preachers and practitioners do not agree with rastafari sex workers in their practice and use of sex as a means to make a living, they do share this common understanding of a ruptural futurity. It is with this notion of futurity to which many rastafari sex workers approach their work: as merely temporary.

If the future, according to messianism and messianic time, becomes an end-of-days era, then time, therefore and in this specific sense, is understood as a sort of ruptural and periodic sort of time—what some scholars, like Walter Benjamin, might call "messianic time". Whereas the empty homogenous time that exists under capitalism is characterized as quantitative, continuously flowing, "anesthetizing, desensitizing, and meaningless," messianic time is qualitative, immediate and ruptural. Messianic time is full of non-linear connections, and it is also emotionally intense (Robinson). So, instead of progressing through time with an end goal as one does in linear progressive and teleological time which would amount to probably nothing more than the contemporary continuation of the rent-a-rastas' past condition of mass enslavement, the Messianic Age promises to usher in an entirely new order of things, and therefore an entirely new temporal system, which means an entirely new notion of time, itself. With the advent and arrival of the messiah, the seemingly interminable structures of the past are supposedly left behind and/or destroyed, never carried over into the next period in a linear and/or evolutionary like way.

But messianic time doesn't just organize time's flow and futurity; it also organizes one's access to the past. In order to explain this, let me first begin by discussing linear progressive and teleological time's relationship to the past. With this type of temporality, one narrates the past as

connected to the present by means of an evolutionary progression. Within this temporal schema, the periods and the people that make up “the past” are (rather arrogantly) understood, from the position and viewpoint of those people who make up “the present,” to be “simpler” and/or “backwards” in their ways of doing, thinking, knowing, and/or being etc.. Those periods and people that are located in and make up the temporal category of “the present” are understood to be more “up-to-date” and, therefore, to be more “advanced” and “complex” in their ways of doing, thinking, knowing, and/or being etc..

In messianic time, however, one has access to the past as well as the opportunity to narrate those very same moments in the past in, at least, four completely different ways. First, moments that are located in the past are not rendered into any sort of linear, evolutionary, and/or progressive scheme. According to the messianic view of time and history, there simply is no larger and linear, driving and progressive, evolutionary force that exists somewhere behind it all. Instead, history is understood to be the amalgamation of different and rather discontinuous eras that are each full of their own unique and yet interconnected struggles. Second, the periods that occur in the past are not hierarchized or valued according to what is understood in the present moment to be the most important. Those moments in the past are, instead, recognized as occurring *simultaneously* with the present. Within a messianic temporal schema, moments of the past are, therefore, understood to be of equal importance to those moments of the present. Third, messianic time narrates those moments in the past as being *differentially* connected to the present. That is, depending on how one approaches the past from the present, different moments in the past connect at different points and in different ways. Fourth, one narrates those simultaneous moments of the past as ordered sequentially with another period or any given set of periods that consist of simultaneous moments. Therefore, different sequentially rendered time

periods also connect differentially to the present. This is more like a conception of time that simulates something like a threaded rope with not just multiple lines of time, but threads whose thread-lengths all end and begin differentially. The periods of time are delimited by their indentations.

One last aspect of how the film engages with messianic time is that it reveals the emotional intensity of the past, translated over and into the present moment as the spiritual drive of Rastafarianism. I am using “spiritual” here less in the loose sense of the term as “religious” and more in its etymologically-based understanding as “spirit,” or literally a “breath,” that which animates and even propels one into a certain direction. The opening scene of the film reframes the African slave trade in relation to sex tourism not just as the historical precondition for contemporary rent-a-rastas, but it is also their “animating or vital principle.” It is their “inspiration” as Rastafari followers. I want to briefly note, here, some of the etymological connections that exist between the words, “spirit,” “inspire,” and, “inspiration.”

I think the religious studies scholar, Ennis Edmonds, characterizes this sentiment well in one of his own descriptions of Rastafarianism. Edmonds observes that, “Rastafari is a male redemption movement seeking to rehabilitate diasporic African males from the emasculation of slavery and colonialism” (4-5). Thus, the spiritual, animating principle of Rastafarianism is derived from the loss of masculinity that came as a result of enslavement. The propulsion, in Rastafarianism, is the attempt to recover that loss of masculinity. The direction into which they then go is “back” to Africa. The Rastafari movement looks back to the colonial period and slavery as the moment in which they were dispossessed of not only their land and their bodies, but of their loved ones and their ways of life, of their minds and their souls, of more than I could list here. The recuperation and restoration of their lost masculinity serves, I think, as supposed

source of power as well. To uptake sex work, then and in some ways, is to begin to reaffirm a male's lost virility.

What is perhaps most powerful in this particular messianic version of history is how it can both reveal and recognize the material as well as epistemic structures of various spatio-temporal contexts from which capitalism in the present borrows and which it then narrates as being disconnected from itself. I refer to this phenomenon, borrowing from Benjamin but reconceptualizing it as informed by Sharpe, as the "hell of capitalist repetition." This is true of the relations that I have just traced above between the referential original events as depicted in the montage sequence's images. That is, the woodcut's referential event occurred sometime in the Brazilian port of Rio before 1832 and repeats itself in—and is frequently mistaken for—the 1781 Zong Massacre as depicted in Turner's romantic rendition aboard the eponymous British slave ship. This is also true, for example, of the relationships between the vignettes with which I opened this chapter. What I will explore in more detail in the section to come is how the 1969 Coco Tea concert in the resort town not too far from Negril is linked to the Parisian demimonde under the French Second Republic (1848-1851) and subsequent Second Empire (1852-1870).

I would speculate that the documentary uptakes Turner's piece precisely because of how it depicts and uses the sublime in relation to the real historical events of African slavery. Altogether, the documentary's use of Turner's painting complements and aesthetically enhances its own narrative that is, itself, organized by a Jewish messianic notion of time. As one art critic by the name of McQuillen has noted: "Turner depicts a typhoon powered by cosmic reckoning and divine retribution as it bears down on the slave ship Zong." The documentary, then, divides Turner's painting into various smaller frames and thus shots. It focuses in on the depiction of those specific moments that speak to such "cosmic reckoning" and "divine retribution." It

arranges these various aspects of the sublime in the painting so as to construct the documentary's exposition. The first shot is of the ball and column of light in the center of the painting. This frame fades in from the initial, more digital yet cosmic, star-like ball of light with which the entire documentary opens. The next shot is of the center left, capturing the ship amidst the chaotic waters of the oncoming typhoon. To the bottom left, a quick zoom-in enlarges the many hands pointing out of the water. The last shot is a sustained take of the lower left, showcasing an emerging foot with a shackle over the ankle. Whereas the painting showcases all of these events as simultaneously occurring, the documentary rearranges them into a series. Beginning with the cosmic (the ball of light), it progresses into the corporeal (the hands above the water) and descends into the subaquatic (the foot and shackle above yet the body submerged). Whereas the oncoming typhoon and its turbulent waters seem to reflect the divine retribution in light of the atrocity of throwing slaves overboard, the ship's position as moving head on into it suggests a rather undiscerning eradication (i.e. the reckoning) as retribution of both slaves and slavers. Moreover, the typhoon's position as outside the painting's frame literally positions the futurity of this scene as unforeseeable. If divine retribution were to come, we know not what it looks like; there is only freedom's promise. In short, the documentary and the painting flirt with messianic time.

Composed of a variety of digitized illustrations that were taken from an array of different contexts, the opening segment juxtaposes them in montage-like fashion allowing Seyfert to generate his own set of dialectical images. Altogether, they fade over and onto one another; they jostle back and forth and even repeat. In this way, the images begin to craft, for the viewer not only a new constellation and framework but an entirely new narrative for understanding "sex tourism" that leans into and relies on the awakening power of a weak messianism that resides

within rastafari cosmology, itself. The entire opening sequence then situates the treatment of the enslaved Africans as an ongoing battle through time, one that continues up and into the contemporary moment. While no longer functioning as enslaved Africans, the film asserts that the rastafari sex workers of today are similarly enslaved.

Because this sequence engages with both an anti-bourgeois conception of history as well as a Jewish messianic notion of time, it instantaneously enlarges and reconfigures the entire framework for our more common-sensical understanding of sex tourism. Instead of narrating this socio-economic condition as an issue at the level of the individual who is typically blamed for their “bad” moral choices, Seyfert’s documentary approaches what we call and think to be “sex tourism” as the latest manifestation of the ongoing systemic condition of an exploited, expropriated, and dispossessed group of people. Indeed, the images that follow are not of specific individuals, but they are the representations of a people without particular names. Neither does the director give name to the interviewees, preachers, scholars, and farmers throughout the duration of the film. While all individually anonymous, they are bound together by the very fact of having been a people collectively abstracted from and violently denied any individuality. They are marked as a people, a group, that together has historically and forcibly been displaced of their land and their bodies.

IV - interview with a *gyalis*, detour through the Parisian *demimonde*

The film also provides insight into another major structural repetition of/in the wake: the presence of the rent a rasta sex worker as a “*gyalis*.” A few minutes after the opening montage of the film, there is a series of interviews with a variety of different rent a rastas which is interspersed and interwoven throughout the film, itself. In the very first interview, the interviewee on camera provides for us viewers what seems to be a crucial term and distinction which he, himself, emphasizes has to be made in order to accurately name and capture what it is that he considers himself to be: a “*gyalis*.”



figure XVIII. A screenshot of the film *Rent A Rasta* (2010) by J. Michael Seyfert which features one of the main interviewers.

The very first interview of the film, lasting from about 05:14-05:52, involves a fairly young adult man. He is dressed in a yellow polo with a vividly green tree which is immediately behind him and serves as a backdrop for this particular shot. The shot is also a medium close-up and, thus, it feels a bit—if not quite—intimate. He seems happy or at least playful in his

demeanor, graciously willing to give the interviewer a peek into his own world; or, perhaps he's pleasantly amused at the chance to be on camera and/or in a documentary-oriented film. In any case, his words carry a certain kind of ethos, especially when preceded by the opening montage and the opening commentary on sex tourism.

I want to be clear, here, that it is not so much the interview, itself and as such, that I am interested in in this fourth section of mine. Instead, I am interested in *what* it is that this particular interview points me/us to as viewers. I'm also interested in *how* it is that that information allows for a much more qualitative understanding of the present state of "sex tourism" in a place like Jamaica.

As the viewer of the film, the very first interview feels as if we're about to receive some sort of deep truth. Huddled amongst the bushes together, in private, there is a confessional and secretive sort of air about this particular shot and set up. As he continues to talk, his line of vision darts among the supposed interviewer, straight into the camera, and then occasionally to his friends who seem to be just on the outside of the frame. This suggests that he is comfortable as well as ready. It appears that he is about to relay some sort of information that may even cause shock and/or drama among them. Throughout the entirety of the interview, he speaks both confidently and yet retains the air of a radiating playfulness.

Right off the bat, he clarifies how it is that he, himself, identifies. He asserts the following:

"I'm not a gigolo, but I'm a guy who love women. You know?! And so, because, if I—if I meet a white girl from Germany or one from France, and I walk... and she talk to me and she love the respect and the culture of me as Rastafari, then a guy would see me and say, 'Oh, man, that's a gigolo.' But at the same time, I

wouldn't call it 'gigolo.' I would call it a 'gyalis!' Because—because, I'm a gyalis! Ya understand me, and girls love me, and I— I don't love battyboy! I don't fuckin' ass eat around here in Jamaica. We—you understand—we, we love girls, whether you're white, black, Indian, Chinese—we love girls!"

Apart from his need to repeatedly broadcast his heterosexuality, his proud homophobia, and his love for a multicultural array of women, I am most interested in his own self-made distinction from what others would call a "gigolo" and his subsequent self-proclamation as a *gyalis*. The first remark that he makes—right at the beginning of the interview—is curious insofar as he indirectly frames the figure of "the gigolo" as one who does not seemingly "love" women through *negation*. He says, for example, that "I'm *not* a gigolo, but [...]" (emphasis mine). One could speculate that this remark on possessing love for women versus its supposed absence is, in part, due to his understanding of gigolos as not only explicitly exchanging sex for money, but also their little to no (romantic) interest in the women they see other than as a source of income. However, without directly asking him, one may never know *why* it is that he initially frames a gigolo in this way.

The second remark—made around the middle of the quotation above—seems to admit that he is simultaneously a gigolo and a gyalis. But this is rather a question of perspective, which he ends up drawing to our attention. At first, he thinks through the perspective of what some other "guy would see me and say." From the vantage point of another guy—perhaps another guy who is not a fellow rent a rasta—he is easily seen as a gigolo, but he goes on to assert that, for himself, he is, indeed and in fact, not a gigolo but a *gyalis*. "But at the same time," he says, "I wouldn't call it 'gigolo.' I would call it a 'gyalis'." As he emphatically restates the term, *gyalis*, he smirks as if to boast of his own self-proclaimed identity.

There is, moreover, the sense of a more collective value here. When the interviewee first mentions the term, *gyalis*, he turns to look at what is supposedly the other rent-a-rastas that are there with him but off screen. He does so for validation and/or to simply excite them in the mere fact that he as an interviewee is dropping this inner-circle term and all that it implies for this seemingly unknowing and yet curious filmmaker who is, himself, both standing and listening right there before him as he films him. One can clearly hear the diegetic laughing that occurs off-screen in response to his use own of the term, *gyalis*. Yet, he never gives a reason for the distinction between the two words, the gigolo and the *gyalis*, besides the simple fact that *he*, himself, loves girls and girls love *him*.

Provided the frame of the interview, it seems obvious that both terms—gigolo as well as *gyalis*— relate to prostitution and/or sex work in some way. The interviewee, however, clearly values being a *gyalis* much more than he values being a gigolo. With an initially intuitive assessment and perhaps at risk of some oversimplification, it would seem obvious that to be called a gigolo, or better yet to self-proclaim oneself as such, would be a shameful thing to do to some degree. The gigolo, as is commonly thought, still “prostitutes” himself even if he is a male. He lends, rents, and/or “lowers” himself to any female buyer. There is a notion of “passivity” with which he engages, here, when dealing with women. It is, therefore, shameful to be a gigolo from the vantage point of the hegemonic norms that inform the complex web of gender, sex, and sexuality. Under heteropatriarchy, a gigolo is, despite the need to sell himself, meant to hold, wield, and performatively flaunt his power and prowess as a masculine and virile male who is both sexually active and readily available.

The word, “gyalis,” comes to us from Jamaican patois. In an interview on *Tiktok.com*, a contemporary singer and songwriter by the name of Capella Grey “breaks down the meaning

behind the word "Gyalis'" in light of what was then the recent release of his song by the very same name (Frshmedia, 2021). "The definition of a gyalis," Grey explains, "[...] is somebody that's just really good with the girls. You know what I'm saying? We keep a good name, everything healthy, copacetic. Nobody really has anything too bad to say about you. Nobody feels uncomfortable being around you. Everybody catches a good vibe, positive energies—just a gyalis. It's not even a matter of just being like promiscuous in terms of like sex or anything. It's just—you know what I'm saying?" (ibid).

I do think that there is a certain sort of clue that present within the first interviewee's decision to not only make but emphasize a clear and decisive division between the two figures of the gigolo and the *gyalis*. There rests, in other words, a socio-linguistic index and an opportunity to briefly trace a genealogy of the figure and image of the gigolo. Whereas the term "gigolo" has, itself, been deployed in contemporary common parlance in a way that simply signifies a "male prostitute," when we put the term back into history, the word and the figure to which it once corresponded reveals a lot more: a much clearer picture of the socio-political climate in which we find it. An investigation into the qualitative aspects of this particular figure's historical environment help to better reveal the violent legacies that continue well into the present moment and ultimately manifest in the interview itself. In sketching out the conditions of emergence for the figure of the *gyalis*, one can better understand its convergence with that of the gigolo. I want to now turn to these historical accounts, if only to again provide a relatively brief sketch.

Whereas the definitions and etymologies of the two words, "gigolo" and "gyalis," are of use here, I want to begin with the former. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a "gigolo" as "[a] professional male dancing-partner or escort; a 'kept' man, esp. a young man supported financially by an older woman in return for his attentions." Its etymology reveals that the term

came to us in English from the French around the time of 1922 when it was originally “[...] formed as [the] masculine correlative to *gigole* [meaning a] tall thin woman, [and/or] woman of the streets or public dance-halls.”

But when we look at the definition and etymology of the French word, *gigole*, even more is revealed. According to *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé*—from which the Oxford English Dictionary borrows—the word, *la gigole*, has an etymology that dates even further back to at least 1850. This anchors the figure of the *gigolo* not only as a specifically *francophone* phenomenon, but one that emerged in the spatio-temporal context of the French Second Republic which existed on the European continent between the years of 1848 to 1852. This cultural context extended into the more well-known period of French history known as *La Belle Époque* [The Beautiful Era] that also flourished on the European continent in the later years of 1870 to 1914. It is around this latter period that the French word, *gigole*, made its way into the anglophone spheres as the English word, “gigolo”.

In order to understand anything related the historical development of the French figure of *le gigolo*, one must first understand its predecessor, *la gigolette*, to which it was first a response. Generally speaking, a *gigolo* was the male and masculinized version and slang term for its female and feminized counterpart, *la gigole*, a tall and thin woman with *la gigolette* being the diminutive form of *la gigole*. Interestingly enough, there is a complete lack of a positive, self-asserted and/or self-proclaimed identity; instead, the *gigolo*’s being is defined in relation to *la gigole(tte)*. This dynamic is most evident in Larchey’s 1881 *Dictionnaire historique d’argot*, wherein he defines *le gigolo* simply as a young man found in the same spaces where *la gigolette* is. The entry for the word, “*le gigolo*,” reads as follows: “Petit jeune homme fréquentant les lieux où se rencontre la gigolette” [Small, young man frequenting the places where *la gigolette* is

found] (191). While this definition provides little to no qualitative understanding of the figure of *le gigolo*, itself, it does point one to the supposed *lieux* that *le gigolo* and *la gigolette* both frequented. What were these specific places? And why would they frequent them? What did they do there? A lack of so many answers merits some further investigation into the figure of *la gigolette* that takes us into the place, the world, and the universe of which she was once a part.

Whereas the definition of *gigolo* is based off of and, thus, centers both the identity and spatial location of *la gigolette*, the entry for the latter, itself, offers a few more hints. Larchey's dictionary entry for "*la gigolette*" reads: "Grisette, faubourienne, courant les bals publics [8]" (191). Moreover, the *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé* has two definitions of the word: the first is, "[f]ille des rues;" the second is, "[j]eune fille délurée, de mœurs faciles, fréquentant les bals populaires." In order to answer these questions, I want to constellate a series of materials—akin to dialectal images— in order to generate a better historical profile of the *gigolo* before returning to the film and its distinction from and yet deep connection with the *gyalis*.

Generally speaking, *la gigolette* was quite the popular social figure and voyeuristic subject-turned-object for many a male artist's eye roughly throughout the periods extending from France's July Monarchy (1830-1848), into the Second Republic (1848-1852), and well up to the final days of *la Belle Époque* (1871-1914). One can find her represented in a mixture of different media: from play bills, to advertisement posters, songs and even film at the turn of the 20th century. There is a particularly popular 1850s song, to which many sources have pointed. Some of the lyrics go as follows: "Si tu veux être ma gigolette, oui, je serai ton gigolo.[9]" Assuming heterosexual hegemony at this point, one would infer that the original singer of this song and the vantage point from which it speaks and sings are male and masculine oriented. The

lyrics give insight into a proposed union whereby the masculine singer assumes the identity of a *gigolo* on the condition that the female be his *gigolette*. This would make sense in the case of public dance halls. The lyrics, then, not only extend his invitation to dance, but they also generate his identity as a *gigolo* in relation to hers as a *gigolette*.



figure XIX | Left: illustration by Steinlen for 'J'ai perdu ma Gigolette' by Mortreuil, Esse & Delormel, published by Maurel (Paris, s.d.). Right: 'La Valse des Gigolettes' by Spencer, Lelièvre & Damien, published by Brondert (Paris, s.d.), drawing by O'Varély

The common root to the two gender-differentiated words, “*gigolo*” and “*gigolette*,” can be found in another, related word: “*une gigue*.” This noun serves as not just another word for “a leg,” or *une jambe*, but it is also a phonic transliteration of the Anglo-Irish dance known as a “jig” into French. This etymological information helps us to better make sense of Albert Guillaume’s rendition of *la gigolette* in a poster for the Théâtre de L’Ambigu. Here, a woman is framed as partially sitting on a table; the focal point emphasizes her legs in what can almost seem to be either an invitation to dance or a quick respite from dancing. She is surrounded by several festive markers: a turned-over stool beneath the table, a glass of some type of drink, lights and banners in the background. This poster is an advertisement that functions as an invitation whose offer is not merely to have a good time with a sensual and potentially sexual show and dance but the promise of having sex with many pretty and plentifully-available women.



figure XX | A lithograph poster of a Gigolette at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu by Albert Guillaume.

Printed by Imprimerie Chaix in Paris in 1896.

Larchey's *Dictionnaire d'argot historique* is, again, useful here for a deeper understanding of *la gigolette*. Whereas the definition of *le gigolo* is based off of and, thus, centers both the identity and spatial location of the *gigolette*, the entry for *gigolette*, itself, offers much to unpack: "Grisette, faubourienne, courant les bals publics [10]" (191). First, the word, "grisette," is a term that functions as the diminutive of the word "*gris*," used to denote the color grey. But the references to the color grey came to be a pejorative marker of the grey colored and cheaply made fabric of the dresses these women wore. This social figure of *la grisette* was a woman defined as low-class precisely because of her need to work in order to earn a living as opposed to a bourgeois, non-working member of the upper-class. Second, a *faubourienne* was a woman who lived in the working-class neighborhoods just outside of Paris proper. [11] For *la gigolette* and her *gigolo*, the mid- to late-19th century *faubourg* was Montmartre, a place that was frequently referred to as *le demimonde*.

Interestingly enough, Constantin Guys (1802-1892) who was a famous water colorer and illustrator for both British and French newspapers, was seemingly fascinated with this particular type of social life that existed under the Second French Empire. Throughout his lifetime, he produced several artistic renderings of the Parisian demimonde and its many different figures. In "Deux grisettes et deux soldats," Guys captures an exchange with what would have been members of the *Préfecture de police* [the Parisian police department]. According to Lathers' study on female modeling in 19th century France, *la grisette* dominated the scenes of Parisian bohemia under the July Monarchy (1830-1848) (25). They write, "[t]he majority of these "professional" models were working-class women, many immigrants, some who ended as battered women, alcoholics, prostitutes or suicides, and others who left the atelier to become actresses, singers, artists or grandes dames. In addition to posing for the sphere of artists in Paris

at the time, they were also understood to both frequently be sexually available and provide sexual services. However, and as Lathers points out, this was not an equal relationship, but rather a catch twenty-two.



figure XXI | “Deux grisettes et deux soldats.” Colored ink and watercolor by Constantin Guys.

But *la gigolette* was characterized by more than her legs, dancing abilities, and sexual services; she was also categorized as a member of the *canaille*. Literally meaning a pack of “dogs,” *le canaille* metaphorically referenced the “vile populace,” those who were known for being “mischievous.” *Le canaille* was a metaphor used to dehumanize the urban criminal. Over time, the “women of the public dance halls” became associated with the “women of the

street;”—came to signify a woman or man initially for hire as a dancing partner (found outside of public dance halls) or a typical “prostitute” (found on the streets) (Rigaud 194).

It should be noted, as Kushner’s work argues, that to be “kept” in this era was a “profession” in and of itself (3). Taken from other sources, a “gigolo” may frequently live at the woman’s residence and may even be expected to have good manners and social skills. These definitions, altogether then, maintain certain common elements: 1) a gigolo refers to a male-identified person; 2) the client is frequently a woman; 3) their relationship is understood as heterosexual; and, 4) the male is remunerated in some way. Some distinctions are whether or not: a) the woman in question is older and/or the man is younger; b) there is a social function for hiring the gigolo (i.e. for dancing, for a boyfriend experience etc.); c) the male lives at the female’s residence.

The 1887 Pranzini Affair served as a pivotal moment in the social meaning of the *gigolo*. A highly publicized, triple murder case, there was a major turning point for the term, however, after the Pranzini Affair—a highly publicized, late 19th century Parisian triple murder investigation that involved the well-known courtesan, Marie Réginault, and an accused Egyptian immigrant, Enrico Pranzini. Throughout the trial and well into the aftermath, a discursive formation emerged. The term and figure of the *gigolo* took on orientalist connotations of the colonial exotic (Freundschuh). A *gigolo* was now understood to be “[...] decidedly more sexually ambiguous, hedonistic, and worldly [...]” (13). Freundschuh has also critically observed that this discourse belied colonial anxieties around hyper-sexualized colonial males and their inappropriate relations with white women. In essence, the Pranzini Affair linked together the discourses of the colonial with the criminal, embodied in the renewed figure of the gigolo (13).

I want to now turn my attention back to the interviewer's emphatic distinction between the "gigolo" and the "gyalis." Whereas a gigolo first came from France of the 19th century and made its way into a much larger system and complicated network of sex work, morphing to fit new conditions, the figure of the "gyalis" has a different birth. A "gyalis" (also spelled "gyallis," "gallis," or "galis") is word that is heavily influenced by Jamaican patois. Avoiding a rough or overly determined and U.S.-centric translation as a "player," the term refers quite literally to a "girl list" on which the names of a male's female (sexual) exploits can ostensibly be found. [12] One of the primary characteristics of the "gyalis" as a social figure, then, is having multiple female partners. Another is being if not socially astute then cunning, at times manipulative of women. A "gyalis" is, therefore, a male who is calculatingly skilled at seducing multiple women at a time—women who may be oblivious as to the other relationships that he may have with other women.

At least since the 1990s, the figure of the "gyalis" has appeared quite a lot in Jamaican popular culture; yet, its particular origins seem to rest in dancehall music. Lyrics to dancehall songs not only frequently invoke this social figure but promote its value. This type of music has generated a specific "gallis culture" equally characterized by the twin encouragement to have "multiple concurrent female partners" and not settle down (Grizzle, 2017). In the 2019 song "Gyalis for Life" by Movado, for example, the chorus echoes some of the main characteristics that I've already mentioned above in the previous paragraph: "Man a gyalis... / Gyalis for life / Man a gyalis / Fuck your gyal once, me no see that twice" (emphasis mine).

Nevertheless, the *gyalis*'s emphasis on multiple women also lends itself to the widely acknowledged and studied heteropatriarchal undertones of Rastafarianism. Many, in general, have critiqued this "gallis culture" for its misogyny, such as Grizzle (2019). Donna Hope's work

situates the figure of the *gyalis* at the highest point of a hyper-heteromasculine continuum “[...] that stresses promiscuity and sexual prowess” (110). One witnesses the heterosexism of the *gyalis* in the very first interview. The interviewee interjects his own monologue with a clarification that reasserts his heteromascularity by negating his sense of self as a “battyboy.”

While not immediately apparent, the rent-a-rasta shares many of the same traits and characteristics that conditioned the 19th century, French *gigolo*. And yet, it doesn’t seem surprising, then, in light of the socio-historical context of the *gigolo* and *gigolette* in the Parisian demimonde with its public dance halls, that the figure of the *gyalis* comes out of Jamaican dance hall music and culture more generally. In the beginning of this chapter, I opened with the 1969 musical celebration that was the 20th Bob Marley Birthday Bash, featuring one of Jamaica’s best-known reggae singers, Coco Tea. Out in the dancing crowd, to which he spoke and addressed his short diatribe, were the rent-a-rastas, accompanying their companion tourists as dance (and sex) partners. That night, those sex tourists and Jamaican rent-a-rastas replicated in a modified form, as if an historical double, what was set in motion some 119 years earlier in a completely different spot on the planet: the Parisian demimonde.

One could venture to say that whereas the figure of the *gigolo* is hired by a woman, financially dependent on her, and expected to be at her beck and call, the figure of the *gyalis* consciously recognizes this relation of exchange as an unequal one. A *gyalis* knows that a *gigolo* obtains little to no power in their relation, and, thus, he reframes the relation into one that benefits and serves his own interests. This is first evident in his choice of specifically white women, implicitly understood as an opportunity to earn more money. The second means of reframing his relation is his self-assertion and emphasis on respect. He states that, “[...] she love the respect and the culture of me as Rastafari.” Despite the commodification of Rastafarianism as

part of the Jamaican tourism industry, he does not conform himself to any image or performance of a Rastafari man that white women may imagine or expect of him. He, instead, asserts his own embodiment of Rastafarianism as well as the prerequisite for her to respect not just him but also the culture of Rastafarianism, itself.

When put in juxtaposition with Seyfert's other added materials in the film, this seemingly unrelated detour, I think, generates an alternative form of time that not only contests bourgeois history, but it also makes legible what bourgeois history often seeks to hide from view. While these materials may, at first, seem to be part of a rabbit hole, I would even suggest that the rabbit hole itself follows its own kind of time—perhaps even one that resists the ways in which neoliberalism has come to configure time for the Renta Rastas. In any case, this connection and distinction between the gyallist and the gigolo might just be socio-linguistic, but I will say that it also seems to provide us with a much longer temporal and even grander spatial awareness of how figures of prostitution have emerged in certain spaces and in certain times while they are actively occluded from view in other spaces and in other times. Unlike Laurent Cantet's film that manipulates both the space as well as the time of Haiti, J. Michael Seyfert's film is truer to both space and time. Not only are the shots in the film taken in Jamaica as opposed to somewhere else, but Seyfert's own engagement with other historical documentation and materials in addition to the Rastafari belief in a Messianic form of time, allows him to chart a different kind of history. Perhaps, in some queer kind of way, there is a link between the *montage* and the *détour*. They are both words that come to us from the French language, after all.

case c

Dominican Republic-2004:

looking for the self

content warning:

This chapter discusses the suicidality of a boricua Puerto-Rican drag queen prostitute.

0 - the mysterious disappearance of Sirena Selena

Let us now begin our fourth and final case which involves, this time, the mysterious disappearance of a young boricua drag-queen prostitute known by the name of “Sirena Selena.” Caught at the literal and metaphorical border between two worlds, Sirena Selena disappears in what is none other than broad daylight one day. Mysteriously shrouded in what some have described as a curious flash in a nebulous cloud—“como un celaje,” dijo—she is only peripherally perceived. In what is nothing but a fascinating description no less, Sirena Selena is, herself, described as descending and darting down the stairs and, she does so quite quickly no less, escaping out of this world right through and then past the very front door. There, she crosses over and into the threshold, never to be seen (heard of, and/or heard from) again. Sirena Selena had suddenly vanished.

This time, however, the death found in this particular case was a different kind of death altogether. It is not so much a literal death, but it is still a premature death nonetheless. It is not so much a physical death, but it is one that is much more metaphorical, allegorical, and intentional I think. Sirena’s Selena’s own chosen mysterious disappearance and premature death, in this fourth and final case, is her own successful attempt at an escape no less, and, yet instead of still abandoning her and instead of calling her case closed provided that she chose to perhaps kill her own self or per so many official protocols, I still think that there is something that we, night workers, can learn here from her, her own image, her own songs, and, of course, her own story.

This chapter—labeled as Case C and titled “Dominican-Republic-2000: looking for the self”—telescopes the larger project’s fourth and final Caribbean figure of prostitution and/or sex

work. It, therefore, centers on and investigates the image of the boricua drag-queen prostitute which is, itself, imagined in this case as a magical and dangerously enchanting siren who performs for predominately white gay male tourists in the Dominican Republic's hotel and (sex) tourism industry right after the turn into the 21st century. This particular image and this particular rendition of the sex working siren appears or rather disappears in Mayra Santos-Febres' 2000 novel, *Sirena Selena: Vestida de Pena*. In English, the novel is often translated as *Sirena Selena: Dressed in Pain*. Santos-Febres is, herself, Afro-Puerto Rican, and she has expressed in her own words a general worry for "la experiencia urbana caribeña," or "the urban Caribbean experience." It was this particular sentiment, I think, that really led her to write this novel.

In my own upcoming reading of this particular image and figure, I aim to address how it is that one might be able to not only find oneself deep within the depths of one's own soul but how it is that one might also be able to escape the interplanetary deathworld and hellscape that neoliberalism has created since its emergence. My own reading therefore suggests that by means of a variety of different magical practices—such as that of certain rituals, rites, and songs—we may be able to craft some potentially effective antidotes that can, in turn, help to heal one from the imposition of a specifically *neoliberal* mode of ontology. In short, I argue that Santos-Febres's image and figure of the siren as a Puerto Rican sex worker who sings boleros in the Dominican Republic's hotel tourism industry allows for us as readers to both witness and imagine an alternative and distinctively non-secular mode of resistance to the increasingly dangerous, soul-sucking, ontological demands, and general threat of neoliberal individualism. I want to emphasize here that, for Santos-Febres, this alternative mode of resistance to neoliberalism and primarily to its ontology is, itself, deeply anchored in a specific form of spirituality. It, therefore, involves a very specific kind of tradition of magical enchantment and

ritual that is, itself, capable of facilitating and protecting one's own erotic autonomy against something as powerful as, say, neoliberal incursion.

In this final case and chapter of mine, I try to weave in and largely rely on the theoretical framework of a few scholars in particular—many of which are from somewhere in the Caribbean region, themselves. The first is Audre Lorde, and I pull from her original, 1978 paper on the “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In doing so, I pay focused attention to Lorde’s description of the erotic as something that offers women a “well of replenishing and provocative force,” which suggests that the erotic, for Lorde, possesses a watery or even electric-like nature insofar as it replenishes what has been depleted. She also provides for us in her own description of the erotic the analogous image of the pellet of yellow food coloring which was “perched like a topaz” in the “white, uncolored margarine” of her childhood. When pressed and popped, the food coloring would flow and saturate the margarine. For Lorde, this was the perfect image to describe the erotic and how it worked. I then turn to a second scholar, M. Jacqui Alexander, in order to understand the politics of erotic autonomy as a specific form of decolonial practice as she, herself, describes it in the very first chapter to her own 2005 book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*. That chapter is, itself, called “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas.” Provided that this work also deals with the tourism industry in a neighboring set of Caribbean islands—the Bahamas—it feels all the more important and potent. I, therefore, try to weave together not only these two Caribbean thinkers and their work on the erotic, but I then try to weave them and their work together in with some of the mythological insights that scholars have long established on sirens and their own history of imagery. For that kind of work, I turn to scholars Inna Naroditskaya, Linda Phyllis Austern and Persephone Braham. I finally look to Roberto Strongman’s discussion of the specifically

disidentificatory politics involved in the specifically queer aesthetics and performances of the *bolereo*, from his 2007 article, “The Latin American Queer Aesthetics of *El Bolereo*.” In order to distinguish this disidentificatory type of performance from the more traditional type of the *bolero*, Strongman uses a similar and yet slightly different term, the “*bolereo*”—a name and word that is written with an extra “e” located between the “r” and the “o” of the original word, “bolero.”

In what follows, then, I have assembled here together yet another set of fragmented and scaffolded readings. Like in all of the cases and all of the chapters that have come before this one, in all of the other three cases that I have chosen to juxtapose here together, this fourth and final case of mine has involved me cobbling together and then presenting for view four major pearls from the deep. The second section of this case is, itself, dedicated to discussing the differences between “[...] the Hispanic Caribbean musical genre of the Bolero” and its more queer version and aesthetic, the *Bolereo*. In the third section, I explore more of what it is that I, myself, mean by my own use of the word, “erotic” and my related use of the expression, “erotic autonomy.” In order to do so, I turn to and build off of the work of Lorde and Alexander. For this work, I return to Strongman. I then move on in the fourth section to provide a critical gnoseological analysis of key moments in Santos-Febres’ novel wherein Sirena Selena triggers and taps into her own erotic autonomy and begins to use her enchanting magical powers on others in her environment. Framed as she is as a queer borica siren and sex worker, I read these moments as deeply erotic and intuitive moments, moments that the novel, itself, is able to visually describe and provide mental imagery for how intuition itself functions: as water. This whole discussion involves investigating the effective spiritual and/or religious role of the queer bolerista in the resistance against an increasingly neoliberal environment.

I - on the text, the author, & the context

Throughout the decade of the 1990s, the Caribbean country of the Dominican Republic underwent a stabilization and structural adjustment effort as a necessary part of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) *New Economic Program*⁵⁰ for a New World Order. In addition to what was then and there the Fernández administration's implementation of hallmark neoliberal reforms—such as that of trade liberalization, the establishment of free trade zones, wide privatization, and public sector modernization—the D.R., itself, was “opened up” to a sizable inflow of what has been framed as “foreign direct investment” into the D.R.'s tourism sector, placing it at the very front and center of the tourism industry. As Davis and Sanchez Taylor have already both observed, the IMF's investment in tourism as a primary form of economic salvation generated an uptick in sex work around many tourist locations. Yet while prostitution is legal in the D.R., the administration does not acknowledge the structural conditions under which sex work in the tourism industry becomes possible. In 1995, Dominican sex workers under the Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas (MODEMU) [Movement of United Women] organized for themselves the first national conference dedicated to analyzing the supposed benefits of globalization in light of the increased exploitation of women's work and femmicide.

On the neighboring island of Puerto-Rico in the year 2000—which is only a decade into the IMF's structural adjustment program in the D.R.—Mayra Santos-Febres publishes her first and, now-famous, novel, *Sirena Selena: Vestida de Pena*. Now, the overarching narrative of the novel, while multiperspectival, primarily follows the eponymous protagonist, Sirena Selena, who is not only named after a siren and the moon, but she is also a teenaged, *travesti mulata*, or a mixed race trans girl who lives alone as an orphan after having lost her only living relative, her

grandmother, which also resulted in her housing. She is, therefore, left abandoned by her own family in a sense, and she resorts to living outside on the streets of Old San Juan, engaging here and there in sex work all in order to survive and make a living. One night, however, La Martha who is the owner of a local drag club in Old San Juan, hears Selena singing *boleros*, and she immediately decides to take her under her own wing. In order to help her secure a living and thus her own freedom, La Martha convinces Selena's to travel with her to the Dominican Republic where they both could contract a show in the highly touristic *zona colonial*, or "colonial zone," in Santo Domingo. It is also a space where U.S. child labor laws don't exactly apply for them as Puertorricans. Selena agrees and, together, the two of them take off, with La Martha functioning as Selena's (drag) mother as well as her manager/commercial agent. In the book, this young and queer sex worker figure who sings boleros is given, moreover, the magical powers of a siren which she often uses to help her navigate and survive the underworld of Caribbean prostitution. The main impetus for the story is that Sirena Selena travels with her drag mother and her "savior," La Martha, as they both make their own ways (and hopefully their own fortunes) in moving from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic's highly touristic *zona colonial*. When they do arrive, they must then learn how to climb this somewhat new and neoliberal world, a world that is, itself, full of powerful (queer) hotel magnates and (gay) U.S. business people.

Upon its release, Santos-Febres' novel obtained a near-instant level of fame. In fact, it was treated as a cultural celebration, and it literally had people dancing in the streets. Academically speaking, the text, itself, quickly generated a vast amount of literary criticism in both English as well as in Spanish. Sandoval-Sánchez characterizes the moment of the novel's publication as a "powerful [one] in queer scholarship in Puerto Rican literary criticism and Cultural Studies" (6). She also notes that on May 18, 2000, the day of the novel's exact

publication, there was a festive enactment of “[...] queer happening beyond the closet and academia,” one that occurred on the very same streets that the very same protagonists of the novel spend part if not most of their time. The party took place there on *la calle de San Sebastian* in Old San Juan just like in the novel, itself (7). Indeed, the novel's release seems to have not only generated a much needed space for queer Puerto Rican subjectivities, but it also framed those subjectivities as being able to deliver a powerful and what I will call a “gnoseological” critique of the neoliberalization of the Caribbean, or, said another way, the implementation of structural adjustment programs and processes in places like the Dominican Republic.

The novel offers up a heterogenous and even at times contradictory take on sex tourism through its diverse range of characters and their episodic stories. Once in the tourist circuit of hotels and beach resorts, Selena's main narrative is inter-spliced with those of others who engage in some way or another with this burgeoning economic formation. The narrative of Hugo Graubel, for example, is that of a white hotel millionaire and magnate whose family stems from the country's formerly planter class. As such, he allegorizes the triumph of neoliberalism in the country and the resulting restructuring into specifically neoliberal capitalist economic and social relations. What is interesting is that he comes to realize and outwardly express throughout the whole entire course of the novel his own latent queer sexuality without losing his own position as hotel owner. With a nascent love interest emerging between Selena and Hugo, tensions begin to rise with Hugo's wife, Solange, who struggles with her now devaluation as a housewife. I read Solange's frequent monologues as attempts to reconcile the shifts that have occurred in the value of the specifically sexual purity of white womanhood. Meanwhile, Selena's own drag mother, La Martha, functions as an agent of neoliberalism as well. She first views Selena as an opportunity to flex her business skills, constantly referring to her “sangre de empresaria” [blood of a business

woman]. It is La Martha who ultimately strikes a deal with Stan, the owner of the Hotel Colón in the *zona colonial* [colonial zone]. Stan is also a member of what La Martha refers to as “el inframundo gay de Santo Domingo” [the infra-gay world of Santo Domingo] (201). She refers to this group as “locas de nación” [crazies of the nation] which highlights neoliberalism’s reconfiguring of queer sexuality in the service of the nation (202). Indeed, the narratives in *Sirena Selenia* are multiple, offering up an account of sex tourism that doesn’t seek to fully homogenize its diverse elements or reconcile its contradictions.

The literary criticism surrounding the novel is vast, as its release was a celebrated cultural moment in Puerto Rican queer history. The City University of New York’s journal, *Centro de estudios puertorriqueños* [Center of Puerto Rican Studies], dedicated an entire volume to the novel (XV, No.2, 2003). This dedicated journal provides contemporary Cultural Studies readings of the novel as well as situates Santos-Febres’s emergence in the larger historical development of Puerto Rican literature. Whereas some scholars read *Sirena Selenia* as a postmodern allegory or as participating in the transnational “capital-enabled sites of transit,” others have used it to render visible the shifts in nation-states, subjectivities, and the mutually dependent relationship between imagined peripheries and sites of belonging. These include scholars such as Arroyo, Barradas, Rangelove, & Rodríguez. Barradas, for example, is the one who reads the novel as a postmodern allegory, and they see it as told from a certain viewpoint that is endogenous as opposed to exogenous to the region. They also argue, in their own words, “[...] que presenta al Caribe hispano de nuestros días visto desde una perspectiva boricua.” In English, they assert “that it [the novel] presents the hispanic Caribbean of our days as seen through a boricua perspective” (56). They also mention how the use of the figures of *lxs transvestixs* serve as a representation of the evolution of tourism in the Caribbean—especially in how it foments new forms of sexual

conduct. Gonzalez-Allende (2005) work has argued how the novel's protagonists are predominately in search of how to acquire power in their own society when they are unfortunately confined to the margins. For Gonzalez-Allende, the main characters pursue dominion in the realm of sexual relations in addition to the acquisition of economic solvency. Rangelove (2007) considers, however, completely different aspects of the novel, such as its use of plural instead of singular places including airports, customs offices etc..

My own reading of the novel sees it as offering up a heterogenous and even contradictory take on sex tourism at times through its own diverse range of characters and their episodically structured stories. Once in the tourist circuit of hotels and beach resorts, Selena's main narrative is inter-spliced with those of other characters and their own unfurling narratives. Altogether, they all engage in some way or another with what is a burgeoning economic formation: neoliberalism. The narrative of Hugo Graubel, a white hotel millionaire and magnate whose family stems from the country's formerly planter class, allegorizes the triumph of neoliberalism in restructuring capitalist relations. He is the one who comes to realize and outwardly express throughout the course of the novel his own latent queer sexuality without losing his position as hotel owner. With a nascent love interest between Selena and Hugo, tensions rise between Selena and Hugo's wife, Solange, who struggles with her own devaluation as housewife. Solange's frequent inner monologues attempt to reconcile the shifts in value of the sexual purity of white womanhood. Meanwhile, Selena's drag mother, La Martha, functions as an queer agent of neoliberalism in that she first views Selena as an opportunity to flex her business skills, constantly referring to her "sangre de empresaria." She strikes a deal with Stan, owner of the Hotel Colón in the *zona colonial* and member of what she calls "el inframundo gay de Santo Domingo" (201). She refers to this group as "locas de nación," a name which indexes neoliberalism's reconfiguring of queer

sexuality to be in the service of and to the nation (202). Indeed, the narratives in *Sirena Selena* are multiplicitous, offering up an account of sex tourism that does not seek to fully homogenize its diverse elements nor reconcile its contradictions.

In addition to the other interpretations that scholars have put forth so far, my own analysis of Santos-Febres' work asks how the novel imagines a form of erotic autonomy that negotiates and articulates itself as distinct from both liberal and neoliberal epistemological formations. That is, my own reading of *Sirena Selena* engages the text as participating in not only an epistemological form of resistance but a gnoseological one as well. This case therefore seeks to ask a few related questions in attempting to think about *Sirena Selena*'s disappearance, and those questions are as follows: *How does one imagine a queer of color form of erotic autonomy in this transitional moment? To which set of epistemological and gnoseological logics does one take recourse to do so when those of the previous moment are now being reconfigured and commodified? To what lexicon, imaginaries, and fantasies does one turn?*

Following after other cultural studies scholars, I, myself, understand the novel in general to be a cultural terrain of struggle or as what Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd once referred to as a "site of contradiction" in their 1997 book, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capitalism*. That is, the logics that the novel, itself, deploys cannot—or resistantly will not—be "[...] subsumed by the logic of commodification itself" (1). This particular notion of resistance within the novel is, itself, rich in two important ways. First, despite the novel having been (in)formed by and from transnational capitalist relations of production and reproduction, it, nevertheless, still critiques them. Secondly, it performs that specific critique of capitalist relations of production and reproduction via the supernatural as a means to express what cannot seemingly be accounted for "logically" within the onto-epistemological frameworks provided by modern Western

rational discourse. I, therefore, take note of how Santos-Febres' depiction of Sirena Selena as a siren participates and also intervenes in a long line of representing female sexual and erotic autonomy by celebrating and making use of the monstrous imagery of the siren with her own queer and bewitching effects that we consistently find in her own singing and her own playing with the aesthetics of the unique Latin American musical tradition known as the *bolero*.

As such, this chapter attempts to contribute to studies of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic. In particular, it takes up Mayra-Santos Febres' text as not only a complication of the dominant narratives around sex tourism that at times focus specifically on the role of cisgendered women or men sex workers, but also those that locate sex tourism as a lack of agency. Moreover, this chapter troubles the rubric of agency itself in suggesting that agency may take forms other than those predetermined channels derived from (neo)liberal subjectivity. That is, agency in *Sirena Selena*—especially in the way that I read it as an activated form of erotic potential and erotic agency—challenges those “proper” forms that seek recourse through the State via rights, or the legalization of prostitution underpinned by violence, or even assertions of power over another, those of exploitation. As Anne McClintock has already observed: the legalization of prostitution puts prostitution into male hands. It also puts the money it generates into circulation. She writes that

“[u]nder legalization, the profits of women’s work [and I would add of queer feminized folks too] clatter into men’s pockets. The state becomes a licit pimp, penning prostitutes in brothels and levying punitive taxes at rates higher than other workers. [...] Under legalization, the state controls prostitutes’ work and leisure, preventing organization and often making it very hard for them to leave the trade if they wish.” (90)

The novel stages sex tourism in significantly different ways than those that I have already explored in previous cases and chapters. Of course, there are the more obvious socio-historical contextual differences: the former involved “romance tourism” between the United States and Canada with Haiti in the 1970s; the latter contemporaneously occurs with the book's publication date in 2000 between predominately Puerto Rican sex workers moving into the Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, the novel still peripherally figures Canadian and other Global North tourists. Whereas Cantet and Laferrière explore a more explicit exchange of sex and romance for money, Santos-Febres' account, comparatively speaking, is more implicit and/or tangential. There are times when Selena and a few others engage in sex work on occasion as a means to make ends meet; however, they never engage in sex work as their primary means of income, nor do they refer to themselves as a “sex worker” or any other subjectivity related to sex work, such as “spanky panky,” “pinguero,” “rent-a-dred” etc. as is found in other locales. Another difference is that Selena, herself, as the provider of sexual services, travels to another country instead of being the one who stays and receives tourists. Yet once in the highly touristic *zona colonial* of the Dominican Republic, it is still the foreign tourist that enters the country per usual to engage in sex. This added dynamic, specifically between Puerto Rican migration to the Dominican Republic, offers a different understanding of the way in which nationalism inflects sex tourism. A third and related difference to the one just mentioned is that the narrative's main relationship is not between Selena and a tourist but rather with a local hotel magnate. This relation reveals not only a different class dynamic, but also a complicated international dynamic as well.

This fourth and final case/chapter pulls from work that I began to undertake in my very first case/chapter. In chapter one, I mentioned a necessary critique of the liberatory potential of what some ethnographic scholars by the name of Pruitt and LaFont refer to as “romance

tourism.” In analyzing the relationship that exists between white women from the United States as well as white *québécoises* women with black Haitian, male sex workers staged in the film *Vers le sud*, I revealed how gendered liberty via economic opportunity and access to sex tourism is, itself, conditioned by the erasure and the very real premature death of black Haitian life. Whereas the first chapter explored the dynamic of white women gaining entry into transnational circuits of capital and thus the ability to explore their own sexualities, this chapter looks at how to imagine an erotic autonomy for Puerto Rican *mulata* and *travesti* sex workers in the very shift to a neoliberal form of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, a major sex tourism destination in the Caribbean region.

II - songs, sirens, & sex work

The contemporary relationships that seem to exist among songs, sirens, science, and sex work have a very long and complex history in the context and project of what we continue to call “the West.” The very image of the siren, itself, has a history that stretches as far back as some of the most ancient and yet still extant of pagan myths. This is a history that we, English speakers, have received specifically from the ancient Greek and ancient Roman worlds. As Inna Naroditskaya and Linda Phyllis Austern write in the introduction to their own 2006 book, *Music of the Sirens*, “[the siren, itself,] indicates a particular mythological or folkloric figure whose name, in various languages, is drawn from the ancient Greek term *siren*, such as the Russian *sirin*, the Italian *sirena*, and the Andean *sirinu*” (2). This is a history that goes as far back as during the time when these two ancient civilizations were, themselves, participating in their own ancient imperial conquests over and across the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Within these two particular cultures, we get to see an entire proliferation of many different images of sirens that were depicted in some of the most famous and canonical of texts from the ancient Greek and Roman poets prior to the take over of Christianity. As Naroditskaya and Austern explain, “[t]he term [siren] also incorporates a range of archetypal beings dwelling in or near water, at once human-like and inhuman, recognized by different names in contrasting ethnic traditions, myths folk legends, and rituals” (ibid).

We read and see, for example, images of sirens in both Homer’s *Odyssey* and in Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica*. The former epic poem is perhaps the most well known, and I will revisit it here shortly. The latter epic poem, that of the *Argonautica*, is perhaps lesser well known. It recounts the myth of the voyage that the ancient Greek mythological hero, Jason, once

took as he, himself, led the team known as “the Argonauts” in retrieving the Golden Fleece from Colchis. But we can easily read of sirens again in the works of later ancient Roman poets. Take, for example, Virgil’s *Aeneid* from around 29-19 BC and his *Georgics* around 29 BC. We can also read of them in the works of Ovid. In both Virgil and Ovid, the sirens are located more precisely on a set of islands called the “*Sirenum Scopuli*” which, according to Homer, were located somewhere between the mythological island of Aeaea and the rock of Scylla. But according to one late-seventeenth-to-early-eighteenth century poet, Joseph Addison, the *Sirenum Scopuli*, or “the Scopuli Sirens,” were actually located just to the south of the island of Capri. Wherever they may have actually been, Persephone Braham notes in her own 2012 article and chapter, “The Monstrous Caribbean,” that “[t]he sirens of classical and medieval tradition dwelt alongside Scylla, the hyperdentate sea-hydra; Charybdis, the crushing sea-vortex (or *vorágine*) who devoured passing ships, and her ally, the primordial sea-serpent Leviathan of the *Revelation*” (33).

The siren, therefore, is perhaps best known through some of her most early of depictions and representations in these specifically ancient Greek and Roman contexts. In ancient Greek, she was known as “*Σειρήν*” in the singular and “*Σειρῆνες*” in the plural. Although she originally appears in the twelfth book of the *Odyssey* without any clear description of her own body, visual artists of the time have often represented the ancient Greek siren as woman-like birds (see figures XXII and XXIII below). This point about there not being any clear description of her body in the *Odyssey* is important to remember, however, because, in the very earliest of representations, the reader must rely on their own imagination in order to conjure up the image the siren, herself. Much of what we are given is Odysseus’ struggle with them. As part of a series of trials and temptations that Odysseus, himself, must endure, he first approaches the

sirens only after having warned his own men to plug their ears with wax lest they die upon hearing the sirens' honey-toned voices in song. Odysseus, however, chooses to bind himself to his own ship's mast with his ears *unplugged* in order to try and resist their enchanting music (158-9). *But, why does Odysseus attempt to resist the siren's song and for what?* According to Shankman and Durrant, "[t]he sirens offer Odysseus comprehensive and absolute knowledge that will obviate the need for further seeking, for they know everything" (13). Their name, etymologically speaking as well as exemplified in the text, itself, literally means "the one that binds or entangles."

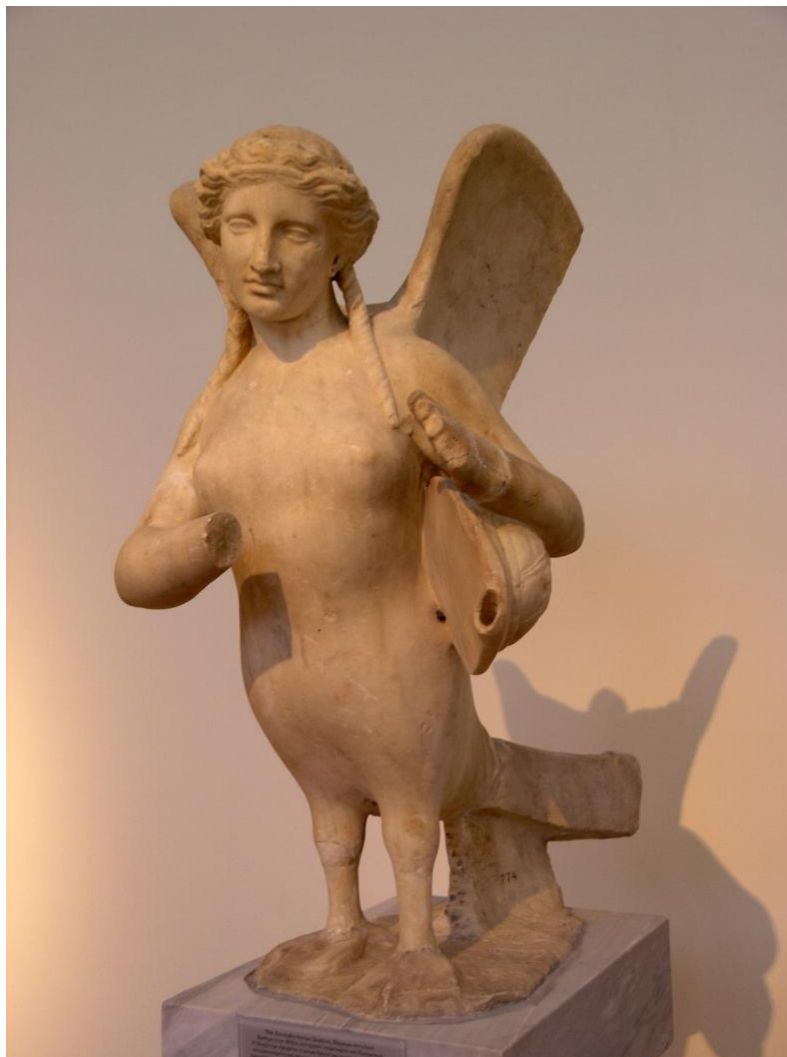


figure XXII | Attic funerary statue of a siren, playing on a tortoiseshell lyre. Circa 370 BC.

With the later Roman poets like Virgil who lived sometime between the years of 70 BC and 19 BC as well as Ovid who lived sometime between 43 BC and 17/18 AD, the sirens were, themselves, displaced into a new realm and territory. They were largely removed from their normally flying positions up in the sky, and they were repositioned from that specifically Greek and terrestrial area that was once a “meadow starred with flowers.” In turn, they were all relocated to a more aquatic-like arena in which they still appeared as monstrous but with a slight twist. They were now half-woman, half-fish. According to Roman mythology, the sirens, themselves, inhabited three small islands that were again known as the *Sirenum Scopuli*, and it is here on these specifically Roman and imaginary islands with their jagged and death-dropping cliffs that men who were (lost) somewhere out there at sea could easily be lured in by way of their own sweet and seductive songs. The sirens, therefore and in this Roman rendition, would all call in the men from afar to then leave them all stranded there without any aid, and, in some of the worst of cases, the sirens would just leave them there to die.

Christian depictions and representations of the siren throughout Europe’s medieval era also treated and framed it as a monstrous figure which, in turn, served as a way to further entrench it as both a specific kind of symbol and allegory. As an allegory, the image of the monstrous siren tells the tragic story and the hard life-lessons learned by young men who were, themselves, told to be wary of the consequences of giving in to certain kinds of worldly and erotic temptations.

Well after the period of classical antiquity, depictions and representations involving songs, sirens, and sex work resurfaced in the early modern European imaginary—especially during the period of the Age of Discovery. As a direct result of this resurfacing, the siren was once again displaced. During this time period, stories (re-)arose when the early modern Western

European empires—mostly modeled on the ancient Roman and Greek empires before them—undertook their own kind of conquests over and across what was, this time, a much larger body of water than that of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. The Atlantic Ocean presented a veritable challenge, but it was ultimately achievable in that European technology and imperial might which enabled them to not only chart this much larger body of water but to also navigate, cross over, and colonize it. During the period of the early modern era, in the early years of the Western European conquest of the Americas, the originally small and rocky islands known as the *Sirenum Scopuli* that were originally imagined in the older and ancient Roman empire were now transposed over and onto those of the Greater Antillean Islands that were located well across the Atlantic Ocean. From the Aegean and Mediterranean seas to that of the Caribbean sea, the figure and the image of the siren had now swum quite far. The Greater Antillean islands have since come to take over the place of the original *Sirenum Scopuli*, and they now go by the names of the following three islands: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola which is now home to both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As Edmundo O’Gorman has already pointed out, these siren figures have helped to construct the very idea of the Americas more generally and the Caribbean more specifically (page).

But what about the siren in the specific context of the Caribbean? Braham describes them in this context as follows: “A denizen of both the Caribbean and Mediterranean seas, the siren embodied the lure of exploration and conquest” (34). But she then goes on to add just a few sentences later that in “[i]nhabiting the liminal space between the Old and New Worlds, the hybrid siren offered a metaphor for Latin American intellectuals seeking political and cultural independence from Europe. At the same time, the racial, cultural, and national hybridity attributed to the criollos of the Americas was regarded as voluptuous, degenerate, and impure”

(34). Joan Dayan writes in her own book on *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, that the figure of *La Sirène* [The Siren] is “[...] one of the powerful female spirits” (xv).

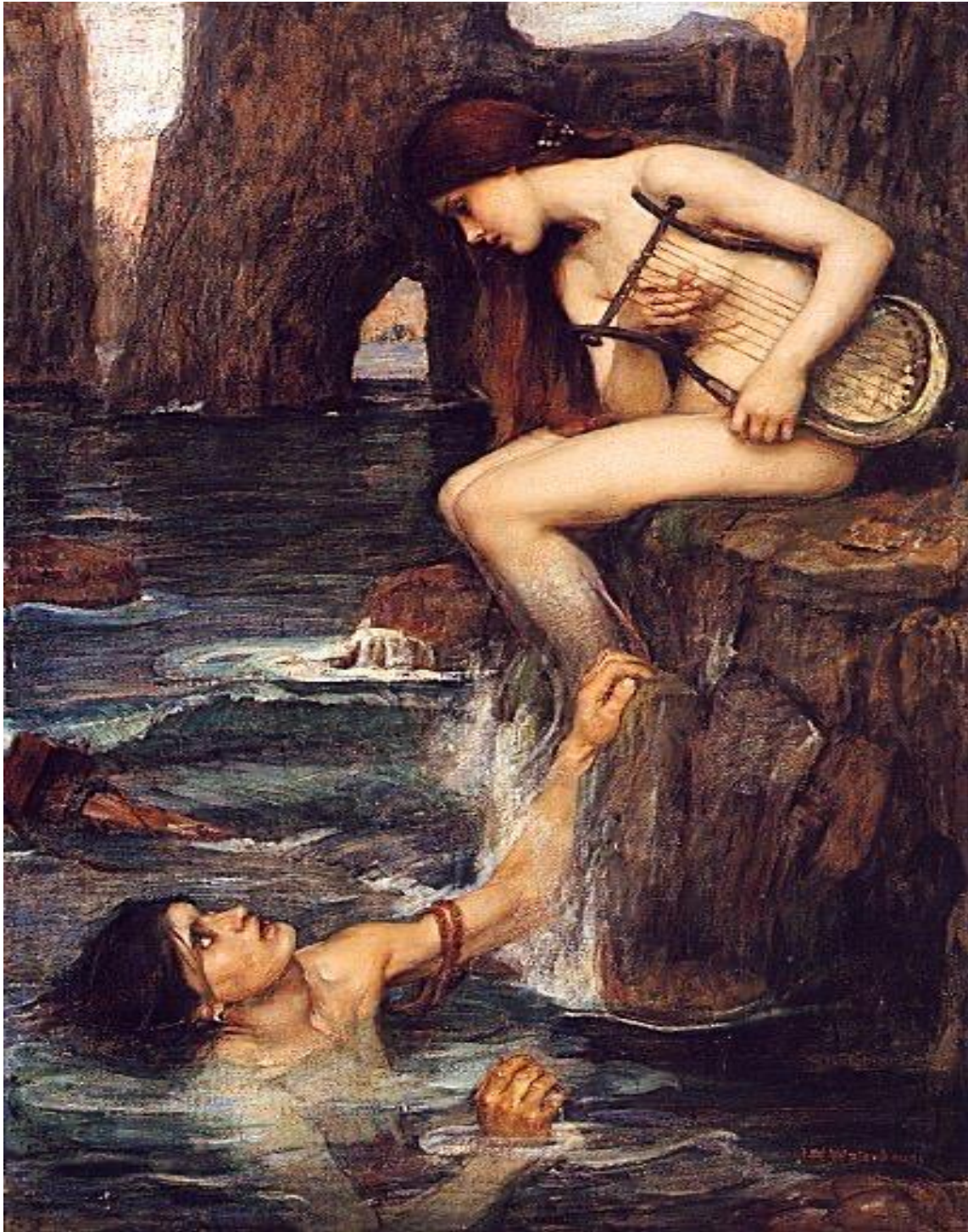


figure XXIII | Waterhouse, John William. “The Siren.” Oil on canvas. Private Collection, circa 1900.

Sirens have long been understood to be monsters, and they have long been depicted as such. A siren, in general, is a more threatening and deadly form of the mermaid, which is also found in many stories and tales of explorers, adventurers, and travelers. But provided that the figure of the siren is, itself, usually found within literature written by men, they have been traditionally depicted as monstrous insofar as they are, themselves, considered to be man-eaters. Sirens, therefore, are known for their terrifying tendency to lure in men and to then consume them and their flesh. With the more modern and Spanish colonization of the Americas, for example, the figure of *la sirena* became part of the imaginary repertoire of a once European but now newly-transposed set of specifically American monsters. *La sirena*, therefore, joined a whole cast of other monstrous and specifically American figures. While she would join the performance taking place on the American stage, she would ultimately not have her own number as she would, herself, have to share the performance with other American monsters—monsters like that of *el canibal*, the cannibal, and the Amazonian woman among so many others. Braham, again, has already observed that,

“[...] it is most particularly in Latin America, whose discovery coincided with the birth of modernity, that Amazons, cannibals, sirens, and other monsters have become enduring symbols of national and regional character. Embodying exoticism, hybridity, and excess, monsters sustained the ongoing conceptualization of the unknown that was a prerequisite to conquest and colonization; after independence, monsters became metaphors for a series of problems ranging from indigenous and African slavery to dictatorship and postcolonial identity” (17).

A bit later, Braham writes that, “Amazons, sirens, and cannibals, represented the wealth of the Indies, and resistance to the Spanish right to it” (22).

Even just a brief look at her own historical representations, as I have done here on up and above, reveals the ideological work of several different and yet oppressive kinds of logics. The first is that of gender, for she is, as a siren, always rendered feminine. Second, her sexuality is often depicted and interpreted as threatening and, thus, it is also condemned due to the ways in which she, herself, uses her own sex. Last are the allusions to the logic of race, provided that she, herself, signifies an impurity of the human as a very category, itself. She is always a mixture of the human and something else. Sometimes she is half-bird; other times she is half-fish. But as Naroditskaya and Austern both write, “[t]he siren and her sisters are the most elusive and paradoxical of all creatures. Neither fish, fowl, nor long-tressed mammal, they are impossible combinations of any of these, or none at all” (1). “Sirens,” they continue to explain just a few sentences later on, “are beings of foam and fantasy, insubstantial as the play of moonlight across the surface of the pool, born of the desires of simple river folk and ancient sailors” (ibid).

I, myself, understand the figure of the siren (and sometimes the figure of the mermaid) to have become a leading member in the main repertoire and imaginary of Western Modernity. She—as she is again most often gendered and sexed as feminine and female—is a figure that has been produced in what the contemporary Caribbean scholar, Michael Dash, has called “[...] the colonial context [of] a primitivist or exotic discourse[, one] that reduces other cultures to the realm of the id, the libidinal, and the savage” (23). The siren, then, came to be an important object of primitivist or exotic discursive production. She had a role to play. We should, therefore, remember what Kamala Kempadoo has already pointed out in terms of how relatively current and global imagination of the Caribbean is one that continues to frame and see it as an *exotic*

place which is also just chock full of readily exploitable resources (1). Songs, sirens, and sex work are all alive and well on the Caribbean islands.

In the now post-triumphant era of neoliberalism, the figure of the siren still seems to pull from several of its previous associations with prostitution and/or sex work that have since been developed in the many years and even many millenia before it. Akin to Saint Isidore's conflation of the sirens with prostitutes specifically and with prostitution more generally, a similar situation continues today in which sirens, themselves, are framed as licentious women who lure in travelers from afar. In the case and context of the Caribbean and its (sex) tourism industry, the clientele "[...] en busca de aventuras y entretenimiento" [in search of adventure and entertainment], still largely come from the (neo)imperial centers of the Global North—namely Europe and the United States (12). Prostitutes and/or sex-workers help to bring in tourists from quite far away as they are, themselves, part of the unspoken package deal that is included with the purchase of leisure services found in the sex tourism economy. And yet, these people are often narrated as the very reason for the country's deepest of ills. If we are to take this mythological cultural figure not as some neutral or innocent representation but as something that is, itself, a discursive as well as a poetic kind of tool invested in power relations, then we can hopefully come to understand that this specifically siren-oriented and generally monstrous discursive construction of the Other relies on the oppressive logics of race, gender, sex(uality), and class.

If it isn't apparent already, Sirena Selena's own name is what first indicates her status as a (Spanish-oriented) siren. "*Sirena*" is, itself, the Spanish word for "siren" in English, and sirens, as they are generally known in the Spanish tradition are mythological creatures which have historically been depicted as again these hybrid-like entities often used as metaphors. Yet again, I

want to rely on Braham here who writes that, “[a] study of the distribution of siren images through the Middle Ages places about 30 percent of these images in Spain, specifically Castille, Navarre, and Catalonia. In medieval Spanish lyric,” she goes on to explain, “the siren was a metaphor for flattery and the treachery of the senses (Juan de Mena’s *Coplas*) or the transience of good fortune (the Marquis of Santillana’s sonnets)” (34). Braham then proceeds to pull and provide even more specific examples from within this specifically Spanish tradition. The first involves “[t]he beautiful Melosina, [who] tragically transformed each Saturday into a serpent below the waist, [and who was] figured in a popular 1489 Spanish translation of the French Mélusine by Jean d’Arras. Melosina,” she adds “has many sons, all of whom have bizarre disfigurements (a missing or extra eye, a protruding fang, asymmetrical ears or eyes)” (ibid). Braham then notes that,

“In Spanish Golden Age literature, Calderón de la Barca’s zarzuela *El golfo de las Sirenas* [*The Gulf of the Sirens*] retells Odysseus’s encounters with Scylla, Charybdis, and the sirens. Francisco Quevedo’s unnamed siren represents the treacherous senses; the man who stops his ears and covers his eyes is safely insulated from her danger. Sirens were rumored to eat men who did not satisfy them sexually, and Spanish fishermen and sailors had to swear an oath against coupling with them” (ibid).

I should add that because Sirena Selena is, herself, described in the novel as “*travesti*,” the whole entire notion of her being a siren is further reinforced. She is, herself, assumed to have a “split” body and, therefore, she has an inherently “monstrous” body. In this way, her *travesti* body is just like the body of the siren: it is made of two supposedly distinct things. The

siren/mermaid's body is always a composite body, half-human, half-creature, and, therefore, it is seen as monstrous.

However, Santos-Febres' novel ultimately reworks and reframes this traditional take on the western and modern figure of the siren/mermaid in order to fit the specific situation of Puerto Rico. And she does so in order to call attention to the underlying colonial logics that have long served as the pillars for the siren's own architectural structure. She is not the first one to do so as she builds on the work of other writers, like that of the father of Puerto-Rican literature, Alejandro Tapia y Riviera (1826-82). "*La Antigua Sirena* (1862)," writes Braham, "took up the theme of the hybrid or liminal status of Puerto Rico" (35). In that particular work of his, Braham notes how "[t]he eponymous Sirena is a beautiful young woman who seduces and destroys all those around her. She is a monster," she adds, "of political intrigue who undermines the most idealistic and patriotic young men: a 'double lie' whose external beauty belies her moral corruption and whose all-consuming devotion to power runs contrary to the feminine ideal of self-abnegation: "Sirena was, then, a double lie: a lie as a beauty, a lie as an abnegation, the second and principal beauty of woman. The Siren, indeed, represents the political intrigue in the Spanish court and its deleterious effects on the noble, fatally misused American Amazon" (ibid).

For Sirena Selena in Santos-Febres' novel to be in Solange's social circles is a violation of what is discursively framed in the text as "natural law." In fact, Solange states while being caught by Selena's song that "[n]o es de este mundo" [She/it is not from this world]. Solange makes this statement as if it is, itself, self-explanatory; however, her own assertion relies on the previous rehearsals of dehumanizing name-calling. The song's effect is to attempt to mark two ontologically distinct realms: the first being that of Solange's and the second being that of Selena's. It is doubtless true that within the circles of the upper Dominican elite, Selena's

presence is, by far, viewed as an exception. It is something they see as strange, alluring, and yet threatening all at once. It is her own status as sex worker, moreover, that marks her presence as specifically forbidden within their class. Solange uses this phrase to convince her interlocutor that Selena is, indeed, from another (supposedly magical) world whose laws are separate from and, therefore, they are too different from this one. Selena, therefore, cannot belong to or be an active part of Solange's assumed-to-be "natural" world. For, if Sirena were to belong to or be an active part of her seemingly natural world, then this would mean that it is either manipulated somehow or in the process of being destroyed by Sirena's denaturalizing powers as a seemingly otherworldly subject.

In addition to this, what makes Sirena's voice most threatening is that it is not bound by the laws of Solange's neoliberal world. It can, therefore, transfix her. Sirena's own voice is viewed as "simply" too different and, therefore, threatening in its ability to magically transcend the seemingly secular laws that bind the neoliberal order of things. Solange, herself, needs Selena to be an animal and a monster in order for her to make her own self feel like a human and unified being. But of course, epistemologically speaking, the Other *is* part and parcel of "this [neoliberal] world" order if only through its (ab)negation into a world unlike "this one," and this is in spite of its own role as a constitutive element. In short, it constitutes while and through being (ab)negated.

Santos-Febres uptakes this particular figure and image of the siren as a dangerous prostitute in the neoliberal dreamwork to then reframe her own allegorical significance in the context of sex tourism. By using the figure and image of the siren as a sex worker, Santos-Febres is able to stage a character who can assert their own emerging erotic autonomy. Moreover, the explorers and sailors previously deployed in the Western European tradition now figure as the

tourists and the business people who arrive *en masse* either by plane or by cruise ship. In sum, Santos-Febres uptakes the image and the imaginary figure of the Siren as a form of empowerment, and, in doing so, she is also able to metaphorically capture the relations between those who represent the neoliberal capitalist interest that ultimately looks to consume her body and those whom she, herself, seeks out in order to feel whole.

III - the erotic & erotic autonomy

My use of the two expressions, “the erotic” and “erotic autonomy,” is anchored in the work of two specific scholars, and they are much more expansive than the simplistic, State-based understanding of eroticism as sexual desire. I pull these two phrases directly from Audre Lorde whose much more detailed work on “the erotic” frames it as a sources of suppressed power and M. Jacqui Alexander who puts “erotic autonomy” in relation to the recolonizing process of the post-colonial nation in the Caribbean context. Much of my own understanding of “the erotic” here in this case and chapter comes from the work of Audre Lorde who wrote about the erotic in her own short 1993 essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” My own understanding of “erotic autonomy” is informed by the work of M. Jacqui Alexander who situates and discusses the issue of erotic autonomy within the context of the Caribbean in the very first chapter of her own book *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. That first chapter of hers is titled, “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas.” In what follows I want to revisit and then build on the work of these two brilliant scholars.

In one of Lorde’s shorter essays, she offers us not only a definition of the word, “erotic,” but a much more nuanced account of—if at times approaching a seemingly mystic take on—what exactly constitutes the term. Lorde initially describes “the erotic” in that essay as “[...] a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). What is perhaps key here to Lorde’s own definition of the erotic is that it is not limited to any one particular subsection of the general population. We all possess “the erotic” “within each of us” as a “resource.” A little bit later on in

that exact same essay, Lorde goes on to elaborate on how “the erotic” is something that is also distinctively non-rational and a source of both power *and* information (54). At one point she even refers to it as a “reservoir of knowledge” (56).

Stemming originally from the ancient Greek deity of *Ἔρως* [Eros] who was, himself, understood to be the personification of love born from Chaos, Lorde generally views the erotic as the expression of a deep and chaotic sort of creative power as well as a sense of harmony. Yet in addition to this description, she also notes several different aspects of what the erotic can do as a form of potential power. She states that, as an assertion of the life-force of women, it “offers a well of replenishing and provocative force.” and this force is a sort of watery force, given her choice of the words, “well,” and “replenishing”—and “reservoir” from earlier. The erotic, therefore, seems to serve, for Lorde, as a sort of watery reservoir that is not only capable of replenishing those who draw from it but also capable of providing them with a “provocative force.”

Because the erotic has been historically manipulated and used in the service of men, reduced to the pornographic as honing in on and extracting sensation, it has since become and even come to mean a suppression of feeling in dominant understandings. Lorde observes how women in particular have been forced into suppressing their own erotic power, for a woman erotically empowered is considered to be a dangerous woman. Lastly, Lorde makes a very incisive point: she states that “[f]or the erotic is not only a question of *what* we do, but *how acutely* and *fully* we can feel in the doing” (emphasis mine, 54).

In sum, “the erotic” for Lorde, is a number of different and yet related things. It is an unexpressed or unrecognized feeling that, when activated, replenishes one (and others) with provocative force through a distinctively non-rational, creative, and harmonious kind of power,

and that power delivers not only information but it also provides one with knowledge. I find that many of these elements are also present throughout Santos-Febres' novel. In fact, we can see them most whenever Selena sings, which seems to trigger and/or induce the same watery-like lexicon and imagery that Lorde, herself, uses. There is a similar vocabulary here of the erotic being "a well," and/or "a reservoir" that is capable of "replenishing." It is precisely these moments that I will later read in order to showcase how it is that Selena's deployment of or tapping into her own erotic power and thus her own erotic autonomy works.

This brings me to my understanding of the very expression, "erotic autonomy," itself. In her own chapter dedicated to the term, Alexander first frames "erotic autonomy" as an integral part of the recolonizing processes of the post-colonial nation. While she does not provide us with a definition of what exactly it is that she precisely means by the expression, "erotic autonomy," she does provide us with some of its contouring details especially those regarding its effects. For Alexander, she has keenly observed—and again this is in the context of the Caribbean—that erotic autonomy and "women's sexual agency" have "always been troublesome for the state" (22). She adds, in particular, how both erotic autonomy and women's sexual agency have both challenged and even threatened the nuclear heterosexual family as well as the nation. Narrated from the state's perspective as a form of "corruption," "irresponsible citizenship," and/or a lack of "respectability," Alexander has also observed how the specific erotic autonomies of both the figure of the "prostitute" and the figure of the "lesbian" are "[...] now positioned together within black heteropatriarchy as outlaw, operating outside the boundaries of law, and therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it" (23). In short, the erotically empowered and autonomous women in the Caribbean are viewed not only as not performing properly, but they are also seen as being willfully disobedient and intentionally transgressive.

Whereas Alexander's work is within the context of a predominately black and heteropatriarchal state formation well within the context of the Caribbean region—such as that of the Bahamas—this chapter looks at another state and another island. Taking the Dominican Republic as a predominately white and heteropatriarchal state formation, I assert that the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism that occurred there was one in which the door that led to biopolitical protection for people just like Sirena Selen—that is, for all those people who are framed in the novel as lower-class queer *mulata* sex workers—was finally unlocked and then opened. But the predominately white and heteropatriarchal state of the Dominican Republic also unlocked and opened that door, extending its biopolitical protection, in exchange for Sirena Selen's own self-attunement to a certain kind of subjectivity maintained by a culture of respectability. In this way, she is brought under state control not through the rather blatant necropolitical violences of a Sexual Offences Bill, but rather through her own access to a now legitimized form of subjectivity, with all of its attendant forms of surveillance, discipline, and punishment that end up legitimizing such a subjectivity to begin with. In other words, Sirena Selen's own erotic autonomy is one that does not fully give in to this invitation to perform and assume such a biopolitically sanctioned form of queer subjectivity and identity. Instead, Sirena Selen, I argue, resists and contests that invitation to both perform and assume. In fact, Sirena Selen's own erotic autonomy does even more than that: in addition to both resisting and contesting, her own use of her own erotic autonomy reconfigures the *liberal* as well as the *neoliberal* relations and regimes of governmentality which both seek to respectively exclude and include her. In short, she begins to craft her own world.

My main aim here is to, therefore, build on the work of both Lorde and Alexander by studying just *how exactly* it is that Sirena Selen's own erotic autonomy as a sex worker is both

represented and depicted throughout Santos-Febres' novel. My interest, then, is in the many different erotic interactions that she, herself, has with a variety of different characters in the book. And so, in my own reading here further on down below, I aim to analyze the ways in which Sirena Selena, herself, engages her own erotic autonomy in such a way that she, herself, becomes so alluring, so enchanting, and yet also so threatening at the exact same time. It is through Sirena Selena's singing, I will assert, that her own erotic autonomy functions as a sort of activated-potential, and this activated-potential is both imagined and described in the novel as a sort of nourishing well that holds water which can, itself, be accessed any time *if* one knows how to access it. It is also figured as something that is explicitly nonrational and thus supernatural. It is also deeply connected to the transfer of knowledge and information. This type of work of mine here in this final case and this final chapter sketches out what I, myself, think is a much more expansive definition of the concept of the erotic and even eroticism in general. And what I essentially want to do is move beyond the limits of an understanding of the erotic and eroticism that are caught somewhere in the transition between liberalism and neoliberalism.

In my own subsequent series of close readings of Santos-Febres' novel, I, therefore, distinguish between what I call "moments of erotic potentiality" and "moments of erotic actuality." And I largely distinguish between these two forms of eroticism—the potential and the actual—as they, both themselves, work in conjunction with a particular kind of Caribbean and Latin American genre of song known again as "the *bolero*." While it is the *bolero* that seems to be the specific genre of song which captures well those moments of erotic potentiality in the novel, it is what the contemporary black and religious studies scholar, Roberto Strongman, has called "the *bolereo*"—with an extra 'e' in there before the final 'o'—that seems to capture well those moments of erotic actuality. And despite the small difference in spelling between the two

words, between “*bolero*” and “*bolereo*”—with again that simple addition of an extra ‘e’—this is a very important distinction for me and my own work.

In short, I read those moments of erotic actuality in Santos-Febres’ novel as moments wherein Sirena Selena, herself, activates her own intuition. And in activating her own intuition, things start to get misty, moist, and wet. That is, the moments and scenes in which Sirena Selena, herself, activates her own erotic autonomy often involve watery imagery that ends up seeping and soaking into everything around her—even the people. As a result of her own magical watery gift, Sirena Selena is able to better know (and to even sometimes change) the increasingly threatening neoliberal environment that exists all around her, and she is able to do so by sinking down and into her own gnostic mode of knowledge production. When she ultimately loses herself in what we could call “the rhythm of neoliberalism,” Sirena Selena attempts to look for her own sense of self, her own deep rhythm held within herself. And she ultimately does choose herself in the end by escaping out of *la zona colonial*, and she does so by transforming into an opaque cloud that first runs down the stairs and then disappears outside of the open door that lay right there before her.

In my own upcoming discussion of these two forms of eroticism, of both erotic potentiality and erotic actuality, I also explore the recurrent motif of water that runs its way, all the way, throughout the whole entire novel. In addition to the prevalence of both song and music, there is a lot of water imagery in Santos-Febres’ story. In fact, it is often the song and the music that brings about the imagery of the water as well as the flooding. The appearance of water, I argue, typically signals the moments in which Sirena Selena, herself, *actualizes* her own erotic autonomy, shifting it from a moment of erotic potentiality to a moment of erotic actuality. And, in leaning on Strongman’s work, this is reflected in the queering of an already melancholic genre

of song known as the *bolero*. Water, therefore, comes into the picture whenever Sirena Selena, herself, moves from suppressing her own erotic potential to finally activating it and allowing for it to flow about her freely. This is exactly when things again start to get misty, moist, and very very wet. Water, whenever Sirena Selena sings in the form of the queer aesthetic practice of the *bolereo*, begins to flood and fill up all of the halls. Her liquids race across the floor, and they seep past any sort of door frame that dares to even try to shut them out. Water, for both Sirena Selena and for Santos-Febres, is what cannot be contained by the norms nor the dictates of an increasingly neoliberal world order. Water, here, is what both erodes and escapes as it ebbs and flows.

With Alexander's understandings of the ways in which black and white heteropatriarchal state power both reduce and reconfigure erotic power for their own biopolitical, reproductive ends—especially in the form of procreation—I want to ruminate in the subsequent analyses that follow on just how it is that Santos-Febres is able to imagine and envision an erotic autonomy for specifically Puerto Rican sex workers just like Sirena Selena who are, themselves, attempting to live and survive within the context of the Dominican Republic's increasingly neoliberal sex tourism industry. I want to, therefore, put the theoretical contributions of both Lorde and Alexander into conversation with not only Strongman's work but the ways in which Santos-Febres imagines an erotic autonomy via the queering of a certain kind of musical medium like that the *bolero*.

IV - the queer aesthetics of *el bolereo*

As I have already mentioned up above, one of the novel's most central elements is the use and power of song and, more specifically, that of *the bolero*. In this fourth section, I want to use the specific work of the contemporary Caribbean Cultural Studies scholar, Roberto Strongman, and I want to pull from his 2007 article, "The Latin American Queer Aesthetics of *El Bolereo*" in particular. In relying on Strongman's work here in this fourth and final section of mine, I sketch out a brief history of the *bolero* as a specific style of song in addition to discussing its often melancholic content. I then return to how exactly it is that Mayra Santos-Febres *queers* the bolero in the same way and in the same sense that Strongman means to queer the bolero. I go on to assert that Santos-Febres queers the *bolero* and creates *bolereos* with Sirena Selena's specifically *magical* and *disidentificatory* uptake of the original genre of the bolero within the novel. With the queer aesthetics of *el bolereo* at her disposal, Sirena Selena is then able to assume the position of an enchantress, a monstrous, siren-like *bolerista*, or bolero singer, who can lure in both local businessmen and tourists from afar with nothing but her own singing.

The *bolero*, in short, is a particular kind of genre of song that originated in Cuba sometime around the nineteenth century. This particular type of song is one that usually expresses the singer's often longing desire, which is traditionally assumed and/or understood to be the desire of a masculine, male, and heterosexual subject. The song is typically sung for a particular woman or a particular group of women who often serve as the singer's object(s) of desire.

While the *bolero* does share the same exact name with its eighteenth century counterpart in Spain, its history in the Caribbean and in Latin America more broadly is quite distinct. As I

have already briefly mentioned up above, the *bolero* emerged sometime in the late nineteenth century, but it didn't really reach massive popularity until the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Originally from various African traditions, the Caribbean *bolero* crystalized in Cuba by way of its percussive-accented predecessor, *el cinquillo*. It thus pulled from the rhythm of Vodou ritual percussion that goes as far back as the days of the French colony of Saint Domingue, or what is, today, known as modern-day Haiti. It later blended with the guitar in the style of the *trova*. In Oriente and Santiago de Cuba, typically male musicians—known as *trovadores*—would travel around playing their own guitars in various spots as a way to make their own living. The genre has since spread to many other locales across the many Caribbean islands, and it has also moved on to the wider Latin American world with notable influence in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Chile. , According to Strongman, the *bolero* achieved the level of massive commercialized distribution as well as popularity throughout the decades of the 1930s and 1960s among the Latin American, urban middle-class, and this was thanks to the advent of both the radio and the jukebox (41-42). Popular figures include the accredited founder of the *trova*, itself, whose name is Pepe Sánchez from Cuba, Rafaél Hernandez (1892-1965) from Puerto Rico, Agustín Lara (1897-1970) from México, Luís Miguel (1970-present) who is of Puerto-Rican-Mexican descent, and the recently deceased, Lucho Gatica (1928-2018) from Chile.

With the neoliberalization of the Caribbean in the late twentieth century, the *bolero* became further commodified as a popular song and genre that was then sold in local drag performances throughout the region. In the novel, for example, La Martha views Selena's singing of *boleros* as a profitable opportunity for her own market expansion, but she does not so much see that opportunity for them if they, themselves, stay in Puerto Rico. For La Martha, the opportunity is to be found in a neighboring Caribbean country, and that is in the Dominican

Republic's "*zona turística*," or "tourist zone." This move of La Martha's to seize on such an opportunity—that is, to commodify and to profit off of Selena's singing of *boleros*—comes to her mainly because of the specific kinds of consumers and the specific kinds of audiences of people who like to vacation there. She is, of course and in short, referring to those people who are predominately white, anglophone, and gay male tourists.

Given the *bolero*'s older instantiation in ballad-like form, "loss" has been one of its most important and signature of themes. Since then, its own degree of thematic expression has opened if only slightly. Originally the expression of the love of a *trovador* [troubador], Pérez Firmat notes that the *bolero*'s central preoccupation is, indeed, one of loss, provided that the love which is expressed or declared is frequently a love that is, itself, ultimately unrequited. Juan Carlos Santaella adds that popular Latin American music, like that of the *bolero*, "[...] fue relegada por las élites intelectuales de estos países al rincón oscuro de los bares en donde enardecidas rocolas ofrecían todas las noches *el íntimo testimonio de la soledad y el abandono*" (21). In English, that's something along the lines of the *bolero* [was relegated by the intellectual elites of those countries to the obscure corner of the bars in which enflamed jukeboxes offered up *the intimate testimony of loneliness and abandonment* every night]. In addition to loss, then, the *bolero*'s thematic expression has broadened to include a more—perhaps class-inflected—sense of both loneliness and abandonment.

While Santos-Febres' uptake of the *bolero* does, indeed, participate in these traditional themes of loss, loneliness, and abandonment, there are significant differences as well. To begin, just *who* exactly it is that expresses these themes obviously changes. Instead of the typical repetition of a set of heteronormative characters, the novel offers up an array of many different queer subjectivities. There is Sirena Selena, La Martha, Hugo, Leocadio, and Valentina. Second,

just *what* exactly is lost in addition to *how* their testimonial loneliness and abandonment all figure completely changes. For Selena, loss, loneliness, and abandonment capture her relationship to her home, her family, and the deadly fate of fellow sex workers. In sum, one could argue that Santos-Febres simply adds on to a long line of *bolero* themes by including a simply queer inflection or a queer twist of that particular line, one that ultimately shifts the meanings of what has been historically dominant in this particular kind of artistic medium. I do want to push past such a somewhat simplistic reading, however, if only because it isn't sufficient enough to account for the ways in which Santos-Febres, herself, uses the *bolero* in the text. There is something left unaccounted for, but, in order to attend to it, I must now turn to the scholarly work of Roberto Strongman.

In the text, Sirena Selena queers the *bolero* by turning it into what Strongman, himself, has already theorized as the *bolereo* with an extra 'e' right before the last 'o.' In his own article, Strongman provides an analysis of *how* the *bolero* functions traditionally, which, in turn, allows us to better understand how it is that the main character, Sirena Selena, then disidentifies with it. He first defines the *bolero* as a musical genre that "[...] is supported by an underlying queer aesthetic that exposes gendered and sexualized identities as constructed" (39). In other words, the *bolero*, as a medium of expression, shares certain queer sensibilities that are, themselves, "always already woven into [its] fabric" (41). He then coins the term, "*bolereo*," which is admittedly a word that is quite similar to the word, *bolero*, and can, therefore, be a little bit confusing when trying to distinguish between the two. He does so, however, as a means of better naming and, therefore, capturing this latent and distinctively Latin American "underlying queer aesthetic." He asserts, moreover, that when the *bolereo* is deployed as a discursive practice or as a strategy, it "[...] opens up a temporary space of affirmation for dissident sexualities through its

questioning of reproductive heteropatriarchy” (40). Put differently, the *bolereo* denaturalizes the traditional way in which the *bolero* as song enacts the desire of the singer within its own narrative structure. It does so by reinterpreting the traditional pain of the *bolero* while simultaneously providing a “space of solace” by, in Strongman’s words, “capitaliz[ing] on the discordant emotions of the genre, on its ambiguities, ambivalences, and instabilities to produce an aesthetics that enables same-sex desire to be read within and alongside a traditional heterosexual narrative” (49). Concurrent to this ability to denaturalize heteropatriarchal desire, the *bolereo* also avows or renders that desire as identifiably intelligible. The *bolereo* calls attention to the specificity of heteropatriarchal desire as an originally disavowed and universalized desire. It locates that desire, then, in the tradition of romantic, courtly love conventions (50). In sum, Strongman’s *bolereo* functions as a discursive tool within the *bolero* as song to expose its formerly occluded heteropatriarchal desire via denaturalization as well as the concurrent rendering intelligible of its own specificity.

While the difference between the *bolero* and the *bolereo* might at first seem confusing, I do find the distinction to be quite useful. Insofar as the *bolero* as an artistic medium may never have its queer potential activated, the *bolereo* names the specific deployment of this discursive strategy as a sort of temporary, musical speech-act. In the novel, Selena sings the *bolero* on multiple occasions, yet it is her selective deployment of the *bolereo* to which I pay special attention. Whereas Strongman understands the *bolereo* to be a queer discursive practice that reveals the heteropatriarchal codes that underlie the *bolero*, I understand Selena’s *bolereo* to be more of an externally-directed practice. That is to say, Selena’s selective deployment and use of the *bolereo* serves as an assertion of her own erotic autonomy that is, itself, capable of revealing much more about the underlying codes of her own various relationships and, therefore, about the

larger neoliberal epistemic system she, herself, must navigate and survive. And because her own *bolereo* falls outside of the typical neoliberal rubric of what is now an officially accepted form of desire that is queer but respectable, it thus takes on a distinctively magical or supernatural form. To be a little more clearer here: I think that its emergent articulation cannot be narrated within the already existing idioms and, therefore, seems to exist *outside* of the very laws that bind together those idioms. Selena's *bolereo*, in sum, is able to discursively reveal heteropatriarchy in the various social relations she has with other characters. Her use of the *bolereo* also reconfigures those relations into a more relational ontology as well as liberatory project.

Throughout the novel, there are several scenes in which Selena's supernatural effect of the *bolereo* either serves to protect her or reconfigure current social relations. In what follows, I close read four moments and their contexts in which Selena enacts the *bolereo*, exploring in detail not only its effects on herself and others but also the ways they foment new social relations. I first analyze Selena's relationship with her grandmother, who, while alive but especially after her passing, gifts Selena with *boleros* that actively take on a nurturing and protective form when deploying them more as *bolereos*. I then consider a second, rumored moment between Selena and a client wherein the *bolereo* completely reorients their sexual exchange. I then read a third, much longer exchange between Selena and the white, upper-class housewife, Solange. Lastly, I finish with Selena and Hugo's consummating sexual exchange that ultimately results in Selena's *incapacity* to sing the *bolero* and thus enact any kind of magical effect.

activating the bolereo: boleros, loss, & protection

When La Martha recounts the day she first heard Selena singing in the street, it becomes clear how *boleros*—despite all the mystery and intrigue—function quite differently. La Martha remembers Selena’s voice in the street, like no other:

“[L]o cantó a viva voz, lo cantó como si se fuera a morir cuando terminara de cantarlo, lo cantó para percatarse ella misma de su agonía, como un perro agonizante lo cantó, como un perro de raza pero leproso, muriendo bajo una goma de carro recién desmantelado” (10).

[{s}he sang it with a voice full of life, she sang it as if she were going to die when she finished singing it, she sang it in order to realize her own self as separate from her agony, like an agonizing dog sang it, like a dog {de raza} but leprous, dying underneath a car’s tire recently dismantled.]

At first glance, it is obvious that La Martha is completely taken by Selena’s singing: she was lively, painfully authentic, and clearly someone to not pass up. However, there is much more here in the description of Selena’s singing that La Martha detects but does not—or cannot—fully make sense of. (Perhaps, and if only because, La Martha views Selena’s enchanting capacity to sing as little more than a business opportunity with all its rich, selling potential.) As mentioned above, the *bolero*’s principal preoccupation with loss is traditionally located in the romantic, courtly love conventions of heteropatriarchy. It is typically within the *bolero*, then, that men express their anguish for a lost love. But Selena’s rendition as La Martha recounts it differs not only in terms of *what* exactly is lost but also *how* she relates to the medium.

What draws in La Martha is precisely this striking, qualitatively different manner in which Selena sings the *bolero*, but whose history is unknown. The narrator first emphasizes in the quote above that Selena sang the song as if she were going to die whenever she finished. While this could, indeed, be read as part of the melodramatic expression the song permits—an emphasizing of the intensity of one’s loss of love so much so as to seemingly die when the song ends—I believe this reading is too reductive. The physical and mental conditions of Selena’s life on the streets up to this point in the novel cannot be ignored. It is later revealed through episodic flashbacks that Selena suffered a near-deadly attack from a wealthy client and was left beat-up and bleeding in the streets (70). Valentina, a friend who was a fellow sex worker, older sister, and her first queer mother, came to her rescue. After five days in the hospital with no protection from both the police and social workers who simply continue to harass her and Valentina,⁵¹ Selena becomes caught between living on the streets or being forced into a foster home. But even the government’s foster care system, she knows well, will not protect her:

“¡Qué me va a mantener a mí el Gobierno! A encerrarme en un hogar y tratarme como basura. [...] Los hogares de crianza eran una pesadilla. Tener un simulacro de familia que te trata mal y por cobrar es peor que no tener a nadie. Ella lo sabía en carne propia” (76).

[Oh, the government’s going to take care of me! To lock me up in a home and treat me like garbage. {...} Foster homes were a nightmare. To have the simulacrum of a family that treats you poorly and, collectively, is worse than not having anyone. She knew it in her own body.]

Valentina convinces a healing Selena to no longer work the streets, then, while also offering up her own apartment as a place to stay. In an intimately tender moment of embrace between the two, the full character of Selena's plight comes out in a *llanto silencioso*:

“Con aquel llanto silencioso pudo mejor que con palabras contarle todo a su hermanita, el dolor del abandono maternal, de la muerte de la abuela, las noches en vela buscando dónde dormir, la vida al agite de toparse con policías, el tener quince años y ya vivir así, hastiado de todo, desconfiando hasta de la sombra propia, acostumbrado al desamor, a la lujuria asqueada que habita la calle, esa calle era su hogar y su tumba.” (77)

[With that silent cry she was could explain everything better than with words to her sister, the pain of maternal abandonment, of her grandmother's death, of sleepless nights looking for places to rest, life shaken-up from running into cops, being 15 years old and already living like this, fed up with everything, distrusting even her own shadow, accustomed to heartbreak, to a disgusting lust living in the streets, those streets which were her home and her tomb.]

Despite being a non-verbal medium of expression, Selena's *llanto silencioso* is able to communicate the heterogenous conditions that make up her current, highly precarious state. In addition to attacks from clients, police harassment, and the false promises of social workers and foster homes, she adds a litany of others: maternal abandonment, the death of her grandmother, sleepless and homeless nights on the street at a mere 15, scared of her own shadow and suffering from heartbreak. Not only does this *llanto silencioso* render intelligible such historical conditions, but it also frames them in relation to a larger structural set of happenings that have contributed to and worsened her physical and psychological pain. It is with this contextual

backdrop and expressive ability of the *llanto silencioso* that Selena begins to use and remember *boleros*.

In spite of having survived everything, Selena struggles to earn enough money and thus resorts back to sex work; yet this time, the *bolero* comes into play as a mechanism of protection. Marred by the traumatic memory of the violent client, Selena begins to remember entire *boleros* while interacting with another man who is, himself, guarded and cautious. She knows well the danger even a wary client could bring her, and so she begins to recall song after song. Whereas she could only remember bits and pieces, parts of the chorus, and rhythm whenever she was previously struck with melancholy, this time she notices that, “[...] las oía en su cabeza cantadas por la abuela. Su abuela, voz temblorosa [...] le fue trayendo todos los boleros del mundo al pecho, letra a letra, la memoria exacta de sus melodías. Cada canción le hacía hervir el rostro, sentir cosas que había despechado como inservibles” (79). In English, that’s as follows: “[...] she was hearing them in her head, sung by her abuela. Her grandmother, her trembling voice [...] was bringing to her all the boleros of the world right to her chest, lyric by lyric, the exact memory of their melodies. Every song made her face burn, feel things that she had cast off as useless.” While still unclear *what* exactly the *boleros* do for her or make her feel, it becomes clear that they are a direct connection to Selena’s grandmother, or at least the memory of her. One could also induce that her grandmother’s *boleros* grant her a form of power that allows her to feel in ways that she had deemed not useful, “inservibles,” or perhaps to which she understandably became numb. In any case, it is clear that they begin to take on the role of protection as a means of coping, of not feeling alone, while in dangerous yet necessary moments to make a living.

With the ability to now recall her grandmother’s *boleros*, Selena begins to enact the *bolereo* by preemptively deescalating the situation between her and her client. Her song

generates a peaceful space with specific relaxing effects on her client. The man, performing oral sex on Selena, becomes “alelado,” dazed and bewildered—maybe even a little dumb—to the sound of the *bolero*, “Tentación.” As Selena, herself, leans in to the power of her own singing, his muscles begin to relax: “[...] más se le enternecían las comisuras de la boca, el apretón de la mano contra la base de su pubis” (79). In English, that translates to the following: “[...] even more, the corners of his mouth and the grip of his hand against the base of his pubis both softened.” His aggression, therefore, manifested in the tightness of his jaw and the pressure of his hand, all softens. He becomes enamored and overcome with desire, despite his wary disposition. He turns disgusted at his own pleasure, shifting the focus onto Selena. Nearing the end, they come to share not just a moment together, but something mysteriously more: “El señor tampoco dejaba de acariciarle con la boca y las encías y los dientes, con el ansia y la melancolía y soledad. [...] El señor, tan circunspecto, se tragó entero aquel chorro, ungido, sintiéndose convidado a una extraña comunión” (80). Again, in English, “the man also didn’t stop caressing him with his mouth and gums and teeth, with anxiety and melancholy and loneliness. [...] The man, so guarded, swallowed his entire thick load, feeling invited to a strange communion.” As the man’s character softens, care mixes with pleasure. Together, they share an intimacy blended with their distinctive yet shared notions of anxiety, melancholy, and loneliness. Selena’s song reorients their exchange so that his pleasure as consumption of her difference—ideologically constructed as exotically racialized sexuality, as ultimately excludable and expendable Other—is decentered. In its place, the two arguably “see” each other in a moment of *her* control, *her* pleasure, *her* release. What the narrator describes as their “extraña comunión” is the cathartic expression of the profound ways in which they both experience a nearly inexpressible sadness of their respectable conditions. This nascent moment wherein Selena’s use of the *bolero*, as a

tapping into the power of what the *bolero* can do for her, approximates what will later become a full-fledged conscious deployment —under the frequent commodifying threat of La Martha—of her own erotic autonomy.

Once the client leaves and Selena exists the car paid and safe, the narrator closes with a line that reveals the realization and profoundly intimate connection to these songs. When they lock eyes before Selena exists, the narrator notes how Selena's eyes met his with "un pozo profundo," or "a deep well" in English. Now filling that deep, supposedly empty well with the *boleros* of her grandmother, she reaches a point of consciousness: "[t]odos los boleros de la abuela eran el caudal que necesitaba para protegerse para siempre de las noches en la calle" (80). In English, "[a]ll her grandmother's boleros were a fount of wealth that she needed to forever protect herself in the streets." What draws my attention the most is the linking of *boleros* to a *caudal* which lends itself to several overlapping meanings as they serve to protect her. If the *boleros* function as the first meaning of *un caudal*, then they nourish her as a fountain. In a way, they replenish her; they quench a thirst. In the second case, *un caudal* also refers to an abundance. The *boleros* Selena now remembers from her grandmother are, indeed, quite numerous. Of note are a few the narrator lists in succession: "Distancia," "Miseria," "Dime, capitán de sopetón," "Bajo un palmar," "Silencio," and "Teatro" (79). As noted in the first chapter of the book, Selena also pulls from the long and powerful line of women *boleristas*, such as La Lupe, Lucy Fabery, and Sylvia Rexach. Selena's *caudal*, therefore, draws not only from her grandmother but from the multiple talents, forms, and unique expressions of loss, love and tragedy of others. Lastly, *un caudal* is also a source of fortune or luck—both material as in money, but also in the uncountable ways of good fortune. While the main narrative push involves La Martha having "discovered" and possessing desire to monetize Selena's ability to

sing, Selena will be tested with the fortune and luxury that sex tourism affords her in the Dominican Republic. Altogether, she comes to understand the *bolero* as an ever-flowing fountain that nourishes and replenishes her, saves her in moments of danger, and connects her with the knowledge of her grandmother and other powerful women.

To conclude and return to La Martha's initial recounting, Selena's amazing capacity to sing the *bolero* yet as a leprous dog occludes the historical conditions and role that the *bolero* plays for her. While the *boleros* do, indeed, allow for Selena to express the loss of her grandmother and home, the abandonment of her mother and family, they, more importantly, grant her power as demonstrated above. By connecting with her grandmother through these songs, she is able to enter into a meditative state that protects her while also —“magically”— shifting the dynamics of potentially dangerous situations, such as those with clients. It is this “magical” component of the *boleros* as the activated *bolereo* that interests me most, and which I read as moments of enacting erotic autonomy. Through the novel, they will later take on the specifically and recurrent watery characteristics derived from her abuela's *caudal*. In subsequent moments, not only does the watery imagery return but so too does a liquid-like lexicon. Provided her metaphorical connection to being a siren/mermaid, the notion of *boleros*-as-fountain aligns quite well as a means of keeping her alive. Without the transposition of *bolero*-as-water, she could very well die— a fish on land, a queer youth on the streets. For Selena, her grandmother's *boleros* are the fountain from which she drinks, from which she is able to survive. I now turn to and read subsequent moments when Selena consciously deploys the *bolereo*.

reconfiguring both gender & sexuality with the bolereo

Selena's second time deploying the *bolereo* challenges both the hetero- and homonormative logics that both condition the expansion of neoliberal sex tourism, and it does so by reconfiguring the relations altogether. The textual sample below showcases this reconfiguration via several different threads, including both gender and sexuality, which I disaggregate below in order to explore each one of them in more depth, one right after the other. In a moment of deep reflection back before she was *la Sirena*, the text relates a story of rumors that ran in the old, San Juan club of *El Danubio*:

“Se rumoraba que, aún de bugarroncito, a ella nunca nadie lo había podido clavar, porque, en el momento preciso de la penetración, al chamaquito se le escapaban melodías del pecho, y empezaba a canturrear con su voz extasiada y gloriosa de espíritu de luz. Decían que aun los machos más machorros se derretían en su pose y que él, luego, suavemente, los viraba, los humedecía con saliva ceremoniosa, les metía su carne por los goznes calientes y en espera.” (56)

[It was rumored that, even as a masculine top, no one ever was able to nail her, because, in the exact moment of penetration, melodies escaped from the kid's chest, and started to softly sing with her ecstatic and glorious voice of spirited light. They used to say that even the most macho of machos melted in their pose and that he, later, smoothly, turned them around, moistened them with ceremonial saliva, and put his meat into their hot and waiting hinges.]

One thread, woven throughout the piece above, involves playing with shifting gender as it sets up the scene for enacting the *bolereo*. Selena here is initially referred to with the pronoun “ella,”

signifying that she is a feminine person. Yet concurrently and in an interspersed manner, she is also identified with a list of masculine terms: the direct object “lo,” the subject pronoun “él,” and the noun “chamaquito.” Moreover, the phrase “aún de bugarroncito” expresses a more masculine-presenting person who is typically within a homosexual or bisexual relationship. This last phrase points to a temporal aspect as well, “aún de,” hinting at the fact that Selena presents as masculine for some periods of time and then feminine in others. As the reader moves through the text, itself, Selena’s gender shifts between both masculine and feminine in the diegesis’ present moment while also capturing former lengths of time in differing gendered presentation. It is this shifting of gender that then contributes to a queering of the sexual act to come.

Another thread of the quoted piece above involves sexuality which can, itself, be divided into two aspects here: there is, first, the expectation and, then, there is the unexpected result. In short and in effect, the text interrupts an assumed-to-be heteronormative sexual act. The rumor begins with the idea that “a ella nunca nadie lo había podido clavar.” Apart from the already explored shifting dimensions of gender (e.g. “ella” and “lo”), there is still a peculiarity in that the expectation of being sexually “nailed” has not yet been met. The choice of verb here, *clavar*, denotes quite a few things that merit exploring as they pertain to this expectation. First, it takes on a gendered valence itself: the one who performs its action is typically situated as masculine, whereas the one who receives it is expected to be feminine. Put another way, the one who does the action is understood to be the penetrator —as reflected in the phallic imagery of the nail, *un clavo* — while the receiver is the penetrated. Secondly, the verb can also mean *sujetar* or *fijar*, two synonymous verbs that respectively mean “to hold” and “to fix.” Speaking in strictly semiotic or syntactic terms, then, the subject of the verb as assumed masculine penetrator acts upon the object as passive, as feminine, as penetrated. Moreover, he is expected to

simultaneously be able “to hold” or “to fix” her in the heterosexual act of nailing. I understand this last part of “holding” and “fixing” as an attempt to secure the process of reproductive heteropatriarchy by “nailing her into place” as it were—even as this relationship functions as a simulacrum of heterosexuality. Selena as feminine, passive, and penetrable object, then, is expected and supposed to be brought into a linguistic and ideological economy, a system that requires her to become a recognizable objectified-subjecthood via the heteronormative sexual act. Yet, of course, the rumor’s entire intrigue hinges on and is located *not* in what I’ve described above, but in the sexual oddity that does, in fact, occur.

The second aspect involving the role of sexuality is the surprise in its unexpected result. The text narrates instead not an inversion of the heteronormative sexual act but a queer sexuality altogether. To begin, there is a shift in the men’s performance. The text captures this moment, stating that, “los machos más machorros se derretían en su pose.” Here, the superlative is used (e.g. “los más machorros”) to exceptionally note that the most masculine of men—the “big daddies” or the “pussymen” in more anglophone terms— do not perform as expected when having sex with Selena. Indeed, even *they* —assumed to be the most unwavering— are somehow subject to the oddity that is about to occur. The verb, then, best captures the act. Meaning “to melt,” *derretirse* is juxtaposed with the aforementioned notion of *clavar*, *sujetar* and *fijar*. Indeed, their supposedly firm positions as masculine, penetrating subjects are not, in fact, held and therefore melt or dissolve away. But they don’t give up their expected subject positions with reluctance, through force and/or violence, but willingly with desire. In fact, the verb *derretirse* lends itself to desire as one of its main meanings, as in melting or dripping *with* desire. This is further exemplified in their description as “en espera.” Stemming from the verb *esperar*, it invokes a picture of them as simultaneously “in waiting” as well as “in hope of” the moment to

come. The men, then, not only accept their new sexual position as the penetrated but are also in eager anticipation or hope for the climactic moment of penetration, itself. Against the more phallic imagery of *clavar* with all of its appeals to fixing and holding down, *derretirse* invokes a more liquid or fluid-like imagery that melts the hyper-masculinized men. In combination with them being “en espera,” they undo any attempt to secure reproductive heteropatriarchy in favor of a queer sexual act.

Selena, too, experiences a shift in her own sexual performance, completing the rumor’s intrigue with her own unexpected role. Unlike how others attempt to nail her— a move that is abrupt, literally striking, and seemingly without care—she turns her men around “suavecito” or smoothly with notions of attention, intimacy, and care. This continues as she takes charge, shifting from the object of verbs to the subject: “los humedecía con saliva ceremoniosa.” As if a ritual, she ceremoniously lubricates them in preparation, continuing the emphasis on watery imagery. The text, itself, then reveals that it is *she* who “completes” the sexual act: “les metía su carne.” The choice in verb here is telling in relation to *clavar*, for *meter* describes more the act of inserting and is less indicative of a gendered or heterosexualized act as described up above. In other words, *she* becomes the penetrator but, again, not in an inverted version of the heteronormative framework. In other words, Selena doesn’t simply become the penetrator and them the penetrated, as this would approximate homosexuality provided that her gender and sex were both assumed to be masculine and male. Nor does she approach sex in the same manner as they would, captured again by the verb *clavar*. Lastly, the surprise isn’t anchored in a transphobic reveal of a penis but rather in the fact that the power dynamic is completely reversed. This very same scene captures how the *bolereo* provides a space to enact dissident/queer sexualities.

Returning to the third and final thread, the *bolereo* plays the most important role here. Selena's voice is what disrupts, denaturalizes and reconfigures the sexual act for her own pleasure. The "melodías,"—taken to be *boleros*, provided they are the recurring trope—are what initiate the turn of events. They take place right at the "momento preciso de la penetración," a symbolic moment that would mark the definitive moment or completion of the normative sex act (a.k.a. being the one who is penetrated as either female recipient or the masculine bottom). However, tunes quite oddly "escape" from her chest uncontrollably, serving as a rupture. Doubtless, to sing *boleros* here in the middle of a sex act is in and of itself quite odd, and so its ability to denaturalize the situation seems even stronger. Along with her captivating and glorious voice, the *bolero* interrupts what is assumed of her: to be the one who is penetrated, the supposed "passive" and feminized recipient even when presenting in a more masculine form in a queer relationship. Of note is the verb *canturrear* which captures an almost hum-like quality to her singing. Her song, here, is sung softly to herself; it is a ritual meant for her and *not* for her sexual partner. Described as "extasiada," her voice provides her with the pleasure that she would have been denied otherwise. Nevertheless, the *melodías'* effect is doubled: after their ability to denaturalize the rehearsal of the assumed sexual performance, she receives pleasure while their own "machorro" performances are "melted." Selena's singing of the *bolero* subverts and reorders, as Strongman claims, such a heterosexual and even homo-normative paradigm that assumes feminine and masculine sexual practices (61). The end goal of the "melodías," then, is to not *just* make room for queer or dissident sexuality to subsequently occur but to also provide a space for Selena's own erotic autonomy.

This scene, between Selena and a client back in Puerto Rico, is important because it sets up the reader for the relations and exchanges to come later in the D.R. To recapitulate, Selena's

use of the *bolereo* not only disrupts but denaturalizes and reconfigures the sexual act alongside the expected identity roles altogether. This moment offers a glimpse into what an emerging erotic autonomy looks like, that while contesting the frameworks of both hetero- and homonormativity, may not be instantly recognizable as such. When Selena later comes to participate in and starts to assume the position of Hugo's housewife, she will take recourse over and over again to the *bolereo* as a means to assert her erotic autonomy; yet within this relation, between devalued heterosexual housewife and now avowed, potentially queer housewife, it figures as completely distinct.

contesting (neo)liberal individualism, or the female white possessive

The third time Selena deploys the *bolereo* is during a preview rehearsal for Hugo and other hotel magnates. While it continues to have a reconfiguring effect, which now falls onto Hugo's white Swedish wife, Solange, Selena's *bolereo* is quite different this time in relation to its prior two deployments. In fact and in order to better understand its difference, there is a rather complicated set of dynamics that all come into play, providing the conditions of possibility for this one moment. Not only does Solange's internal struggle, derived from her and Hugo's interpersonal history together, come to bare on this moment but so too does Selena and Solange's largely explosive exchanges all before she even begins singing. Set within this backdrop, there are then three major and more abstract processes at play that I track. The first is a failing yet still dominant liberal order which Solange represents through her various forms of resistance to Selena. The second is an emerging, neoliberal order, mostly represented by Hugo and the stockholders, but ultimately allows for Selena to even be given the okay to enter their house.

Third, Selena's *bolereo* inaugurates an alternative, more erotically autonomous order that only temporarily occurs. In what follows, I provide a reading of Solange's internal struggle and interpersonal history for Hugo that then provides the necessary context for her and Selena's heated exchanges to come. I end with a reading of the climactic moment when Selena deploys the *bolereo* for different ends.

In the time leading up to Selena's *bolereo* and her in-person exchange with Solange, the novel offers several intimate snapshots of Solange's historical, internal struggle as a valuable housewife. In reflecting on her relationship with Hugo, the reader learns about their unsatisfactory sexual dynamic which translates to Solange contending with her own devaluation. She candidly remarks how, "[s]u lechita lo distrajo de las tardes de la playa, de los bugarrones por contrato, del deseo por los hijos preadolescentes de sus compañeros de la industria" (127). In English, that translates to the following: "[h]er cum distracted him from evenings at the beach, from the *bugarrones* for hire, from the desire for the preadolescent boys of his industry colleagues." While Hugo's desires reside elsewhere—in preadolescent boys and the bought sex of *bugarrones*—he sexually performs what little he can or will with Solange. The fact, moreover, of never having fully consummated their marriage with the requisite penetrative sex becomes a main point of contention. As reflected in the verb choice, *distraer*, Solange quickly learned soon after having married Hugo, that he desired and *still* desires something else. She knows that what she could provide sexually as his wife was and is only a temporary fix. Implicitly, it is in this very moment of reflection that she is coming to terms with the fact that her time may very well be up. The time of keeping Hugo distracted, of staving off his true desires, has finally come to an end. Yet, because she somehow feels in debt to Hugo for having saved her from her alcoholic father and rotting family who essentially sold her off to him, she attempts to

become a “*mujer de alcurnía*,” “a woman of lineage”—or the high-class woman and housewife—she thought Hugo wanted. To make up for her supposed “lack” in sexuality, she works hard to embody such a subjectivity.

The second major contributing factor, then, to Solange’s devaluation is her self-believed inability to successfully perform or inhabit the role of “*mujer de alcurnía*.” This is due, in part, to the disavowed rigidity of the category. While claiming a universal notion of womanhood, the subjectivity is inflected by the unmarked axes of race, sexuality, and class. As a more specifically white heterosexual upper-class womanhood, it is rooted in a feminized variant of liberal individualism—or what Aileen Morten-Robinson has called the “white possessive”⁵²—that both serves white masculinity via reproductive labor as well as secures primogeniture through establishing a property line of inheritance. Solange first notes in reflecting on her past that even when they got married, she wasn’t yet this type of “woman.” She, therefore, made a conscious effort to become one: “[...] pero decidió convertirse en una para aquel hombre triste que la quería amar” (142). In English: “[...] but she decided to convert herself into one for that sad man that wanted to love her.” If Hugo couldn’t love her sexually, there were other means to garner that love and assert her worth especially as she grew older and lost what little androgyny or “[...] aquella ambigüedad de pelos y caderitas niñas y pezoncitos en flor” that Hugo so desired (142). She would, in essence, lose “[...] that ambiguity of little girl hips and hair and little nipples in bloom.” Taking charge of what was within her power, then, Solange narrates her own changes into this “womanhood” as learning to complete a series of things:

“Ahora es otra mujer. Había engordado de caderas, se preñó, aprendió a hablar, a caminar, a diferenciar entre el tenedor de la ensalada y el de las carnes, a preparar *soirées* para accionistas, vestirse como una dama de alcurnía, muy decente [...]

Ella es ahora señora de verdad. Ahora ella tiene casa y tenedores, lirios cala y herederos.” (142-143)

[Now she is another woman. She had gained weight in the hips, she got pregnant, learned to speak, to walk, to differentiate between the salad fork and the one for meats, to prepare *soirées* for stockholders, to dress herself up like a lady of lineage, very decent. {...} She was now a real madame. Now she has a house and forks, calla lilies and heirs.]

This reflection takes stock of the shifting qualities in what it means to be a “woman” that isn’t located in an ideologically narrow bio-teleological conception, one which moves from adolescence into puberty and then some phase of maturity. Instead, her understanding of what it means to be a “mujer de alcurnía” relates much more to the performance of a certain sexualized and classed embodiment, a set of knowledges, tasks, and even an aesthetic. At first she notes how she had put on weight in the hips and got pregnant. While part of her own expected role, these two points allude to a dip in her sexual attractiveness to Hugo. In turn, she follows with a string of actions that, while also expected, she subsequently learned in order to gain further value: to speak, to walk, to differentiate, to prepare, to dress. This set of verbs sketch out the performative tasks expected of and required to “become” an upper class woman. But of course, none of this is for her: she has learned to speak, walk, distinguish between the proper materials, prepare *soirées* and dress in a certain way *for* Hugo and *his* colleagues. When Solange ends with the assertion that she is now a “señora de verdad,” she anchors her identity specifically in the possession of a house and forks, cala lilies, and her children as heirs. In this moment, she performatively embodies a subjectivity underpinned by a white possessive logic which she must repeat over and over again, lest she lose yet her value once more.

Provided this contextualized background for Solange's ongoing struggle with being devalued, Selena—in addition to and as a part of the shift to a neoliberal cultural norm—becomes an invasive threat to the already unstable relationship between Solange and Hugo. When Solange does find out that Hugo has invited Selena to their house to practice her singing, she is utterly appalled at how he thinks it acceptable. She chastises him, stating, “[c]arajo, Hugo, ¿cómo se te ocurre traer un travesti a la casa?” (141). “Fuck, Hugo, how did it occur to you to bring a transvestite to the house?” Of brief note here and which I will explore in further depth below, is how Solange refers to Selena not by her name but by “un travesti.” She does so in order to dehumanizingly assert the nearly commonsensical understanding or rule that *travestis* are *not supposed to be* inside their home, especially as invited guests. This is an unequivocal breach of a spatial norm. She emphasizes, what she understands to be, the severity of the situation with her use of the expletive, “carajo,” and the rhetorical question of “how did it occur to you?” To have invited Selena is framed, at best, as a lapse of judgement on Hugo's part. She even follows up with an appeal to his rationality in the question, “¿Y qué hago para hacerte entrar en razón?” (141). “And what do I have to do in order to get you to think with reason?” At worst, Solange reads Selena's invitation as a manipulation of her husband with invasive ends and one that confirms her own devaluation. If Selena were allowed to enter and thus get closer to her husband, she could potentially reconfigure the already questionable life Solange has fought to build with Hugo into one in which she no longer takes part at all. Feeling both threatened and caught, Solange decides to fix this breach of a spatial norm on her own by attempting to expel Selena's corrupting and infiltrating influence.

In her first attempt to manage Selena's “invasion,” Solange deploys a repertoire of dehumanizing terms that function as speech-acts. In conversations with Hugo as well as in her

inner thoughts, Solange repeatedly refers to Selena as “un travesti,” “un aberrado, and “un monstruo”—“a transvestite, “an aberration” and “a monster.” To different degrees, these slurs generally objectify and mark Selena’s body as both illegitimately belonging and, thus, threatening and excludable. Moreover, they rely on and appeal to a naturalized —yet failing— logic of “proper” spatial positioning. That is, they epistemically organize space into an interior-exterior binary division. This division locates (and even confines) Solange to the domestic, private space of the interior (i.e., her house) as white, upper-class housewife in the capacity of unwaged reproductive labor. Selena, however, is meant to be in the exterior, or non-domestic as a domain distinct from the public sphere (i.e. the streets, the alleyways, etc.), provided that she is *mulata* and *travesti* sex worker. She is in essence a member of the lumpenproletariat meant to function in the capacity of unwaged precarious labor. This epistemic boundary, however, between interior-exterior, the domestic and non-domestic, only increasingly founders given that Hugo has granted Selena permission to enter their house, and Solange’s appeal to the authority of such a “natural” spatial division fails. In short, her speech-acts are simply infelicitous insofar as they fail to generate their desired effect.

While I have briefly addressed above Solange’s use of the first term, “un travesti,” as a means to highlight Selena’s unwelcomed invitation into Solange and Hugo’s house, the term is also used for two other ends: 1) to objectify her, and 2) to mark the “incongruity” of her body. Solange unequivocally uses the term “un travesti” instead of Selena’s actual name because it, first, depersonalizes their interaction, evacuating any individuality that is unique to Selena. Second, the use of the indefinite article “un” is key to homogenizing her as an indistinguishable one among a monolithic mass of *travestis*. Put another way, Selena’s being is abstracted into the discursive realm as Other in opposition to Solange’s subjecthood. In line with the second goal,

Solange uses the term to refer to Selena's body, highlighting the fact that she does not conform—albeit to a disavowed—cisgendered logic. Solange uses the indefinite article *I* just mentioned in its masculine form over the feminine one, “*una*,”⁵³ despite the fact that Selena presents as feminine. The masculine marker's effect, then, not only mocks but renders Selena's sex as hyper-“visible” and thus abnormal. In sum, Solange's use of the term “*un travesti*” serves as a dehumanizing speech-act whereby she can, in effect, delegitimize Selena's presence in the interior after having depersonalized and homogenized her.

Solange's second term, “*un aberrado*,” also functions as a speech-act that supplements the first by increasing the severity of Selena's threat. When Solange calls Selena “*un aberrado*,” there are two effects. The first is that she frames Selena as “a deviant” with its highly charged connotations of moral abjection and corrupting influence. As someone who has supposedly sexually deviated from the norm, Selena is capable of inducing deviance in Hugo as well—if not already. Therefore, Solange views Selena as a threat to the very social arrangement of relations that she strives so hard to maintain—in this case Hugo and their relationship (i.e. their marriage, their sex life, and their financial arrangements). The second effect in calling Selena “*un aberrado*” invokes, like deviance, the notion of aberration as “error” or “mistake.” Solange performs a metalepsis⁵⁴ here whereby Selena's status as “error” becomes of her own doing/choosing or as a cultural defect to be corrected. The epistemic system she uses to determine Selena's status as “error” is effectively hidden or disavowed. It is in this second effect that Solange rehearses part of a long history of rhetorical technologies used to manage the racialized sexuality of *la mulata*.⁵⁵ Yet, because it is publicly acceptable for him to court her as well as fully express his queer desire, this moment is distinct from the older heterosexual

expression of a white upper-class male desire for his *mulata* mistress insofar as the same technologies used to control her now fail.

Solange's use of the third term, "un monstruo," reveals more about Solange than its intended exclusionary effect on Selena. It is doubtless that an appeal to monstrosity, yet again, points to Selena's bodily "incongruity." A *monstre* is etymologically a "malformed animal or human, creature afflicted with a birth defect" (OED).⁵⁶ Yet as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out, the etymology of the term is multivalent. Stemming from the Latin *monstrum*, the monster is also "'that which reveals,' and 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant" (4). He adds that because the monster's body "incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary)," it functions as both construct and projection which exists only to be read. Selena, without a doubt, literally incorporates the fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy from those around her. For Hugo, she is desire and fantasy; for Solange, she is the projection of her fears and anxiety around her possible displacement. It is important to note here that the historical use of the monster, especially within the context of the Americas, has been to signal and thus control female sexual difference.⁵⁷ That is to suggest that instead of invoking and rehearsing the figure of the monster as part of an orientalist imperial construction and disciplinary technology, Santos-Febres ultimately celebrates the siren as monster. Indeed, Solange's reliance on an appeal to monstrosity as a form of exclusion is equally infelicitous. As a result, then, Solange abandons her rhetorical speech-acts for a more physical means of resistance and self-assertion.

When Selena physically enters into Hugo and Solange's house, she literally and symbolically breaches a fundamental law of liberal (or white possessive) individualism: she accesses their private property. Moreover, not only does her physical entrance contribute to the ongoing interior-exterior epistemic collapse by increasing the degree of its severity, but her

reorganizing of the physical layout of the space threatens Solange's sense of sovereignty over the realm of the interior. For Selena, her entrance into the house and ability to command what happens inside—if only temporarily—grants her an incredible amount of threatening power. Solange, now with no recourse to legitimized rhetorical modes of exclusion, can only respond with a similar physical resistance—until, that is, Selena enacts the *bolereo*.

In preparation for her show inside the house, Selena gets to temporarily assume the position of power that was previously granted to Solange. Standing in the foyer, she commands the other maids to perform various tasks while she too moves things around. Along with the lights, vases, tables, and other furnishings, she begins to also decorate differently. The place begins to lose any semblance of having belonged to Solange, taking a new form under Selena's command. Solange, however, recognizes the literal and physically displacing threat to her role as housewife and "queendom." As a response, the narrator speaks on her behalf in a repetitively reassuring fashion: "[e]lla es la señora Solange Graubel, dama célebre de la alta sociedad [...]. Esa puerta es de ella, y el servicio también, y los niños que juegan en la playa y su destino completo es de ella y está en sus manos. Nadie se lo puede arrebatar" (146). In English, that translates to, "[s]he is the madame Solange Graubel, famous lady of high society [...] That door is hers, and the team of servants too, and the children playing in the pool and their complete destiny is hers and it's in her hands. Nobody can take that away from her." The text—functioning here as almost a speech-act in itself—attempts to reassert Solange's power through the rehearsal of its white possessive logic. It declares a series of objects, people, and abstract notions such as her destiny as properly belonging to Solange. But the text returns back to Selena who clearly gets satisfaction from both the power and performance of a housewife as well as Solange's anger to her doing it. Switching perspectives, the narrator elaborates: "Selena se

piensa perfecta para el papel de Solange. Selena se bebe a Solange furiosa subiendo las escaleras, se bebe su cara, la agresión de sus tacones. Entona su voz, también el sentimiento entona, para entrar a tono con su papel” (146). In English, again, that translates to the following: “Selena thinks herself perfect for Solange’s role. Selena soaks up the furious Solange climbing the stairs, soaks up her face, the aggression of her high heels. She sings in tune with her voice, also her feelings in tune, in order to enter in tune with her role.” Here, Selena drinks up or absorbs the distinctive mannerisms that make up Solange’s role: the way she climbs the stairs, the scowl of her face, the aggression in her heels, and the feeling within her voice. It becomes clear then, in an unstated yet very real battle, that Solange feels at this moment her most imminent displacement. She experiences the now-fleeting security and power she once had over the order of things in the interior, private space of the home. Meanwhile, Selena, despite all the physical rearranging, begins to perform, dramatize, and inhabit not only Solange’s space but the mold or role of Solange’s personality as housewife that carries and/or grants her value.

As a final means of reasserting her dwindling power, Solange physically reestablishes the interior-exterior division. When Selena begins her rehearsal, Solange cannot bear to be in the same room; she, therefore, retreats to another. With the previous means of rhetorical exclusion having fallen flat, she now physically separates herself in another room in the house, slightly shuts the door, and proceeds to give orders from behind it. Yet, despite this move to power, it is in this moment that all of her internal suffering—from the pitfalls of falling short of her expected duties as housewife and that of Selena’s encroaching presence —now come to the fore. Essentially trapped in her own house, she becomes the most assertive she has been as of yet. Selena takes stock of just how intense Solange’s anger is: “Selena reconoció de inmediato en ese ‘señora’ [...], que la quería poner en su lugar. Dejarle saber quién era quién, que no se

confundiera, aclararle a todos que ella, Solange Graubel, no era ninguna tonta” (149). “Selena recognized immediately in that ‘madame’ [...], that she wanted to put her in her place. To leave her knowing who was who, that nothing got confusing, to clarify for her to everyone that she, Solange Graubel, was no dumb bitch.” While the idiomatic expression “poner en su lugar” is used here to capture how one exerts power over another, it also lends itself to its literal meaning. In order for Solange to gain power, Selena has to be physically removed and placed where she belongs. Nevertheless, Selena does not back down; she enacts the *bolereo* as their battle reaches a climax.

Selena’s *bolereo* is first able to bypasses the door as barrier or border wall because of its watery character. From Solange’s point of view, the narrator asserts that, “[l]a voz potente de aquel animal se escurría por debajo de la puerta” (148). “The potent voice of that animal slid under the door.” Of note here is how Selena’s potent voice doesn’t simply overtake the door; it doesn’t burst through in a violent manner knocking it completely open. Like in previous moments with the *bolereo*, it doesn’t match the other’s aggression but completely reorients their interaction. This time, and akin to other past verbs, the narrator describes Selena’s voice with the verb, *escurrirse*. This captures a sense of draining or a wringing out. In its more informal use, the verb can also add an element of slipping away or passing through something, of escaping. The door, therefore, despite serving as a blockade, cannot fully contain, block out, or dam up Selena’s liquid-like voice that drips, runs, slides, and trickles under the door. Put differently, Selena’s voice doesn’t predictably engage with the door at all. It doesn’t participate in what could be considered an oppositional response to Solange. Instead, her *bolereo* detects, renders visible, and exploits the limits of the door itself— the point, the crack, the interstice— where it meets the floor. This small manoeuvre is indicative of their political approaches: whereas Solange

engages with an established system and its logic, Selena subverts it altogether, moving beyond a predictable counter response and taking up a more alternative one.

Once past the door, Selena's *bolereo* magically transfixes and blends Solange's own body with hers, completing the last remaining part of the interior-exterior collapse. In breaching Solange's own body, Selena challenges Solange's sense of individual subjecthood. I want to note that Selena's singing this round is qualitatively different from the prior two moments. Instead of recalling *boleros*, Selena is here to actually practice a rehearsal show in which she dramatizes the sadness of the white upper class housewife for an audience primarily of stockholders and other hotel magnates. In other words, Solange experiences through Selena a simulacrum of herself. She, therefore, comes to see herself as a performance that denaturalizes her uptake of the "mujer de alcurnía" subjectivity. Selena's *bolereo*, in short, showcases and reconfigures for Solange what form she thinks her liberation could take, especially outside of the rubric of housewife as possessive liberal individualism.

The erotic nature of Selena's *bolereo* takes on a distinct form from the prior two scenes: this time, it involves a loving-induced death. After transfixing Solange in her smaller room, Selena's voice grabs ahold of her and metaphorically "carries her off." The narrator describes this moment from Solange's point of view as follows: "[t]rata de no embelesarse, pero ya es tarde. La voz de la Sirena la coge en sus brazos ardientes con besos de muerte y la lleva hasta el mismísimo abismo de la soledad. Este monstruo es peligroso. No es de este mundo, su voz" (149). "[Solange] tries to not become enchanted, but it's already too late. Sirena's voice grabs her in her passionate arms with kisses of death and takes her to the very abyss of loneliness. This monster is dangerous. Her voice is not from this world." In this instantiation, the *bolereo* becomes personified: it has arms, is able to grab and carry, and apparently has a set of lips with

which to kiss her. Of course, her voice doesn't literally carry Solange off to any other place; she physically remains in the same room with the door shut. Rather, her voice "carries" Solange off existentially, juxtaposing a sense of care with ongoing threat. With her "brazos ardientes" nearly serving as the cradle of her voice, there is a lack of an explicitly sexual component in favor of one characterized by zealous, even loving care. Strictly speaking, the adjective "ardientes," here, lends itself to a sense of fire-like "burning." Yet the term is also loaded with notions of passion or desire, as in the English expression, "burning with desire." While similar to the previous case with her client wherein her voice didn't seek to violently overtake the other, there is a distinctly absent sexual dynamic in favor of a more tender and embracing eroticism. Selena is not here to aggressively fight with Solange; she is here, instead, to lead her, to carry her off to something important however dangerous or threatening it may seem.

Perhaps the most poetically cryptic part of this scene is how Selena's arm-like voice passionately grabs Solange *with* "besos de muerte." In its most traditional usage, the expression "kiss of death" refers to the ruin someone brings at another's expense—specifically pulling from the biblical example of Judas' betraying kiss to Jesus that ultimately sealed his death. The expression is also frequently associated with and serves as a euphemism for HIV/AIDS infection. It is doubtless that from Solange's perspective, Selena's kiss—laden with all the connotations of prostitutes being "corrupting" and "dangerous" to "normal" people—adds to the threat of moral corruption another of physical infection. Yet given the context and taken from Selena's perspective, her kiss—despite the sense of threat it may carry—mark it as distinctively *not* one of simple betrayal or possible seropositivity. After all, Selena and Solange barely know each other intimately; they have no ties of responsibility or accountability to one another at this moment.

Nor are they engaging in any acts that would facilitate HIV transmission. This characteristic, then, points to something else.

I understand Selena's *bolereo* as a "kiss of death" to, instead, mean a deeply caring embrace that does indeed invoke a certain kind of death but only the death of Solange's possessive liberal individualism secured through constantly performing the role of the "mujer de alcurnía." In other words, Selena's own assertion of erotic autonomy via the *bolereo* in this case takes the shape of a certain intersubjective care through the killing of Solange that grants her the ability to mindfully confront and/or think through her own alienation. As a reminder, Solange's experience of this rehearsal is one in which she witnesses Selena dramatize *her own* performance—approximating postmodern parody.⁵⁸ Just as Judith Butler has theorized drag and parody as a mode of queer performance whereby the performer allegorizes heterosexual melancholy, Selena allegorizes the melancholic housewife (Butler; Salih 96). By following the conventions of the *bolero* (or in Butler's terms: working within its "laws") Selena exploits its subversive potential in parodying Solange whose effect—figured as the activated, supernatural *bolereo*—carries Solange off "hasta el mismísimo abismo de la soledad." It is there, in that existential chasm, in the abyss of her loneliness that she is finally able to confront, think through, and identify the cause of her grief. With Selena's *besos de muerte*, she reveals to Solange and severs her from the ideologically secured social relation. Selena temporarily provides her release from the painful life of a constantly-failing and always-lacking, respectable housewife. Because Solange has invested her energy in becoming, through repetitively performing, "una mujer de alcurnía," Selena's *bolereo* and her *besos de muerte* more specifically cause or seals Solange's specifically social demise.

As her voice further takes ahold of Solange, the typical watery lexicon and imagery of the *bolereo* from previous scenes continues. The narrator, speaking again from Solange's perspective, describes her experience: "[s]e le cierran los ojos y ve cómo pasa su lengua por el labio para humedecerlo la Sirena, cómo traga saliva para limpiarse la garganta la Sirena, cómo coge aire para llenarse el pecho una vez más" (149). "She closes her eyes and sees how the Siren passes her tongue over her lip in order to wet it; how the Siren swallows saliva in order to clean her throat; how she takes in air in order to fill up her chest one more time." Here, the focus is on the mouth and throat with Selena's wet tongue, moistened lips, and saliva as she swallows. This description is doubtless erotic with the understanding that this is not just Selena's tongue gliding across her lips but also Solange witnessing/experiencing/causing it too. Nevertheless, the two—as stated above—aren't here to engage in sex (which would effectively be one of the more narrow understandings of eroticism). When Solange's body is collapsed into Selena's, when Solange begins to feel Selena's mouth as she sings *boleros* and concurrently dramatizes Solange's own performance as housewife, Solange begins to intimately feel—perhaps in a meditative way—their bodies as one. It is an invitation to close her eyes and feel their/her *own* body: to notice the ways that her own tongue passes over her lip, how she swallows in order to cleanse her own throat, and how she fills her own chest with air. In other words, Selena supernaturally facilitates a practice of mindfulness for Solange that both gets her out of her own head and into her/their body.

When Solange reflects on the effect of Selena's voice afterwards, she admittedly notes having felt this meditative dynamic both clarifying and focusing:

Tiene que admitirlo. La voz de la Sirena le agitó el pulso, le suspendió el respiro. De repente, se encontró ella también maravillada. Cada tono parecía un túnel que se abría frente a ella, la convidaba a viajar, a alejarse de las miradas, las muecas, los comentarios, la reputación, y a entregarse al peso de sus propios deseos. [...] Como si se estuviera muriendo, desangrándose por la garganta, desnudando el alma cuando no, cuando en realidad les estaba mintiendo a todos. Les robaba la calma y esas otras cosas seguras con que sus invitados habían llegado a la fiesta. (188-189)

[She has to admit it. The voice of *la Sirena* agitated her pulse, suspended her breath. All of a sudden, she also found her amazed. Every tone was like a tunnel that opened in front of her, it invited her travel, to distance herself from the looks, the faces they made, the comments, the reputation, and to deliver herself unto the weight of her own desires {...} It was as if she were dying, bleeding out through the throat, rendering the soul naked when no, when in reality they were lying to everyone. She was robbing them of their calm and those other sure things with which their invites had arrived to the party.]

As Selena's voice incited her pulse and yet suspended her breath, Solange describes a near-death experience. She invokes the frequent trope and visual metaphor of a tunnel that appeared with every tone of Selena's voice. Moreover, the tones and tunnel invite her to travel, leaving both her own body and those around her. With some distance between her and the stares, grimaces, comments, and reputation, she is finally able to concentrate and listen to herself, to surrender to the weight of her own desires. As if looking back on herself, she unequivocally confirms the death-like experience. Using the verb, *morir*, she describes as if she were dying as well as a more

graphic bleeding out from the throat and a stripping her soul completely naked. Yet, despite having been in-tune in what seems to be a long time with her own desires, her description of the event is still laden with resistance. While she states that it felt like death, she retracts, claiming that it was more of a lie. Selena's song simply robbed them of the "calm" and the "other assured things" with which her invitees came to the party. This last point reveals how deeply invested Solange is in maintaining the social relations she had fought so hard to establish in her role as the "mujer de alcornúa." Despite the anxieties they bring up, those social relations for Solange still establish a sense of calm that comes with a predictable and expected set of ways to interact with others. It provided, in short, a role with a script to then only and simply be performed. In addition to Selena's presence within their social circles, their house, and even her own body—with the entire unravelling effect that it brought for the interior-exterior epistemic division—her song presents an alternative formation that has *no* predictable path to follow.

The interaction and relationship between Solange and Selena predominately ends here, and, even with Solange's verbal protest, her actions later on in the novel suggest that she chooses to listen to her own desires rather than continue to suppress them. As we find out, she ends up taking the kids and leaving Hugo. The novel doesn't provide any further insight into where exactly she goes or what happens to her thereafter. Her storyline simply drops off. She abandons her "mujer de alcornúa" identity just like that.

I read this part in the narrative that is concerned with the end of Selena and Solange's relationship together as Solange finally tapping into her own erotic autonomy even if she has not yet fully developed it. I read her leaving as her taking at least a step in the direction of her own erotic self-actualization. But with Solange now gone for good, Hugo is finally able to get closer and closer to Sirena Selena. It is this interaction and relationship between Hugo and Sirena

Selena that is the focus of the fourth and final major part of this chapter, and it is to this last attempt to sing of Selena's that I will now turn.

losing the bolereo & inhabiting the neoliberal model

While practicing for her debut, Selena's *bolereo* seductively bewitches Hugo yet in a manner that is distinct from her normal *bolereos*. Sitting outside yet looking into the Hotel Talanquera next to the beach with a beer in his hand, Hugo begins—like many others already have—to notice the unbelievable quality of Selena's song and singing. He takes a deep gulp and notes a strange feeling that Santos-Febres describes as follows:

“No pudo evitar embelesarse y tuvo que cerrar los ojos. Vio la lengua de Selena mojando sus labios, la saliva de Selena aliviando su garganta, el pecho de Selena abriéndose al aire. Vio a la Selena bajando la escalera en espiral de mármol rosado, vestida por completo de su rabia y su dolor igual a como él va vestido por dentro del suyo y de su amplísima soledad.” (151)

[He couldn't avoid entering into a trance and had to close his eyes. He saw Selena's tongue wetting her lips, Selena's saliva alleviating her throat, Selena's chest opening itself up to the air. He saw Selena descending the rose-marbled spiral staircase, dressed completely in her rage and her pain just like he goes around dressed with his own rage and pain and vast loneliness inside.]

As in previous moments, a similar experience between Hugo and Selena's *pas bolereos* occurs. While Hugo admits that he couldn't prevent it from happening, he is able to slightly shake it away later by downing his beer. Nevertheless, he closes his eyes as he begins to feel transfixed.

Hugo then envisions what was so similar to but distinct from Solange's experience: Selena's water and erotic imagery somewhat return. He sees her tongue moisten her lips; Hugo even witnesses her saliva alleviate her throat and her chest open up with air. There is a reflective, meditative element—again, similar to Solange's—that causes him to think about himself. In envisioning Selena descend the spiral staircase, dressed in her “rage and pain,” he thinks about how he too is metaphorically “dressed.” Yet whereas he observes that Selena wears hers outwardly, his are located inside. The implication is that he hides his own rage and pain accompanied by an “*amplísima soledad*” away from others. Because of Selena's performance, he reflects on and seems to sit with the fact that he is also internally raging, in pain, and deeply lonely.

But just when the *bolereo* would seemingly go further, just when Selena would have actively deployed it and perhaps carried him off like Solange with arms burning with desire, he attempts to break the bewitching effect. He takes a gulp of his beer but still notices something linger that he describes as a broken mirror. If Hugo had not yet experienced a fragmented identity, the broken-mirror feeling that remains represents a splintering of at least the illusion he has so carefully maintained. Unlike other moments when Selena's *bolereo* actively reconfigures a relation, Selena's singing only seduces Hugo and feeds his latent yet increasingly apparent queer desire.

In the next key moment between Hugo and Selena, Selena cannot conjure up a single *bolero* and she, thus, loses the power of her *bolereo*. After her major performance, Selena retreats to her room as a means to retain the illusion she created during her performance. Knowing that she'd more than likely walk down and through the gardens, Hugo goes off to find

her. Alone together, Hugo finally makes a move, and Santos-Febres describes the moment as follows:

“La besa y Selena se deja besar, recibe el molusco tibio del anfitrión en la boca. Selena deja que lo siga besando, pensando en el bolero que debe pegar en un momento como este, el anfitrión y ella bajo la luna, paseando por los jardines de una residencia lujosa al lado del mar. Debe haber un bolero que cantar en un momento como este. Los boleros se hicieron para momentos como este.” (192-193)

[He kisses her and Selena lets herself be kissed, she receives the host's warm mollusk of a tongue in her mouth. Selena continues to let him kiss her, thinking about the *bolero* that must stick in a moment like this, the host and her under the moon, walking through the gardens of a luxurious residence by the sea. There must be a *bolero* to sing in a moment like this.]

Now, two things occur here in the very moment in which Hugo kisses Selena. First, he finally expresses his own desire in an unfettered way. Second, Selena releases the little amount of control she once had by allowing him to see her *outside* of the illusion that she has so intentionally maintained. As the text, itself, notes, not only does *he* kiss *her*, but she *allows* herself to be kissed, “se deja besar,” it reads. In part, this seemingly perfect moment between her and Hugo is what she has always wanted, what she has dreamed of, but still something is amiss. The two do not kiss here as equals; Hugo kisses her on his own terms and not hers. The emphasis above on Hugo's warm tongue entering *her* mouth—while indeed phallic—represents just the beginning of a further symbolic penetration and triumph of neoliberalism for which Hugo serves as a fictional, perhaps even allegorical, agent. In other words, Selena lets herself be

metaphorically consumed by and absorbed into a neoliberal order, and she does so by being with Hugo as he, himself, wants and desires her.

To perhaps drive this latter point a little bit further: when Hugo literally and symbolically penetrates Selena's most valuable asset—that is, her mouth as producer of her own voice—with his tongue, he literally and symbolically forecloses Selena's ability to assert her own erotic autonomy. His tongue not only enters her mouth and literally obstructs her voice, but it also impedes her ability to sing and conjure up a *bolero*. The narrator describes how it is that she puzzlingly searches for one that simply will not stick. She looks at the space around her: gardens of a luxurious residence all beside the sea and under the light of the moon. She reiterates as if in disbelief the fact that, “[l]os boleros se hicieron para momentos como este” [boleros were made for moments like this]. This is what she came to the Dominican Republic for; this is the life that she has yearned to have outside of poverty, full of love, and free to be whoever it is that she is. This was the content of so many *boleros*, and what she and her grandmother used to imagine together whenever it was that they sang together. Or, was it? As Hugo continues to kiss her, she pauses, unable to speak, sing, or even think of a single *bolero* in the large repertoire of songs that she knows so well. Instead, she now stands there vulnerable and alienated from the very moment in which she is currently living. And while the kiss between them does end, she wonders and more than likely fears if this is what their relationship may permanently become.

Much later and after their dinner together, Hugo initiates sex with Selena. Selena attempts to sing again, but, this time, Hugo actively commands her not to. He directly says to her: “No cantes hoy. Siénteme tan solo.” [Don't sing today. Just feel me alone] (page). Selena obeys despite the feeling in her chest, and so, instead of singing out loud, she still tries to sing to herself internally. Yet, as Hugo continues, she can no longer fully conjure up a *bolero*. Bits and

pieces of one come and go. Hugo then forcibly masculinizes her by calling her “Sirenito,” and the text, itself, indicates that, “[l]o llama en masculino como nunca y la turba en su canción. Le hace abrir los ojos a Sirena, olvidarse de su acto” [he calls him in the masculine way like never before and disturbs her in her song. He makes Sirena open her eyes, forgetting her act] (page). In this moment, Selena’s desire is not only alienated but it is also displaced by Hugo’s desire, which is now completely foregrounded.

Selena later realizes upon further reflection that to be with Hugo in the way that he wants means that she must give up a part of herself. She asks herself: “¿Por qué no pudo, como siempre había podido, perderse en un ronroneo de canciones, alejarse de aquello que le pasaba a su cuerpo, mientras ella se perdía en otra parte?” [Why couldn’t she, like she has always been able to, lose herself in the purr of songs, to distance herself from what was happening to her body, while she lost herself elsewhere] (207). She highlights her own inability to lose herself in her song. Her body both grounded and prevented her from distancing herself in the moment. Instead, she got lost “elsewhere.” She then articulates what at first was so confusing to her: “Ese cliente le había trastocado las pautas de su acostumbrado plan, y a ella cada vez se le hacía más difícil mantenerse envuelta en la ilusión de amor y entrega que, hasta entonces, la había protegido. Algo en Hugo la hacía vulnerable a la realidad” [That client had disrupted the rules of her customary plan, and it was more and more difficult each time to keep herself wrapped in the illusion of love and presentation that, up till now, had protected her. Something in Hugo made her vulnerable to reality] (207). One could potentially read Selena’s inability to sing the *bolero* here and generate an illusion for Hugo as a moment in which she can finally be herself. Hugo has supposedly helped her shed the protective measure she has used now over and over again so that now she may be authentic. One could even read her desire to maintain the illusion as unfairly manipulating Hugo.

However, such readings would not only recenter Hugo and effectively erase the complexity of Selena's situation, but it would also engage a liberal logic that hides the economic system of and in which the two are a part and constantly involved. It's Sirena then comes to a moment of realization about what is, in fact, happening. She states that, "[p]ero para hablar tendría que deshacerse de quien es ella en realidad, de quien tanto trabajo le ha costado ser." [but in order to speak she would have to undo herself from who she was in reality, of whom it cost her so much work to be]. The use of the verb, "*hablar*," here emphasizing the act of speaking, points to the demand on Selena to articulate herself in and thus be interpellated by not simply a language but a system of thought and being that render her pleasure unviable, unless it be in the service of capital. In other words, Selena is coerced into expressing herself in a neoliberal idiom that centers and makes possible Hugo's authentic expression of self.

Selena, then, realizes that her relationships with both Hugo and La Martha are not in her own interest but are, instead, at her own expense. Further reflecting on their interaction, she attempts to stay grounded in what it is that she, herself, feels. She says to herself: "[p]ero ella no es boba, sabe que algo extraño está ocurriendo" [but she is not stupid; she knows that something strange is happening] (208). And then that's when the promise she once made to Valentina comes right back to her. That's when she remembers how she agreed that "[n]unca más se dejará clavar por ningún hombre" [never again would she allow herself to be nailed by any man] (208). Despite Hugo's sweet intentions, the entire life of luxury and all of the stability he promised, she recognizes that the entire system of which they are both now a part is yet another ruse. The only two outcomes she can envision then are either ending up like Valentina, which means addicted to drugs and eventually dead, or ending up like Martha, which means being a "mujer de empresaria" who is constantly concerned with a life of business. This realization and this

recognition are what lead Selena to assert her own worth on her own terms, and they are also what give her the courage to escape.

The end of Selena's narrative arch involves a description of her own escape with no clear understanding of where it is that she is going or what might happen to her thereafter. In short, she simply ejects herself from everyone and everything. La Martha is the only character that obliquely sees Selena leave the hotel: she notes having seen a particularly strange "celaje" [cloudscape] running down the stairs and out the main doors of the Hotel Colón. She describes Selena in this moment as barely perceptible, more indistinct, or amorphous, just like thin clouds. Yet the word "celaje" also connotes a shimmering element. Thus, Selena seemingly emanated an array of colorful light suggestive of twilight as she, herself, descended and ran imperceptibly. On the one hand, La Martha's inability to fully make out Selena in her escape represents the unintelligibility of such a decision. Not only has Selena abruptly and unexpectedly left Hugo with no word but she flees even from her queer mother, La Martha. In a way, she returns to the domain of the unknown, becoming both indistinct and illegible yet again among the sea of other members of the lumpenproletariat. On the other hand, the twilight effect La Martha describes is also one of hope. While it is unclear whether this decision means Selena's metaphorical sunset or her sunrise, an end or a new beginning, she has nevertheless chosen to do what was best for her: to get the hell out of wherever it is that she is.

conclusion

*dissertation overview,
(dis)orientation, & overall (dis)organization*

“[...] we are part of the disorientation of the world.”

— J. Michael Dash in his translation of Édouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*

Figuring out just *how* exactly to write up, narrate, and organize this whole entire project has proven itself to be just as hard of a struggle as figuring out its content. For a while now, I intuited a desperate need to break out of the modern, western, and more specifically those secular and purely scientific ways of not just interpreting, knowing, and thinking but writing, narrating, and organizing as well. In short, I needed to break away from what was the now-dominant if not the now-hegemonic format of the linear argumentative essay, and this was after years of having been trained to read, write, and perform them, myself. In a way, I recognized the fact that I had to abandon the very format which I had grown so used to using in the very construction of so many different close readings and *explications de texte*.

But, thankfully, I wasn’t alone in this approach to what seemed for many to be a simply rebellious approach to the standard and accepted form of academic writing. There were other, more senior scholars whom I had found—with some of them living but most of them dead—who had already observed the same issue just as I, myself, had done. While similar in nature, they, themselves, had observed the issue in their own unique ways. In some cases, they had already dedicated significant amounts of time as well as significant amounts of writing to it. And so, their own work simply became indispensable for me. Walter Benjamin, for example, was one such (dead) person who back in the 1930s was part of a somewhat small group of people who were all quite aware of the issue of modern (and, for some but not all, of western) representation. This included things such as the very format of the traditional essay, itself, which is, again,

something that so many of us have been taught to mimic and perform since some of our earliest of years in grade-school.

In fact, we know that Benjamin actively toyed with the format of the traditional essay by employing and experimenting with it using two specifically surrealist-inflected and *trompe l'œil* conducive artistic techniques: that of *collage* and that of *montage*. He did this most in his 1938 essay, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Beaudelaire,” which, according to the Benjaminian scholar, Michael Jennings, was both “a representative critical performance” of Benjamin’s own writing and his own research in addition to what “[...] Benjamin conceived as a ‘miniature model’ of the great project of the 1930s, *Das Passagen-Werk* (the arcades project)” (12).

In those two texts of his from the 1930s—the Paris essay and *Das Passagen-Werk*—Benjamin, himself, doesn’t lay out any sort of linear argument. Instead, he intentionally experiments with the juxtaposition of many different kinds of textual fragments—what Jennings, himself, identifies as “quotations, theoretical statements, historical data”—and he does this juxtaposition of these many different kinds of textual fragments in what is again the surrealistic fashion of *collage* and *montage* (14). As Jennings points out a little bit later on, “[o]nly after repeated readings do the salient formal characteristics of the text emerge in relief: the Baudelaire essay comprises a series of images torn from their ‘natural’ context and reintegrated in the form of a montage or constellation” (24). In so doing, in retooling the traditional format of the essay by representing historical material in the form of a montage or constellation consisting of many different kinds of textual fragments, Benjamin, himself, sought to generate an entirely new, critical, and yet still material and dialectical mode of historiography. Benjamin’s own mode of critical historiography was, itself, quite akin to the Marxist method of historical materialism, but it was different in that it did not seek to hide away its own reliance on theology and on Jewish

mysticism in particular. What is, however, the thing that distinguishes Benjamin's own mode and method of critical historiography the most from Marxism's mode and method of historical materialism is that Benjamin's is dedicated to the exploration and the analysis of "a series of *images*" (emphasis mine).

In rereading Gloria Anzaldúa, I recognized that something quite similar was at work in her own writing as well. She, too, was quite aware of this issue with regard to modern western representation, and I came to find out that she, too, knew quite well—well before she, herself, died in 2004. As we can see throughout all of the chapters of her originally 1987 text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa wrote in ways that were not exactly linear but more poetic than anything. Quite akin to Benjamin, Anzaldúa's text is also composed of many different kinds of textual fragments. In her own case, we find prose in addition to poetry, quotations, theoretical statements, and historical data that she, herself, intentionally collected and then interwove and/or stitched back together into the shape of a book. She, herself, describes this whole entire dynamic with regard to her own writing in chapter six of *Borderlands*. In "Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink," Anzaldúa writes the following:

"This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. It is a rebellious, willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twigs, clay." (88-89)

We also know from Anzaldúa's posthumously published work that she, herself, approached and understood her own writing in a completely different way than that of the traditional essay. For Anzaldúa, writing was a specifically *embodied* kind of act and action in addition to a *ritual*. It involved more than the simple rationalist crafting of an argument with arguably objective points. Her own writing foregoes the simple delivery of a consumable thesis statement. As one of her own writing *comadres*, Ana Louise Keating, has put it, "[Anzaldúa] wanted the words to move in the readers' bodies and transform them, from the inside out, and she revised repeatedly to achieve this impact. She revised for cadence, musicality, nuanced meaning, and metaphoric complexity" (xii). Again, Anzaldúa's approach to writing here is not so much one that favors rationalist organization but one that favors the embodiment and the pace of a certain kind of rhythm. Again, she "wanted the words to move in the readers' bodies." That, is what Keating says. There is, then and without any sort of doubt, a certain kind of *rhythmic* and *ritualistic* quality to Anzaldúa's writing, and we see this most not only in her own repeated revisions but in the "cadence" and the "musicality" which her own writing, itself, produces. Ritual partakes in and of a certain kind of rhythm, and I think that Anzaldúa, too, knew that very much.

But in addition to this embodied and ritualistic approach to the writing that Anzaldúa once practiced, she was, herself, also explicit about its specifically *spiritual* dimension. In the interview series she did with Ana Louise Keating, Anzaldúa "[...] worries that the spiritual components might turn off some readers [...]" (21). Keating states that Anzaldúa even explains in a 1993 interview that "[...] scholars have ignored the more dangerous, metaphysical dimensions of her work [...]" (ibid). In her own words, she says that:

“The ‘safe’ elements in *Borderlands* are appropriated and used, and the ‘unsafe’ elements are ignored. One of the things that doesn’t get talked about is the connection between body, mind, and spirit. Nor is anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. As long as it’s theoretical and about history, about borders, that’s fine; borders are a concern that everybody has. But when I start talking about *nepantla*—as a border between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind or as a process—they resist.” (ibid)

Another scholar by the name of Betsy Dahms adds on to this specifically spiritual dimension and discussion of Anzaldúa’s work, and she does so with special regard to Keating’s own description of Anzaldúa’s spiritually-inclined writing approach as well as her writing style. As Dahms, herself, describes it, “[...] Anzaldúa effectively employs writing as shamanic quest toward wholeness [...]” (17.). That is, “[...] writing,” for Anzaldúa, “does not offer a destination, only the process of creation” (17). And so writing, in short, is what helps Anzaldúa to create something instead of simply arguing for something. For Anzaldúa, there is hardly ever an end point, goal, and/or destination in the very act of creation, itself. She might, therefore, even say that there is really no thesis statement ever to be found. There is, however, a certain kind of pull or a certain kind of call that does come from somewhere located deep down and within, and that’s where Anzaldúa, herself, went whenever she wrote. There’s a certain kind of connection to whatever it is that lay lurking there somewhere down in the dark and amongst all the dead in the deep. That’s where Anzaldúa dwelled, and that’s where Benjamin dwelled. I think that’s where I, myself, might have been dwelling now for quite some time too.

We also know from several of her own writings that Anzaldúa thought of her own approach to writing as answering the specific call of what she, herself, named and theorized as

“the Coyolxāuhqui imperative.” This particular kind of imperative was, for Anzaldúa, something that had to be performed in the name of the great Aztec warrior goddess of the moon, Coyolxāuhqui (see figure XXIV). According to her own myth, Coyolxāuhqui, was dethroned, decapitated, cut up, and dismembered by the then conquering god of the sun, war, and sacrifice whose name was (and still is) Huitzilopochtli. Writing, for Anzaldúa then, was a way to answer the Coyolxāuhqui imperative in that it would help, in her own words, “[...] to heal and to achieve integration” in the wake of Coyolxāuhqui’s traumatic dethroning, decapitating, and dismembering. Anzaldúa, therefore, understood her own writing as a way of answering Coyolxāuhqui’s imperative as well as was a way of helping her to express a life-long process of healing after traumatic events that fragment, dismember, and/or deeply wound the self. Understood here within this particular kind of mythic context, Dahms further explains that “[...] the task of writing is to re-member the dismembered, to re-compose the identity fragmented by a post-modern society to perform ‘embodied writing’” (18).



figure XXIV | The Coyolxāuhqui stone at the Temple Mayor Museum.

Together, these two writers, both Benjamin and Anzaldúa, saw the world as well as the cosmos—perhaps even their own two lives as well—as something that had been both violently broken and fractured into many different kinds of fragments. These fragments, moreover, are usually scattered and/or hidden about. Sometimes, they are dispersed very far away from us and even very far away from one another. We see this repeated in a number of other myths, including

the myth of Dionysus/Zagreus, and the myth of Osiris. All of the fragments must, therefore, be sought out and then brought back together, just as Benjamin and Anzaldúa both did or just as Athena, Demeter, and Isis all do. We must, in other words, go out and go off in search of them so that we may then, ourselves, (re)collect them, bringing them back and then putting them back together again. As the imperative, itself, demands, we must put Coyolxāuhqui's many different and dismembered bodily parts back together, and, in order to do so, we must go on these multiple and sometimes very long journeys in order to find all of her many different fragments.

Sometimes, we must trek and sometimes we must chart very difficult paths and tortuous routes in order to first relocate them before we, ourselves, can later reconstitute them back together into a brand-new whole. In this way, they re-present what is now—upon recollection and upon reconstitution—a reintegrated whole, one that clearly consists of fragmented parts but fragmented parts which are now decorated with so many different cracks and fissures where there once were none before. While the memories of the trauma, itself, still remain, the showing of the crack becomes an important part of whole. It is the recognition and the integration of the shadow.

Moving on from both Benjamin and Anzaldúa, I also increasingly saw this same kind of concern to forego the traditional format of the essay in the work of even more contemporary scholars who are, themselves, working in the interdisciplinary fields of both queer studies and decolonial studies. In the interdisciplinary field of queer studies, I stumbled upon Kris Trujillo's 2021 article, "Queer Melancholia," in which he entreats his own fellow queer scholars and his own fellow queer colleagues to remember the "set of intersecting conditions" out of which it was that the literature we now know as "queer theory" first emerged. For Trujillo, those conditions include "[...] the history of the theory journal, the queer politics of grief in the context of the

AIDS crisis, and the elegiac mode of literary studies” (106). In short, Trujillo reminds his own fellow queer scholars and queer colleagues to remember that queer theory, itself, has historically partaken in and perhaps has much more in common with the tradition of the elegy than it does with the tradition of the essay. As Trujillo, himself, quite pithily puts it: “[b]y situating the emergence of queer theory amidst the AIDS pandemic and within a longer tradition of the elegy, I hope to show how the practice of queer theorizing is inseparable from the rituals of caring for the dead” (ibid). Given that I, myself, see this here project as indeed enacting “the practice of queer theorizing,” perhaps my own persistent returns to the work and to the spirits of both Walter Benjamin and Gloria Anzaldúa—among so many others—has been nothing more than an expression of my own contemporary and queer ritualistic form of care for them since they are both, indeed, dead. And I guess Trujillo’s point means that the writing to be found here in this project is much more elegiac than it ever is essayistic.

Moving on to the interdisciplinary field of decolonial studies, I also stumbled onto the work of certain (living) scholars, like Walter D. Mignolo, who were starting to critically rethink the ways in which we write insofar as writing, itself, had been an integral part of the colonial production of knowledge. I won’t linger on this too much and in too great of detail, but Mignolo, himself, has observed, for example, the need for an alternative form of argumentative writing, and he has also stated quite pithily in his own work that “[a] linear argument cannot capture the nuances, since once a name or a paragraph is mentioned or quoted in a linear flow, *it does not return*: repetitions are not good in English composition but are important in decolonial thinking” (xxiii, emphasis mine). Insofar as this here project participates in an active kind of return in the writing, I do think that it may very well ally with decolonial thinking and decolonial movements.

And so what you will *not* find here is some kind of project that unfolds in a typically linear-like and/or argumentative-like way as we so often find them in the traditional format of the essay. What I have here is something that is, I confess, quite far from that traditional form and format as well as that traditional approach to writing. I must also say and I must also emphasize that I have chosen to write more elegiacally than essayistically with much more intention over the many years that I, myself, have now spent writing all of this up. Like Benjamin, Anzaldúa, Trujillo, and Mignolo, I do not think that we can continue to uncritically write in the traditional format of the essay as we have been taught to do so for so long now. I also do not think that we can simply continue to treat that particular way of writing as the *only* legitimate way of writing that there is in the world, and it is so often seen as a way of writing that is held up as superior to other forms of writing. While I recognize that there are different qualities to writing with some that is more complex and more artful than others, this is not really what I am talking about here. As Anzaldúa, herself, has said in her own originally 1991 essay, “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana, “[j]ust as we speak in different ways, we read in different ways, write in different ways. Educational and lived experiences change the way we speak, hear, read, and write.” In fact, I can easily imagine there being a fairly robust and whole entire colonial history to this very dynamic regarding essayistic writing having rooted out other forms of writing in a contest to the top.

Essays, it now seems to me, involve not only a particular way of writing, but they also involve a particular way of seeing. In order to think about how to best represent the Caribbean and its peoples—especially within the context of globality—I think that we must begin to question the very essay form, itself, especially as the dominant modern mode of representation. And I do think that it is important to remember, here, that the essay is, again, a European

invention, the history and context of which we have largely seemed to both ignore and forget as we, academics, continue to use them, write them, and train others in how to use and write them. But just as we continue to talk about decolonizing the mind in the aftermath of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work, it would seem to me that we must also talk about decolonizing the ways of writing and writing habits which we have inherited from people such as the sixteenth century French Renaissance philosopher, humanist, and moralist, Michel de Montaigne.

There are, moreover, certain modes of knowledge production for which the traditional format of the essay is simply not conducive to what may be their more and dare I say "natural" mode of expression. And so, it would be, to my mind, in the disservice of facilitating the transfer of knowledge to force such knowledge into a format or into a mode of expression that does not allow for that knowledge to fully express itself. That knowledge would only ever be received in a way that was, itself, distorted, and I cannot in good faith add on levels of distortion to that knowledge when I think that I can, myself, convey it much better by means of another way.

What you *will* find here is a kind of project that *unfolds* and *unfurls* in such a way that the return is an integral part of the very text, itself. "[...I]t does not return [...]" again says Mignolo. In linear thinking and in linear argumentation, there is no notion or ritual of the return. Things simply move on from one thing to the next, from the old to the new, from the unknown to the known, and that is the golden nugget with which Mignolo, himself, leaves us here: there simply is a complete lack of return in our own linear argumentative writing and, thus, in our own linear argumentative thinking. Unlike traditionally linear and argumentative essays, then, this particular project of mine integrates the ritual of the return into the very text, itself, because, I believe, that it is the return which allows for the ritual of it all to come right back up and right back out of

hiding. Indeed, I think that it is the return which allows for the whole entire ritual of it all to emerge from out of the background, to come on up, out, and into the fore.

The ritual of the return is also what allows for a certain kind of necessary repetition to come back into the writing, back into the thinking, and back into the very argument, itself. “[...L]a répétition,” or “repetition,” to return to Édouard Glissant for a beat, “est une des formes de la connaissance dans notre monde [...]”, or [is one of the forms of knowledge in our world] (33), and as Glissant, himself, goes on to further explain, “[...] c’est en répétant qu’on commence à voir le petit bout d’une nouveauté, qui apparaît”, or [it’s by repeating that one starts to see the small piece of a new thing that appears] (ibid). Celia Britton puts it this way in her own reading of Glissant: “[...] returning to the same topic from a different perspective gives [Glissant] a chance to discover new aspects of it” (208). And so repetition, here, is an integral part of the very ritual of the return, itself. It is integrated into the text which allows for us to come back to things but to do so at different angles and from different perspectives, and we keep doing this kind of return in order to then “discover new aspects.”

In a way, I came to this kind of ritual of the return because I, myself, kept on *returning* to certain people. I kept on *returning* to certain places, and I kept on *returning* to certain times. Like a moth in the night, I have often felt myself lured in a way, and I have kept on finding myself *returning* to certain kinds of writers in my own writing and certain kinds of thinkers in my own research. Perhaps, it was my own way of caring for the dead. Perhaps, it was my own feeling of needing to return to them. And so that is exactly what I did: I returned to Walter Benjamin and his little entourage countless times in the many years right before his own death. It was Benjamin who then led me to Georges Bataille, which, interestingly enough, was another return to some of my own earlier coursework that I had already done on him throughout a decent period of

graduate school. A little bit later on, I also returned to Gloria Anzaldúa, eating up the many words, frameworks, and clues that she, herself, had left for us well before she, herself, ended up departing from this world. I can confidently say that it was the ghost of Anzaldúa that later led me to the interdisciplinary field of Depth Psychology and to the whole entire work and worldview of James Hillman in particular. Hillman's œuvre has since proven to be without any ounce of a doubt not only useful but also both validating and inspiring—and that is true not just for me but for many of my own students as well. For me, then, embracing the ritual of the return became quite fruitful. *And so, why not just integrate the whole entire ritual of the return into the very text, itself?*

In the enactment of *the ritual of the return*, in the very process of undertaking it, I do think that something rather remarkable is generated and/or created. In the very moment of the return, in the very act of returning to something that one is investigating and studying, something like that of a spiraled sort of argument or spiraled sort of understanding begins to emerge. It's kind of like the crossroads that one keeps on coming back to inside of a labyrinth or inside of a maze, and one keeps coming back to that crossroads, because one is not exactly quite sure if one has already been here at this specific spot or not. In the labyrinth and in the maze, just like in Westworld, our own memories are often taken and/or kept locked away from us. But each and every time we, ourselves, come back to a certain spot, each and every time we, ourselves, come back to that one particular crossroads, we start to see and we start to notice something anew. Maybe we even start to remember that which we once forgot.

Whatever the case may be, the important thing is that the experience of it all is not exactly the same each and every time that we return to something. No, the experience of it is slightly different each and every single time that we do, indeed, return to it. There is something

over here that is on the wall that we didn't quite notice before or there is something over there on the ground that we did not quite see, and so by coming back to it, by revisiting it with greater speculation and detail, by re-experiencing it in this sort of spiraled-like way, by standing over there in the exact same spot that one once was in order to reinspect it, by doing this sort of return in such a repeated kind of fashion, it would all start to become a mental ritual, a way of critically remembering when we are made to so often ritualistically forget. There is, therefore, a certain kind return in the writing here, and that return really aims to help us remember. There's, therefore, a certain kind of ritual of the return in the writing that ends up helping us to go deeper and deeper as we, ourselves, return, getting more and more complex as we push on and further into the darkness of the beyond.

Now, while I had long sensed that the traditional essay format's linearity prohibited that which I wanted to express, I will also confess that I still didn't know *how* exactly to better express it all. In spite of having intuited the need for a break with the traditional argumentative essay form and all of the promising power that the ritual of the return seemed to possess, I still didn't know *in which* alternative way and *in which* alternative written form I, myself, should write. The traditional elegy was alluring, but I, myself, was honestly quite unfamiliar. I, therefore, needed an alternative way and an alternative written form of both narrating and organizing my own thinking that was still elegiac. So, in addition to figuring out the project's content, I also had to go looking concurrently for an alternative way of writing in addition to an alternative written form that was still somehow connected to the elegy.

And that was, quite frankly, just overwhelming. I simply needed to stop and then just take stock of what exactly it was that I knew in that moment, and when I did that, I quickly realized that I knew I needed a way and form with which I could better recount the stories of my own

four images of Caribbean figures of prostitution. I knew that I needed a different way to tell their own four stories as I, myself, was attempting to tell them in my own writing. Yes, the linear essay was just not it. It couldn't do the work that I needed, and that's when I realized that I needed ways to recount them that were not so linear and not so logocentric, or word-driven. Yes! I knew that I needed a way in which to tell their own stories that was much more akin to me painting better *pictures* of them than it was of me making *linear arguments* of, about, and/or with them. And that was it! I realized that what I needed to do was *paint* instead of *write*. Well, I need to paint with my writing. I needed to paint, because I wasn't so much dealing with words and with *logos*. Sure they were there. They were present, but I was dealing with something quite different, something much more like images and *eros*. I was dealing with nightly things, not daily things. I, therefore, needed a way of writing that could help me, myself, and my own presumably modern western readers *to imagine* these many different historical images of mine. I needed a way of writing that could, itself, help me to facilitate *the images* that would (re)emerge of them in these readers' minds, and so I searched for a way to help me do that, looking around for a very long time. But I needed to do so in order to be able to better tell these always unfinished stories of mine, stories that were, themselves, about these images, and I wanted to do that in way that felt good. Yes, *in good faith*—that is, to tell them with honesty and with sincerity of intention.

Throughout the whole entire process of my own investigation, I gradually came to understand and came to see that linear modes of writing, narrating, and organizing—such as that of the typical chapter and that of the typical essay—simply would not enable me to do the kind of work that I, myself, wanted to do. In fact, they would only help to further obfuscate and even further obscure the issues rather than better illuminate them. And given that my own

investigations were into these images, into these figures' mysterious deaths and their murders, into their own mysterious disappearances and even into some of their own reappearances, it only ever emphasized the need for a much more *critical* mode of narration, one that could accompany the project's already *critical* mode of representation. Altogether, I knew that whatever this alternative way of writing and whatever this alternative written format may have been, it would promise, no matter what, to be better able to represent that which I so desperately needed to both show and evoke. This much more *critical* mode of narration would, therefore, provide me with the ability to help the presumably self-identified modern and western reader to at least get a glimpse of an entirely different way of *perceiving* let alone an entirely different way of *knowing* and *being* in the world. And these were ways of perceiving, knowing, and being that were, all again, oriented to *images* as opposed to *words*, to *eros* as opposed to *logos*, and, perhaps above all, they were much more oriented to *poesis* as opposed to *thesis*. As Rabinovitch, herself, has put it, "[t]he artist's creativity eludes the parameters of the logical thought process but [it] has its own logic—the logic of symbols" (xv).

But just how exactly was I to do all of this again? That was one big question that I had long asked myself, and I am sure glad that I did, because, in asking myself that very question, I then had yet another and rather literal return of my own this time. I returned after some two to three years—lost somewhere out there in the infinite and deep, dark ocean waters of historical research—right back to one of my very own *original* sources of inspiration. And let me just echo here some of what J. Michael Dash has already said in one of his own readings of Glissant when he, himself, writes that "[...] this wandering, this solitary self-fulfillment is pointless if we do not return to the point from which we started" (xx). And, for me, that starting point was Benjamin's final project, his very own *Das Passagen-Werk*, or *The Arcades Project* as it is, again, so often

translated into English. The *critical* mode of representation was always there if only in its prototypical form. The seed of it was there in that very book of his; I just hadn't fully recognized it yet. Like Bernard and the (hidden) door or even like Bernard and the image of his own anatomized blueprint there on the desk right there before him, it simply didn't look like anything to me. I couldn't recognize it when I, myself, had first encountered it. But then, upon my own later return to it, I was able to finally recognize it, to see it there bright as day. Something in me had shifted, and for that I was definitely thankful.

Perhaps it was due to my own initial resistance to it all, but it took me even longer to realize that, in all of my own diving into the worlds and into the work of people like Benjamin and Anzaldúa, I was only ever scratching at the surface of what was a much deeper need and a much deeper desire for yet another kind of return altogether. That kind of return was a critical return to religion, to theology, and to the spiritual in things like our scholarship. Walter Benjamin, after all, was a scholar who was heavily influenced by and well informed about theology and Jewish mysticism in particular. According to Jason A. Josephson-Storm in his own 2017 book, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, "Benjamin had a number of other friends in Western esoteric circles" (228). In fact, Benjamin was so connected to these "Western esoteric circles" that Josephson-Storm continues to explain how

"[...] Benjamin's knowledge of the Kabbalah came first from Gentile esoteric circles. He was introduced to Jewish mysticism by the Swiss esotericist Max Pulver, who recommended the writings of Christian theosophists Franz von Baader and Baader's student Franz von Melior. Benjamin's main source for the

Kabbalah was Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*
(Philosophy of history or the tradition, 1824-53)." (227)

I will just go ahead and say here that as a queer person, I don't think that I would have leaned into this newer and more critical return to religion, theology, and spirituality as much if it were not for the very fact that the stories which I aimed to tell and the evidence which I, myself, had assembled together here in this project were both at stake. Without some sort of critical storytelling process, without some sort of critical mode of narration, these stories of mine, they would only ever continue to remain largely obscure, illegible, and even go completely unintelligible. Without such a return, we wouldn't be able to see them, because we would have missed them the first time and then simply moved on. And quite surprisingly (at least to me), theology seemed—in the way that Walter Benjamin was engaging with it—to help facilitate the type of work that I, myself, so desperately needed and desired to do. Talk about a twist.

But, *what exactly did Benjamin mean when he, himself, used the critical and theologically informed method of constellation? What, for Benjamin, did it mean "to constellate" exactly?* There are so many more questions like this that I could raise, but in their own 2018 book, *Thinking in Constellations: Walter Benjamin in the Humanities*, Nassima Sahraoui and Caroline Sauter both explain that "[i]n its common usage, 'constellation' usually defines a configuration of phenomena under specific spatial and temporal circumstances" (ix). While I do like this take on the common definition of the word, "constellation," I would also say that in vernacular English, a "constellation" is—rather simply and I would even dare to say *usually*—a collection of stars that are located somewhere up and out there in outer space. One might first think of what is perhaps one of the most famous of constellations there is in the Northern Hemisphere. There's the big dipper, for example, or, even say, that of Orion's Belt. I think most

people know of a “constellation” in this sense, and that is as an asterism or “a prominent pattern or group of stars in the sky,” and we should note that “[...] the stars,” as Benjamin Wurgaft writes, are “a recurring and powerful motif scattered across Benjamin’s writings” (2016).

For Benjamin, himself, a “constellation” meant something that was quite similar to our own word and use of it in the English language, and yet it also meant something which was slightly different given that he, himself, spoke German. As Josephson-Storm has already pointed out, there are two distinct words in German for the English word, “constellation.” There is the cognate, “*Konstellation*,” and then there is the word, “*Sternbild*.” While the former word, *Konstellation*, “[...] evokes a more neutral arrangement [...],” as Josephson-Storm puts it, the latter word, *Sternbild*, literally means “star picture” and “[...] evokes astrology” (231).

Josephson-Storm further explains that “Benjamin connected astrology with *Konstellationen*, and he used the formulation *Konstellationen der Sterne* when he did so. Indeed,” Josephson-Storm adds that, “Benjamin conceptualized *constellation* alongside astrology and the idea of correspondences so crucial to esotericism” (ibid). What is interesting here is that this work of Josephson-Storm’s is, itself, corroborated in the work of other scholars like Sahraoui and Sauter. In a similar vein, they, too, write that

“[t]here is a notable, constant, and indeed programmatic reference to constellations, stars, and astrology throughout Benjamin’s oeuvre: from the earliest to the latest writings, the repeated mentioning of stellar constellations in key texts of Benjamin’s [...] relates two essential aspects of Benjamin’s work to the notion of constellation: his poetics of reading and writing, and his philosophical method.” (ix-x)

But this “notable, constant, and indeed programmatic reference to” things like constellations, stars, and astrology were also a large part of Benjamin’s own developing method. Sahraoui and Sauter both explain this point quite well when they write that,

[...] a constellation, for Benjamin, is not only a fixed concept, and it is not only a metaphor, or a manner of speaking, nor is it just a random motif among others. Rather, it is—perhaps quite idiosyncratically—his name for a specific movement of thought and a specific method of (non-)presentation that challenges the very assumptions and conventions of reading, writing and thinking that the Humanities are based on—most clearly, of course, the conventions of progress, progression, and linearity. Benjamin’s constellations are therefore best understood as crystallised “thought images” that defer rigorous conventions, and lead us to a critical standpoint, allowing us to transcend the borders of reading and writing, and not least of thinking, thus creating an essential and indeed programmatic openness. (xi)

In other words and in sort of a review here, Benjamin’s own method and use of constellations in his writing was a way of not directly presenting whatever it was that he wanted to show (i.e. [non-]presentation). In all honesty, I don’t really think he knew half the time what, in fact, would be revealed. He would intentionally collect things and then juxtapose them together in the shape of a constellation that would then reveal something. In any case, this approach to writing, Benjamin’s method and use of constellations, “challenges the very assumptions and conventions of reading, writing and thinking that the Humanities are based on [...],” if only because there is a lack of something proposed. Instead, the reader must read the text in order to experience the illumination that may and should very well occur. As both Sahraoui and Sauter further

emphasize, it is this perhaps idiosyncratically and uniquely Benjaminian style of writing in and with constellations that really troubles “[...] most clearly, of course, the conventions of progress, progression, and linearity.” Instead, Benjamin’s essays are, themselves, composed of these constellations which are all “crystallised ‘thought images’ that [again] defer rigorous conventions.” All the more, this specific use of crystalized thought-images in the shape of a constellation is what helps to “lead us to a critical standpoint,” as both Sahraoui and Sauter note. In reading Benjamin’s work, the reader is, therefore, turned into a skywatcher, an observer of then stars. They are then encouraged to read into the logic of these juxtaposed astral symbols.

As I’ve already stated above, Benjamin’s own constellations were, themselves, largely collages and/or montages of intentionally juxtaposed objects. As Josephson-Storm, himself, explains it, “[t]he central model for a constellation might seem to be an artistic collage or assemblage, perhaps inspired by Brechtian theater or Marxist ‘exhibition’” (231). Like each star, Benjamin collected and then juxtaposed together a variety of different historical materials which then helped him and many others to reveal the connections that had existed between them but which were otherwise previously hidden from view and/or understanding. One could think here of the lines that we so often draw between two or more stars in order to make a constellation as the very act of illuminating their otherwise obscured connections. In a 1927 letter to Gershom Scholem, we know that Benjamin described the whole of his own final project, *Das Passagen-Werk*, as an attempt to use the specific surrealist techniques of collage and montage in literature. In short, Benjamin was assembling his own fragments of various historical materials and then he was forging them all together into the shape of constellations of his very own making. He would then place these fragmented and constellated creations of his own into the form of the essay. “But in the main,” as Jennings points out, “the essays allow the individual fragments to speak for

themselves and to generate new meanings and new tensions as they work with or against the other fragments in the constellation” (28).

It would take me a bit longer to realize that there was a whole theological connection here that yet again seemed to subtend much of Benjamin’s own work with both fragments and constellations. In fact, so much of Benjamin’s own method of constellation is, itself, informed by the Jewish Kabbalistic idea of Tikkun, which is a Hebrew word that is often translated into the English words, “fixing” and/or “amending.” But the word, “tikkun” can also mean things like “repair,” “improvement,” and even to “prepare.” And so, in a way, Benjamin’s consistent collection of stars and his own act of assembling them together into the form of illuminating constellations and montage-oriented essays, was his own little act of repairing and amending what he, himself, saw as a world and a history which had been deeply broken. His collections and his constellations both involved and invoked a ritual of and for remembering—literally, figuratively, and, above all, anagogically.

So, inspired as I was by this critical intellectual ancestor and in choosing to pay homage to his work, I thus set myself the task of writing, narrating, and organizing—of really foresting and forging together—*A Critical Caribbean Constellation* in like fashion. In terms of my own critical mode of representation, I, too, have collected my own distinct theological fragments. I, too, have collected my own images, treating them like the “stars” that they are up there in the bright night sky. I then brought them together, as if following the Coyolxauhqui imperative, myself, juxtaposing them here in this here project as a pair of dialectical oppositions. In this process, I formed two asterisms that would, in turn, ultimately forge together a much larger and much greater constellation: a specifically *Caribbean* constellation, given the project’s focus. And so just like the work and just like the many writings of Walter Benjamin, himself, the very form

that my own writing would take here in this project, the very form which Benjamin, himself, referred to as a constellation, would be “[...] intended as a heuristic device,” as Jennings has explicitly put it (27).

Now, while Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk* provided me with a model for such a critical mode of representation, the critical mode of narration, however, had yet to be fully developed. Again, Benjamin’s own magnum opus only ever left us with a prototype, a seed if you will of how to use his method of constellation. I would ultimately be left here on my own, for Benjamin committed suicide while fleeing Nazi occupation just before he could finish the project. What he, himself, left us with, writes Susan Buck-Morss, is “a massive collection of notes” often in fragmented, aphoristic and commentary-like form (ix, 1989). So along with a few others, I, myself, had to go on and craft my own kind of critical narratological method with nothing but a little seed, and as time, itself, went on, I would largely cultivate this little seedling method of mine based on the figure of the scholar-detective. In other words, I, myself, would aim to create and forge a constellation along with a written up narrative that would chronicle my own journey of coming into consciousness as I, myself, had come to investigate and assemble together these four different images of Caribbean figures of prostitution that make up my cases.

I should forewarn, however, that, just like Benjamin’s own constellations, this project’s constellation can also disorient and shock. But rest assured that these kinds of experiences of both disorientation and shock are, indeed, intentional. Jennings, himself, has observed that the structure of Benjamin’s Baudelaire Essay resists narrative coherence and that it may, therefore, “[...] produce a feeling of dislocation in the reader. This effect,” he continues, “is deliberate” (24). As a constellation that is forged out of specifically dialectical images, this project is meant to juxtapose together the seemingly disconnected in order to induce a temporary shock, a

moment of disorientation, and a feeling of defamiliarization. The general targets of such defamiliarization are certain bourgeois ways of perceiving both history and time. As Pensky, himself, explains it, “[...the] power to disorient and shock lay to a large degree in the defamiliarization effect of seeing otherwise meaningless material objects suddenly removed from the context that determines their meaninglessness” (186). In short, both the disorientation and the shock are intended effects of this critical mode of representation whose underlying intentions are to induce transformation as well as awakening in the reader.

A Critical Caribbean Constellation is, therefore, meant to serve as a new and alternative kind of framework, one that functions just like Walter Benjamin’s own constellations once did for him. It is a framework through which to better interpret, better think, and better know the global, necroerotic phenomena that I, myself, think are associated with what many scholars have come to consistently refer to as “Western modernity.” This critical Caribbean constellation, in particular, aims to function as a framework that is quite capable of primarily shattering and/or reshaping History with a capital ‘H’—of which both Walter Benjamin and Silvia Federici have already admonished us. But the project’s own target isn’t just set on the defamiliarization and even the denaturalization of History with a capital ‘H.’ There are other related and similarly capitalized targets that are set as well. There is also Time with a capital ‘T’ as well as Memory with a capital ‘M.’ I think the project even enters into some of the (Heideggerian) conversations on Being with a capital ‘B’—especially insofar as that Being with a capital ‘B’ exists *in* Time with a capital ‘T.’ These, too, are some of this project’s targets set for defamiliarization and denaturalization. As such, *A Critical Caribbean Constellation* is meant to epistemologically disorient the presumably modern and Western reader, first, before then reorienting them to a way of knowing, thinking, and conceiving of those things that we have long come to so uncritically

call and write as universal: I'm talking about those things, again, like "History," "Time," "Memory," and even "Being."

I should add here that while undertaking the *nekyia*, the project's chronology—or, temporal structure, itself,—does shift from chapter to chapter as well as from part to part. There are then, two major chronological/temporal shifts that occur within the project as a whole. Given the project's own interest in the politics of the present conjuncture with specific regard the politics of time or what has elsewhere been referred to as "chronopolitics," and given the project's own interest in generating histories of the present, this project's first shift begins with a somewhat synchronic kind of orientation. That synchronic kind of orientation quickly shifts, however, within the first Part of the project as the reader moves on from Chapter I into Chapter II, and that particular shift involves a move away from the initial synchronic kind of orientation into an orientation that is, itself, much more *diachronic* than *synchronic*. It is therefore concerned with the change in the historical structure of the global phenomenon generally referred to as "sex tourism" over time. "From a diachronic perspective," writes Gesa Mackenthun, "such traces – such knowledge of the destruction of knowledge – can be the starting point for critically re-examining established historiographies, myths, and narratives."¹

The second shift in this project occurs in the transition from Part I into either Part II or Part III. Here, the first Part's *diachronic* orientation turns into something much more like a *pluri-chronic* orientation. In doing so, the project hopes to not just reveal a plurality of different temporalities altogether—such as that of linear time, rational time, empty homogenous time, messianic time, cyclical time, and spiral time among so many others—but to also expose some of the ways in which certain types of time have been historically used as an integral part of the (neo)imperial management and control of (neo)colonized populations. As Graeme Gilloch has

put it for a different and yet still related context, “[t]hese constellations are not to be envisaged as distinct chronological phases; rather, they must be imagined as superimposed, one upon the other, so that now this one, now the other, takes precedence and appears closest to us” (25).

Now, while the project’s form does assume the shape of a critical Caribbean constellation composed as it is of four unique little stars which when split make up two different asterisms, the deeper backdrop that serves as its general organizing structure is meant to be the image-concept of a global maze. One might think of this in terms of a still life, collage-like painting that consists of each of my own four individual cases making up, in total, a four-part constellation which is then overlaid onto the background image-concept of a global maze. And so there on top of the image-concept of a global maze sits my own critical Caribbean constellation, with its four stars located on the Greater Antillean islands of Hispaniola (which includes today’s Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, and it does so at different times in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We might then “zoom out” as it were and (re)imagine the globe, here, as being our very own planet, Earth, with the global maze covering its many different continents and its many different islands, its many different seas and even its many different oceans.

In a similar way, one might think of this critical Caribbean constellation of mine as akin to an actual constellation as they already are out there in outer space. One might think, for example, of constellations like Sagittarius, Cassiopeia, or even something like Scorpio (see figure XXV below) which are all constellations that are backdropped by the arms and the heart of our very own Milky Way galaxy. In this way, my very own critical Caribbean constellation focuses our attention in the dark and (re)orients our own perspective while still recognizing the great and incredible depth and complexity that exists all around it. These are nothing but four little stars then in what is none other than an entire galaxy of them.

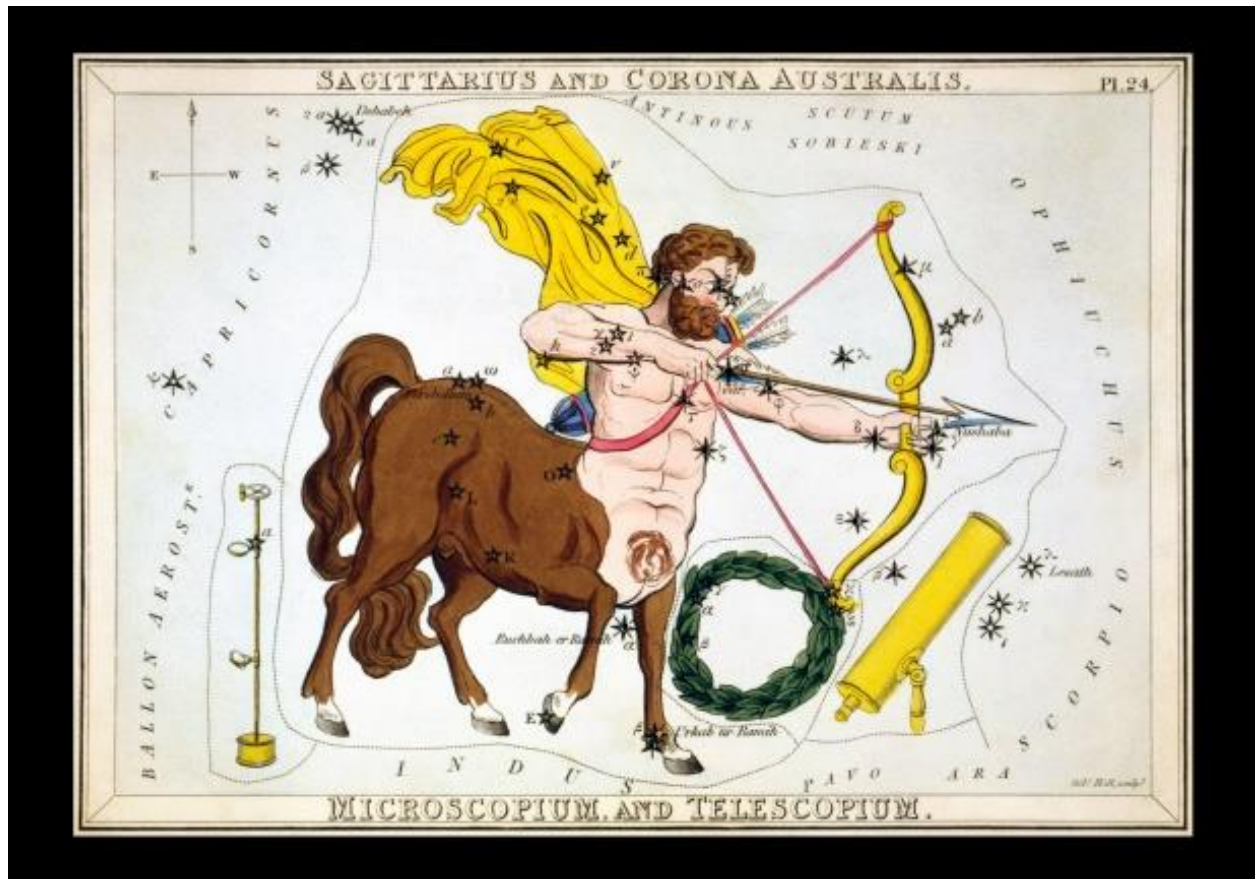


figure XXV | Hall, Sydney. "Sagittarius and Corona Australis. Microscopium, and Telescopium," *Urania's Mirror; or, a view of the Heavens*. Plate 24. London. Astronomical chart, 1 print on layered paper board: etching, hand-colored. Restored by Adam Cuerden. 1825.

With the image-concept of the global maze in the background, the project as a whole suggests that we take and explore the plurality of its many different entry and exit points. It asks, in short, that we test and we try some of the many different paths which all exist therein. These many different paths, however, are anything but the same. There are some paths that lead us to very “dead ends”—both literal and figurative—but there are also other paths, paths that lead us to much “greater depths”—both literal and figurative. Some paths lead us into nightmares and deathworlds, while other paths lead us into things like dreams and entirely new and unknown

lifeworlds. This project's structure, then, invites the reader to venture both "this way" and "that way" as they make their own way through the constellation and the maze.

If one could see this project in its entirety from the bird's-eye view of the mythical, ancient Greek architect, Daedalus, or perhaps even through today's contemporary satellite imagery, then its whole entire written structure is, itself, multicursal like a maze. As opposed to a single continuous path or line such as in a more linear and unicursal design—quite like that which we find in the traditional format of the essay—this project employs a much more critical form of representation whose structure is multicursal, and it, therefore, draws our attention to the presences as well as to the possibilities of more than one possible route between the outside and the center.

It is this multicursal structure to the whole entire project that also deploys and draws our attention repeatedly back to *the ritual of the return*, of which I, myself, have already briefly spoken up above. In these pages that do, indeed, function like the long and twisted hallways of a maze, we must repeatedly return—sometimes wittingly and at other times unwittingly—to the very same spots at which we last started and/or stopped. And I will reemphasize the fact here that it is precisely in the ritual of the return to these very same starting and stopping points, that one begins to cultivate both a practice of critical (re)memory as well as one of critical remembrance.

And so, written, narrativized, and organized as it is in this particularly unorthodox way, I nevertheless found that the politics of the project's content came to function much more in harmony with the politics of the project's form. Previously, the disharmony that existed between the two of them seemed to be a problem that I, myself, just could not ignore. With this new-found harmony, I, then, aimed and hoped to intentionally break with not just "the Western code" as Walter Mignolo has referred to it but with our own dominant, Enlightenment-based

conventions of modern representation and modern writing anchored as they both are in the essay's linearity as well as the quick consumption of now widely commodified knowledge. I, myself, believe, moreover, that the stakes and the qualitatively beneficial implications of this shift away from these specifically modern modes of representing, writing, thinking, and perceiving will become all the more clear in the many pages and passages that follow.

level I: the constellation

The first level of this dissertation project is the level of the constellation as a whole, which is, itself, composed of two different asterisms. These asterisms are, in turn and respectively, composed of two different stars or cases. The constellation as a whole is meant to function as a sort of mnemonic device, something by which to critically remember that which is meant to be forgotten. I will now just provide a brief explanation of constellations and the imaginal kind of work they do before discussing the other three major levels.

Permit me now to just echo a few of the words written by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S. archetypal psychologist, James Hillman—someone whose own work Gloria Anzaldúa much admired. In his 1979 book, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Hillman, himself, writes in reference to his own work that “[t]his essay [...] therefore is an essay in epistrophe, reversion, return, the recall of phenomena to their imaginal background” (4). It is in this rather Hillmanian kind of spirit that this here text is also written and woven together. Yes, the *imaginal background*. This project gets us to focus in on the imaginal background. Its overall aim is to get us back to the (importance of the) image. In short, this project is all about images and the constellations that we end up perceiving in those very images.

But much like an actual constellation as it is seen from our very own vantage point here down on Earth, the overall goal of *A Critical Caribbean Constellation* is not to achieve any sort of complete, totalizing picture and/or view. Constellations are, after all, only ever a perceived pattern, a woven-together outline that consists of several different fragments, of many different kinds of stars. Constellations, themselves, may give us a semblance of something, a pattern to pay attention to, but they do not fill in all the gaps. They can't. Constellations are always already surrounded by so much that exceeds them and the very stars that constitute them. In fact, constellations bring our attention to the very notion and the very presence of excess, itself. There in the dark where we are to find constellations, it is the darkness that rules and extends out into a forever. There is still so much "empty" space that exists both in, around, and beyond constellations, and that "empty" space houses truths that are much more deep and much more complex than the constellations on whose stars we fixate will ever allow. Let us not forget that, in many religious traditions, it is the light that emerges out of the dark and not vice versa.

And yet, constellations alone can point us to specific kinds of paths with specific kinds of directions. In a way, they function quite like guides do. They serve as a compass. The overall goal of a constellation then is not so much completion or the achievement of a complete picture but rather a kind of *refocusing* and *reorientation*. Constellations help to show us a different kind of way. They're about learning a different way of putting things together, of seeing things differently. And it is the contemplation of this particular kind of constellation of my own, again this specifically *critical* and *Caribbean* constellation of mine, that I hope will offer us, if anything, the outlines of a much larger picture and story to tell, one that is, itself, set against the incredibly deep, dark, and dynamic background that is Caribbean history.

As I was, again, inspired by Walter Benjamin's aesthetic theories and his own final attempt at crafting and theorizing a method of constellation as a form of critical representation, I, myself, set out to forge not only a *critical* constellation of my own but a specifically *Caribbean* constellation as well. In following Benjamin, I began to conceive of each of the four chapters as not simply *telescoping* the past as he once did but as, instead, *stereoscoping* the historical images of Caribbean figures of prostitution that were, themselves, located in various spatio-temporal coordinates across the Greater Antillean islands of the 20th and 21st centuries. These four images would, in turn, function together as guiding stars in my own assemblage and in my own construction of a specifically *critical* and *Caribbean* kind of constellation. And so I, myself, paired each image, each star, with another in dialectical fashion so as to form and forge a little asterism, or an identified pattern out of a group of stars, and that little asterism would hopefully work well with my own subsequent attempt at crafting a much more stereoscopic form of vision. With two sets of dialectically paired images juxtaposed together, I was then able to form two asterisms in total. I then chose to put those two asterisms together in similar dialectical fashion so as to form and forge a much larger constellation.

Like the multiple layers of a *trompe l'œil* painting, my own constellation here consists of three major levels, itself. First, there is the level of the constellation as a whole. Then there is, second, the level of the two asterisms, which is then followed by the third and final level that consists of the four individual stars. When seen all together, the constellation that emerges out of these four individual chapters takes the form and image of a cross which is, itself, composed of two perpendicularly rendered lines whose respective poles are, again, arranged in dialectical opposition. Part I, therefore, dialectically opposes Part IV in a vertical manner while Part II dialectically opposes Part III in a horizontal manner.

Now, while there are three levels to this project's constellation, the constellation, itself, possesses four major parts. As if again looking from the bird's-eye-view of the mythical, ancient Greek architect, Daedalus, or perhaps through today's contemporary satellite imagery, one is able to imagine how the multicursal as opposed to unicursal shape of the project's backgrounded, key image-concept of a global maze does—in spite of all of its seemingly excessive, unclear, and twisting paths—possess certain clear sections with distinguishable features, notable themes, and decisive limits. The constellation as a whole reveals four large sections, and in these sections there are particular patterns, certain repetitions, and even rehearsals—perhaps even a whole repertoire—that distinguishes each of the four major parts, each of their respective chapters, and each of the case studies that I have developed therein.

In order to better mark each pair of parts' dialectical oppositions, I have chosen to name them according to their own major mythological themes. Part I and Part IV are respectively titled “the descent” and “the ascent.” These two parts are designed to induce and then facilitate in the reader a particular kind of underworld journey that I have heretofore referred to as a “nekyia.” In short, it is this rite of the nekyia that helps one to descend and then pass through the threshold which exists at the border as well as the entrance to the global maze's underworld. The first major part, therefore, begins with a descent down into the global maze's dark depths and desperate ends before it later turns around, in the fourth and final major part, with an ascent into what may hopefully be some of the most beautiful of moonlit nights and new beginnings.

The ancient mythological nekyia-like structure of this whole entire project—from the descent, to the search, to the ascent—allows me to frame my own exploration of relatively contemporary as well as historical representations of Caribbean sex workers and/or prostitutes as a journey into the hidden and often forgotten, marginalized aspects of modern western society

and culture. Put another way, the *nekyia* has allowed me to undertake what is no less than a death-inducing dive deep down into the forgotten depths of the collective unconscious. By organizing my own project into these three phases as I have done, I have also tried to create some sort of critical narrative structure, one that is, itself, largely based on and inspired by myth. And I, myself, must confess that I have chosen to do this just to make the readability much easier, because in all actuality, there might not ultimately be a narrative structure to begin with. I know that this exact same issue over narrative coherence was a big part of the tension that existed amongst the surrealists during their own time they spent together. Nevertheless, there are moments throughout this here project where and when I, myself, have chosen to lean more on the side of narrative clarity rather than that of narrative obscurity, and that is simply because my own job is currently at stake. In doing so, I still hope to offer up what it is that I see here as a critical and interdisciplinary framework as well as a critical and interdisciplinary methodology for undertaking the exploration, restoration, and maybe even the recovery of memories that have long since been forgotten.

The second two major themes are found in parts II and III which are, themselves, respectively titled “this way” and “that way.” These two parts are designed to be the global maze’s disorienting and confusing interior which is, itself, split by its own two major *remolinos*—or vortexes, whirlwinds, and/or whirlpools as Gloria Anzaldúa has variously referred to them. And it is here where I simply want to echo Anzaldúa, herself, when she states quite clearly that “[w]e live in the constant suck of *remolinos*—vortexes composed of new ideas, technological shifts, cyber age information, new class systems, new communities—demanding our attention. Estos *remolinos* sweep us up and land us in different places, forcing us to shift our values, beliefs, perceptions, and myths. The bits and pieces swirled up and sucked in the cultural

vortex create extreme hybridization” (86). As if two incredibly large storms thrashing about in opposite cyclical directions, these two whirlpools, the veritable presences of something like a Scylla and a Charybdis, pull the project apart by nearly ripping it into two.

Yet what I, myself, hope to demonstrate here with these two *remolinos* of my own is something that is, I think, quite straight forward but what may be, perhaps, quite novel for many. This project is, itself, unlike most dissertation projects perhaps in that it espouses and attempts to present a specifically *stereoscopic* form of aesthetics. That is, the project is, itself, split up into two, and these two split up parts—with the split located in the middle section of the project as a whole—are split into one way which is the fairly clear dead ends to be found in going “this way,” down *this* particular path of knowing and being known as neoliberal epistemology and neoliberal ontology, and another way which is the promising, hopeful beginnings to be found in going “that way,” down *that* particular path of knowing known as afro-diasporic cosmologies and gnoseologies. I will now move into a much more detailed and deeper explanation of the project at the level of each pair of its own dialectically opposed parts.

The first set of dialectically opposed parts is again composed of Part I - the descent and Part IV - the ascent. These two parts do *not* include investigations into any particular figures; they, instead, function as the beginning and the ending of a much larger rite—again, that of the nekylia. As a reminder, though, the nekylia is, itself, composed of a katabasis, or ritualistic trip downward and into an underworld, which is then followed by an anabasis, or ritualistic trip upward and then back out of that underworld. I have tentatively chosen to title the first part, Part I - the descent, “the old way: the death & despair of Western Modernity/Coloniality.” Across two chapters, this first part offers and expounds upon the project’s key words, their corresponding key image-concepts, the project’s theoretical framework, as well as its methodology. As a

katabasis, Part I serves as a sort of journey into the underworld for the reader. This is a stage of sinking down and diving deeper—hence the title of “the descent”—into better understanding the historical processes and dire effects of Western Modernity/Coloniality’s specific processes of disenchantment, secularization, progressive temporalization, and rationalization. I have tentatively chosen to title the fourth and final part, Part IV - the ascent, “a new way: the life & hope of alternative knowledge coalitions & patchworked dreaming.” Across another two chapters, this fourth part offers and expounds upon a synthesis of the findings concerning my own four constellated cases of Caribbean figures of prostitution in addition to an epilogue that attempts to theorize an alternative historiography of my own. This particular mode of historiography helps to develop and facilitate what I, myself, call “queer eschatapoetic visions,” and these visions, I think, may very well prove effective at leading us into the hopeful direction and challenging task of accomplishing something like that of a great escape. As an anabasis, Part IV serves as a sort of spiritual launch pad for the modern western reader. This is a stage of reemergence and rising higher—hence “the ascent”—into mentally seeing anew, hopefully endowed with the ability to perceive that which was once hidden from view but now revealed through the reactivation of a latent (and more than likely anesthetized) stereoscopic aesthetic and vision.

And I must say here that all of this does function quite similarly to something like one of those 1990s Magic Eye stereograms (see figure XXVI here on down below). I remember well some of the days when those of us who could would help those of us who couldn’t in learning how to *see* the (hidden) images in the stereograms of those many different Magic Eye books that used to be so popular during that decade. I, myself, am providing an example of one of those stereograms here as a point of visual reference as well as an opportunity for those of you who

may want to go ahead and try to see whatever the (hidden) image here may be. I will reveal here, though and with a bit of a spoiler alert for what is to come, that the (hidden) image is that of a squirrel holding a nut. But just as Anzaldúa once described to her own friends in how to look for the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe “[...] emerging from the tree [...],” I think that it’s important to know that “[...]t’s sort of like hunting for hidden animals in children’s coloring books; it requires a slight shift in perspective to bring them up from the foliage” (23-24). As a kid, I, myself, would simply cross my own eyes, and then I could easily detect the image long enough to both lock on to and then stabilize it.



figure XXVI | This is an image and example of a stereogram generated by 3Dimka.

The second set of dialectically opposed parts is, itself, composed of Part II - this way and Part III - that way. These parts *do* include investigations into the images of particular figures of Caribbean prostitution. Each of the three total chapters, therefore, investigates a specific representation of Caribbean prostitution as well as its own corresponding image and figure. What makes up the central difference between these three specific and split parts—between the “this” in “this way” and the “that” in “that way”—is in *how* the figures studied therein are represented, interpreted, and known. Each part is concerned with, in short, the representations’ differing modes of representation, storytelling, and knowledge production. In following the critical epistemological work of scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, and Michel Foucault, I pay particular attention to the ways in which these cultural products evince a “[...] silent but powerful epistemological configuration” as Mudimbe, himself, has observed in others and well explained (8). I should add, however, that, in my own subsequent analyses to come, I read not only the epistemological politics found within the very medium, itself, but also the epistemological politics of the diegesis—such as the relations of power/knowledge that exist among the very characters within the work of art, itself.

One could say, however, that another unifying thread that brings all three of these cases together is their shared moment after the 2000s. This was not only a moment of neoliberalism in the Caribbean, but it was also one of neglect writ large. Each of my own cases, therefore, offer up commentaries and critiques of the time of neoliberalism that has no time for figures of prostitution which, therefore, leads to abandoning them. Many of these figures that I have studied must find out ways to survive, live, and even thrive as best they can. Not all are liberatory, but I do cover one that is in a way. Whereas Legba is treated as already moribund and dead, and whereas the Rastafari sex worker is still waiting for the arrival of the black Messiah to

save them, figures like Sirena Selena—a borica drag-queen prostitute who sings bolereos in the Dominican Republic’s hotel circuit—are able to tap into much older times, memories, and methods for a better way of living in tune with the rhythms and rituals anchored in Vodou percussion.

level II: the asterisms

The second level of the dissertation focuses in on the two asterisms, which are, in turn, the dialectical juxtaposition of two stars or cases. Each asterism is meant to function as a dialectical set of images. I will now provide a small breakdown of each asterism or part of the project.

Part I, which I have chosen to call “the descent - the old way: the death, despair, & destruction of western modernity/coloniality” attempts to offer up a set of fragmented and yet sustained discussions. In this first part of the project, my goal was to introduce the reader to the project’s intentional use of certain critical and interdisciplinary methods as well as the key methodological thinkers who were behind the creation of those methods. The project’s methods chapter titled, “methods - Benjamin & Bataille: on stereoscoping a constellation of key image-concepts,” I follow and trace the work of both Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille who worked together in Paris during the decade of 1930s with fellow Surrealist artists to develop certain key image-concepts such as that of the Prostitute, the Labyrinth, the Maze, and the Minotaur. I do so as a means of enacting and thus explicating just what exactly was Walter Benjamin’s own critical theological methodology, which was, as I and many others have already observed, a methodology that involved telescoping in addition to the process of weaving together particular kinds of constellations.

Part IV, titled “the ascent - a new way: the life and hope of alternative knowledge coalitions & patchworked dreaming,” attempts to articulate a few and relatively newly emerging, queer eschatapoetic visions. In a way, this part aims to shoot an arrow into a particular kind of direction while beginning to articulate and detail an alternative way of seeing. I have provisionally chosen to call this project’s epilogue, “queer eschatapoetic visions for a great escape.” I then move on to discuss what I, myself, propose to be a more adequate—and alternative—hermeneutical mode for the interpretation of today’s global necroerotic phenomena. This epilogue, in taking up and emulating the tradition of the eulogy, attempts to revive the work of not only the late twentieth century queer Iranian playwright, Reza Abdoh, on the topic “queer eschatology” but the early twentieth century French philosopher, Georges Bataille’s, early 1930s experimental discussions and theories involving the power of metamorphosis in what he, himself, called an “ontoescapology,” or the study of ontological escape, which was an escape out of a certain way of *being*. In pulling from these two thinkers, I, therefore, challenge many of us within the many queer diasporas of the global north to not only critically rethink our investment in secularism but in modernity and the West as well. And I will continue to contend that by situating secularism as not only part of the University system but also within the much longer historical development of Euromerican imperial and colonial projects, it will then become thinkable how secular modes of interpretation and knowledge production *cannot* and *will not* produce solutions for solving the increasing phenomena of premature death today. In the many many pages to come, it will hopefully be revealed, that these secular modes of interpreting and knowing not only end up obscuring the matter but they also then rationalize, naturalize, and/or normalize the very conditions of possibility for premature death to become real. Secularism, in these cases, helps to kill, and it helps to kill with a certain kind of intention.

Part II, which I have chosen to call “this way: the dead ends of (neo)liberal epistemology & secular hermeneutics,” attempts to illuminate some of the ways in which modern, western, and secular ways of knowing and interpreting abet the (hidden) production and reproduction of racialized fatality. The opening section to this second part offers up a narrativized account of what it is that I think links together as well as becomes thinkable in the dialectical juxtaposition of the figures of Caribbean prostitution in case A, B, and C. What I also think brings these investigations together is their shared theme involving the failure and/or inability of the filmmaker as well as that of the scientist to *interpret*, *know*, and *think* about the respective murder and mysterious disappearance (in addition to the subsequent reappearance) of their own main figures in question: Legba and Jane-Doe. It is here where I, myself, argue that the chronology which undergirds both neoliberal as well as liberal epistemology distorts the modern westerner’s ability to clock premature black Haitian death. I also make the claim that the contemporary study of the Caribbean system of “sex tourism” which is now understood to be a global phenomenon can and should, itself, be traced back to at least an earlier stage and form in the wake of the United States’ invasion of Haiti on July 28th, 1915. It is here where I, myself, contend that the figure and the image of the black Haitian female zombie, is, itself, a unique Ur-form of prostitution within the Caribbean region, and that contention is supported by other scholarship such as Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski who write in their own 1996 book, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, that, “[i]n Haitian folklore, the key myth is that of the zombi. This is a specifically, one might even say archetypal, New World myth which, though having its roots in Africa, addressed American realities in its particularity. Most specifically, it has obviously been created out of the experience of slavery.” (26)

Part III, which I have chosen to call “that way: the hopeful life of thinking with alternative Caribbean visions,” investigates the representations of another set of two images. In doing so, it attempts to illuminate some of the alternative, non-secular modes of interpreting, knowing, thinking, and even historiography that continue to exist among many different groups of Caribbean peoples today. Just like in part II, this opening section offers up a narrativized account of what it is that I, myself, think gets revealed as well as becomes thinkable in the dialectical juxtaposition of the two different and yet similar figures of Caribbean prostitution in case B and in case C. What brings these two investigations together is their shared ability on behalf of the filmmaker and the novelist to take us well beyond just identifying the failure, limits, and violence of neoliberal, modern, and western based forms of epistemology. It is here where I, myself, argue that the chronologies which undergird both the cosmology of Rastafarianism and the gnoseology of something akin to Santería aid the black Rastafari sex worker as well as the Puerto-Rican drag queen prostitute in clocking their own premature deaths and historical displacements. I also make the claim that the first form of Rastafari informed chronology or historiography reframes the entire contemporary sex tourism industry as, itself, connected to the historical and yet ongoing system of the transatlantic slave trade. It is here where I begin to contend and hope to demonstrate that certain kinds of rituals and certain kinds of religious practices found in Afro-diasporic cosmologies and gnoseologies allow for a different kind of historiographical or chronological orientation to the past (as well as to the present and the future), and they are able to facilitate, moreover, the necessary onto-epistemological repair work that I, myself, think is needed in the relationship that exists between the I and the self as they may still currently be under neoliberal conditions today.

level III: the stars

The third level of this dissertation involves the stars, themselves, which, in essence, are again the cases. Each case is meant to function as an image, and the investigation into that particular image allows the reader to not only better see but to also better envision. I will now provide a small conclusionary breakdown of each of my own three stars or cases.

Case A telescopes and investigates the project's very first image and Caribbean figure of prostitution. Titled, "Haiti-2005: looking for Legba and Jane Doe," this chapter centers on the mysterious death and murder of the eponymous characters, Legba, a black Haitian sex worker and his unknown friend, Jane Doe, as they are both represented in Laurent Cantet's 2005 film, *Vers le sud*. This chapter builds on Thérèse de Raedt's analytical reading of the exact same film in and by which they, themselves, develop a particular typology of violence. I then expound on and extend De Raedt's typology of violence by defining and discussing a fifth form of violence: epistemic violence. Afterwards, I proceed to offer up another critical epistemological analysis of the specifically neoliberal epistemic violence that can be found in both the film's content as well as the film's form. In focusing on the film's diegesis, I demonstrate how the camera's literal perspective in addition to the filmmaker's revisionist conception of (Haitian) history enacts and reproduces the epistemic violence of neoliberal epistemology. I ultimately reveal how the film as well as the filmmaker both epistemically obscure the global (neo)imperial system of sex tourism and its history as a way of producing and reproducing the racialized sexual image and violence that serve as the very conditions of possibility for Legba and Jane Doe's premature deaths and murders.

Case B telescopes and investigates the project's third image and Caribbean figure of prostitution. Titled, "Jamaica-2010: looking (& waiting) for the black messiah," this chapter centers on the highly anticipated and mysterious (re)appearance of the Black Messiah alongside the proliferation of the image and figure of the *Rent-a-Rasta*, a black Jamaican male sex worker, as represented in J. Michael Seyfert's 2010 documentary film, *RENT a RASTA*. The arcanum that I, myself, argue this particular figure of prostitution possesses is the everyday politics involved in our own conceptions of "the cosmos" and, therefore, our modern and western cosmology. That is, I read Seyfert's film as a sympathetic and hermeneutical attempt to translate for the viewer an entirely different kind of Caribbean cosmology, one that is, this time, not anchored in Vodou but in Rastafarianism. And it is the film's more formal elements that I, myself, pay most attention to in this chapter insofar as the filmmaker actively employs the method of dialectical images as a part of the film's visual narrative. In this way the film, itself, as well as the rastafari religion retain and make remember a critical historical memory that is, otherwise, largely absent or narrated as disconnected from the present, dominant, and western epistemology. I flesh out how their specifically Rastafarian cosmology—as a mixture of both Judaism and African-based cosmologies—maintains completely different conceptions of history, time, and collective memory, which, in turn, provides for an entirely different read of "sex tourism" as a reconfigured form of racialized sexual enslavement. That history situates the now global sex tourism industry as part and parcel of the ongoing historical development of the transatlantic slave trade, and because of their continued search for the Black Messiah, Black Rastafari rent-a-rastas ritualistically nurture the flame of hope for the day when they, themselves, will finally be liberated, redeemed, and repatriated. For them, the day the Black Messiah arrives is the day the

reckoning ensues, and so we get a completely different orientation to not only history but also space-time as well.

Case C telescopes and investigates the project's fourth and final image and Caribbean figure of prostitution. Titled, "Dominican Republic-2000: looking for the self," this chapter centers on the mysterious and magical disappearance of the image and figure of the queer boricua prostitute who is imagined in this case as an enchanting and, therefore, threatening siren in a secular, neoliberal environment. In a third critical epistemological analysis of mine—this time of a celebrated Puertorican novel—I offer up a reading of key moments in Mayra Santos-Febres' story, *Sirena Selena: Vestida de Pena* (2000). This chapter pulls from and then seeks to build on the work that Roberto Strongman, himself, has already done and developed with regard to the queer aesthetic practice known as the *bolereo*. For Strongman, the *bolereo* (with an extra 'e' before the 'o' on the end) is best understood as a specifically disidentificatory performance that is, itself, often performed by both queer and latinx folks in response to the traditionally Cuban and heteronormative genre known as the *bolero* (without the extra 'e'). After providing some background on the image-concept of the siren as a dangerous prostitute and/or sex worker, I move on to analyze a few key moments in the novel when Sirena Selena, herself, not only sings melancholic songs in the tradition of the *bolero* but when she also specifically queers those songs as a strategy for her own survival. I contend that Sirena Selena's queering of the *bolero* ultimately allows her to reconfigure and reconceptualize the dominant and neoliberal metaphysical conceptions of space, time, and the body. My reading of Santos' novel thus reframes these moments as a specifically gnoseological—as in both *gnosis* and *gnostic*—ritual and rhythm as opposed to a simple epistemological formation. This specifically non-secular and alternative form of knowledge production is one that invokes the erotic through the meditative

performances of trance which ultimately serve as a powerful source for not only knowing intuitively but for also healing from what is none other than an increasingly toxic neoliberal environment. In singing and performing the queer aesthetics of *bolereos* as opposed to the traditional heteronormative aesthetics of *boleros*, Sirena Selenia is able to look for and then find herself by literally escaping as a glittering cloud out of a system that demands of her an onto-epistemological conversion in addition to a secular form of self-sacrifice.

endnotes

methods |

1. See the wikipedia entry for Georges Bataile at:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Bataille
2. I learned of this small tid-bit of intelligence from a short conversation with Mikkel Borch-Jacobson over zoom.
3. See the entry for: "telescope, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/198739. Accessed 14 September 2022.
4. See the following web address for more at:
<https://museums victoria.com.au/scienceworks/plan-your-visit/melbourne-planetarium/fact-sheets/how-do-telescopes-work>
5. See the following web address for more:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/307374>
6. See Foucault's essay on *La mort et le labyrinthe* (1996) also translated as *Death and the Labyrinth: the World of Raymond Roussel* (2007).
7. See Andrew McCann's brief overview of this discussion in *Walter Benjamin's Sex Work: Prostitution and the State of Exception* (100) as well as Angela McRobie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (102). Susan Buck-Morss, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, and Esther Leslie also chime in at various points.

case a |

1. It should be noted, for the record, that this is an interpretation that Albert provided in standard French during an interview between the local and official Haitian investigator

and Ellen, one of the many now-grieving tourists and former clients of Legba's. The original statement was made and communicated to Albert in Haitian Kréyol.

2. Albert provides an interpretation of a comment that the local official Haitian investigator made as an aside to him in Kréyol after having interviewed Ellen.
3. De Raedt addresses this point in the written form of a question, but I think it also to be declaratively true. The original French citation is: “Espérait-elle que grâce à Albert sa fille puisse entrer en contact avec l’autre monde de l’autre côté de la vitre, là où se trouvent les touristes, et ainsi échapper à la violence sournoise qui a déjà touché sa famille et qui règne partout dans le pays?” [Did she hope that thanks to Albert her daughter could enter into contact with the other world from the other side of the window, there where the tourists find themselves, and then escape the sly violence that has already touched her family and which reigns everywhere throughout the country?] (128).
4. Albert uses the expression “on ne peut pas faire ça” as a way to deny the anonymous black Haitian woman’s proposal. I would like to add that in specifically using the impersonal pronoun “on” [one and/or we] here—as opposed to the more personal “je” [I]—Albert is able to distance himself from the situation by appealing to the supposedly collective norm while also depersonalizing himself from the requested action to take her daughter. Together, his distancing and depersonalization ultimately index his commitment to a certain (black Haitian) respectability.
5. Spivak quotes Thomas Babington Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Indian education’ (1835).
6. See these quotes from Brunner’s website at the following web address:
<https://epistemicviolence.aau.at/index.php/en/home-2/>

7. See Will Higbee's "Elle est où, ta place?" The social-realist melodramas of Laurent Cantet: *Ressources humaines* and *L'Emploi du temps*," *French Cultural Studies* 15.3 (October 2004): 235-50.

case b |

1. See Frater A. "Coco Tea rules at 'Marley Bash.'" *The Gleaner* [Internet]. 1969 [cited 2020 Apr 20]; Available from: <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20120206/ent/ent5.html>
2. I take my understanding of neoliberal multiculturalism from the work of Jodi Melamed in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*.
3. By "materialist historiography" here, I mean to participate in a tradition of thinkers that are interested in tracing and writing the histories of material objects.

Indeed, Benjamin's "dialectical images" is a direct response to both Hegel's initial idealist conception of history and time as well as Marx's materialist (under)theorizing of "the commodity" as a general concept (Pensky 184). As an anti-Hegelian method (read as non-idealist), Benjamin aligns with Marx; however, he sought to rework Marx's own understanding of the commodity by bifurcating it into the *object of consumption*—for which Marx's theory of fetishism was accurate—and the *object of production*—for which Marx had no specific theory at all. On the one side, the commodity as *object of consumption* and fetish produces a "magical" or rather illusory effect that both hides the historical conditions of its very production, particularly the human labor therein, and, therefore, takes on an animated power whereby the material object is seemingly

transformed into a subject, or simply that which produces effects on its own. This material object-turned-subject contributes only temporarily to the bourgeois philosophical notion of history as progress before it is quickly replaced by the next hot commodity and assigned to the “trash bin of history.” From the vantage point of the object’s consumption, Benjamin viewed Marx’s theory as sufficient. What was lacking, however, was the vantage point of the workers in the object’s production.

case c |

1. The report notes that this program started as a series of presidential decrees (339-90 and 340-90), which were then ratified in 1993 under Law No. 14-93.
2. The novel illustrates that in order to gain access to and be promised the feigning semblance of protection, Valentina, in particular, is structurally coerced into performing the gendered, sexed, and sexualized role of manhood. In turn, Valentina suppresses her own sense of self for that of an alienating performance even to simply visit Selena in the hospital: “[t]enía que ir vestido de civil, incomodísimo, en mahones y camisetas largas. Tenía que despintarse las uñas, ponerse gorritas de pelotero para esconder el moño y gafas para taparse las cejas depiladas” (75).
3. As Aileen Morten-Robinson has argued, Solange’s uptake of the “mujer de alcurnía” subjectivity as a white identity provides her both “cultural and social purchase, and as a possession it enhances one’s life chances as configured through the logic of capital” (xix). For a more theoretical understanding of the ways in which subjects may embody white possessive logics, see her book.

4. Whether or not this move is intentional is beyond the point that I want to make involving the discursive effect this linguistic usage produces. Even if one were to agree to the framing of intentionality, Solange has decided to deploy and thus center the masculine marker without calling attention to the catachresis or, more importantly, honoring Selena's presenting as feminine. For a better understanding of what I mean by this see Foucault's *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*
5. I understand the term "metalepsis" in the Derridean sense: that is, as a figure of speech whereby the cause of something is substituted by its supposed effect. For example, my own claim here is that the normative epistemic structure that causes Selena's "error" has been substituted for the effect of simply being an "error." In other words, Selena is reframed as the cause—or author—of her own effects or cultural "errors." This effectively obscures a system of power that is, itself, the cause of making her "aberrant," the effect.

For other examples of the use of metalepsis as a technique to frame minoritized life along both racialized and/or sexualized axes, see Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black* (2004), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and Judith (now Jack) Halberstam's section on the "Bathroom Problem" in the introduction to *Female Masculinity* (1998).

6. Kamala Kempadoo makes notes of the fact that the figure of *la mulata* has been historically represented as concurrently "erotic and sexually desirable" while also framed as an "outcast and pathologized." She has served, in other words, as "the sexually available, yet socially despised body" (38).

7. See the following etymological entry for “monster” at the following website:
<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=monster>
8. See Persephone Braham’s work for the use of monstrosity as a discursive tool of conquest especially for female sexual perversity. See also Mimi Scheller’s work for a more contemporary reading.
9. I’m thinking here through the contributions of both Frederic Jameson as well as Judith Butler.

conclusion |

1. See the full article at the following website: <https://www.iaa.uni-rostock.de/forschung/laufende-forschungsprojekte/american-antiquities-prof-mackenthun/project/theories/coloniality-of-knowledge/>

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