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Wifredo Lam and the Lost Origins of The Jungle

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the complex inscription of modernist Cuban imaginaries within Atlantic cultural and political networks. I consider the tropes of cultural intelligibility and epistemic opacity in the fields of visual culture and cultural hierarchy. Through historical contextualizations of Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle* (1943) within the Paris and New York art scenes of the late 1930s and early 1940s, I address the questions of intelligibility and relative value in the international reception of exotic cultural forms. I examine some of the ways in which discourses of Lam and *The Jungle* have been constructed, appropriated, and made to illustrate national, regional, and global necessities. Finally, I engage with issues of insularity and cultural specificity within the context of an ongoing production of racialized images of 'Third World' political chaos in today's global Atlantic.

Key Words ◇ Aesthetics ◇ Atlantic ◇ Caribbean ◇ Cuba ◇ globalization
◇ visual culture ◇ Wifredo Lam

The story of how Wifredo Lam started painting *The Jungle* in Havana in 1942 is relatively well known. *The Jungle*, which signals for many critics a turning point in Lam's artistic career, is also regarded as one of the Caribbean's most emblematic works of art. A work of art, one must add at once, by a black Cuban artist, by a Surrealist artist, by a protégé of Picasso. Furthermore, *The Jungle* was bought by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1943, and it can still be seen as part of the museum's permanent collection. In this essay, I intend to describe and engage some of the discourses that have defined the cultural life of this painting. Rather than just contributing my own critical discourse on what and how *The Jungle* signifies, I want to

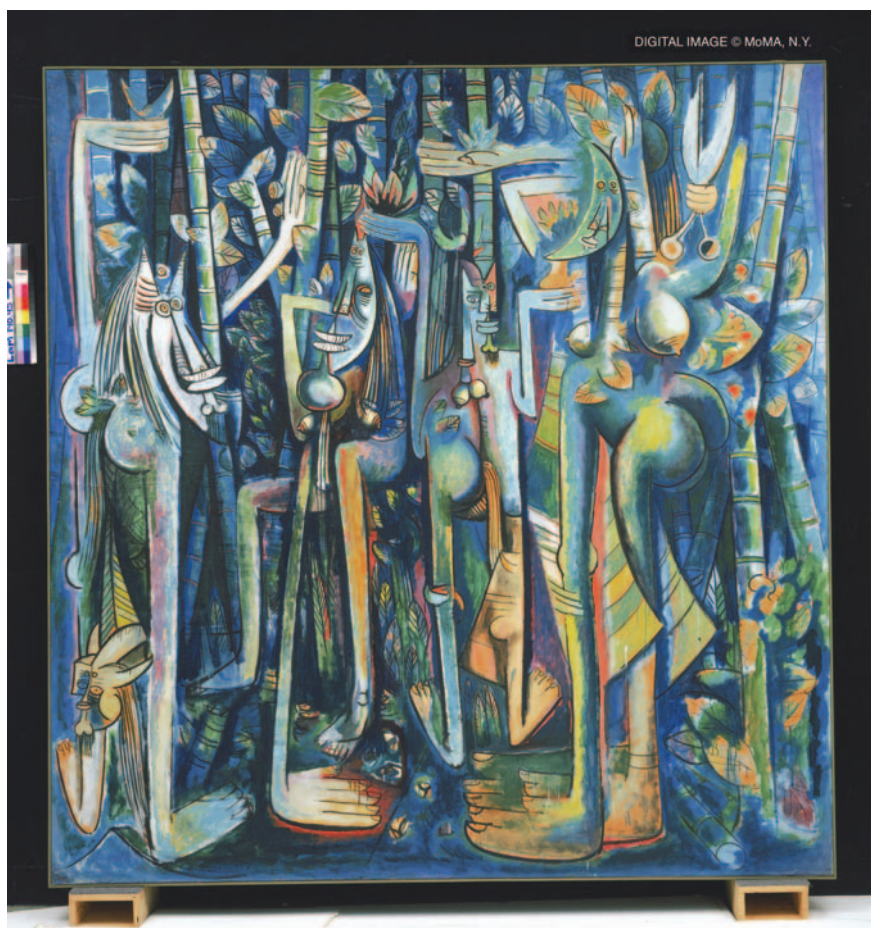


Figure 1. *The Jungle* by Wifredo Lam

investigate what the complex inscription of this cultural artifact within and beyond Atlantic networks says about Caribbean places and spaces. At the core of my argument lies a reflection on the contemporary critical configuration of global diasporas as it applies to the Caribbean, and it will become clear that 'global' and 'diaspora', however broadly defined, can hardly be excised from their Atlantic genealogies. *The Jungle* is not only the title of a famous painting by a renowned Caribbean artist—it is also a site where the parallel conditions of ongoing exploitation and misrepresentation characterizing Atlantic and Caribbean insularity have been expressed. Neo-liberal discourse calls this

condition ‘deviancy’ (Dash, 1997: 166). Wifredo Lam and other Caribbean artists and critics have insistently chosen more hopeful images, such as *The Jungle*. For over six decades, discourses on *The Jungle* have often grounded their logic on strategic reconstructions of the artist as purveyor of cultural and racial transparency, not opacity, in an effort to counteract, and replicate, Western forms of colonial and epistemic reductionism. In what follows, I explain how discourses on artistic subjectivity and pictorial referentiality have sought to construct ideological meanings through *The Jungle*. In my reflections on these discourses, I argue that *The Jungle* embodies place in suggestively modern, diasporic, and global ways.

The Jungle

The Jungle is a large, 239.4 × 229.9 cm gouache on paper painting mounted on canvas. It is structured following a vertical pattern—a sort of grid—counterpointed by short diagonal, horizontal, and curved lines. The surface’s slightly oblong shape accentuates its verticality, which is further highlighted by the predominantly long lines occupying most of the lower area. Canes and foliage are suggested in the background. Human or humanoid limbs, buttocks, joints, breasts, long hands, and extremely large feet extend over the surface with great dynamism. The viewer will notice, half hidden, or as if emerging from the foliage, a complex foreground divided in a lower and a higher level. Above, schematic faces rhyme with buttocks, breasts large and small, and groups of two or three eyes.¹ Long manes of hair are suggested behind the flat faces, and thin, almost rectangular noses have protruding elongations resembling male sexual organs underneath at least two of the figures’ lips. Pointy ears or horns, and, again, long manes, grow out of two of the figures’ backs. A hand holds open scissors above the characters on the upper right corner, and another head, ears or horns and long mane included, appears on the lower left corner, very close to a pair of feet and to the ground. A relationship is thus expressed between the severed head and the scissors, and a diagonal line between these two elements once again divides the surface in two symmetrical parts (Menéndez, 2002: 15–16). Perhaps more alluring than the schematic character of this scene are the gouache colors chosen to fill out the entire surface and to provide a striking contrast to the thick lines. Bright, light oranges, gray-whites, and intense pale blues cover most of the bodies, canes, and foliage. Blue-greens, cobalt blues, and dark, dirty blues fill most of the background. Fiery orange and dark reds appear here and there, suggesting blood—as in the bright red area surrounding the large hand or foot on the lower left region, against the cobalt blue ground. Cane, finally, seems to have been cut, or to have fallen, on both ends of the ground.

The scene is perhaps more naturalistic than it seems at first sight, and it has remained open to various iconographic interpretations. Each one of them seems unconvincing, as if the image's dreamlike qualities both conjured and dissolved most attempts at genealogical identification, or at cultural and art-historical location. This is where the strangeness, and the humor, interpellate the viewer, and where our own efforts in deciphering the artwork necessarily start to fail.

Lam's work, like that of later artists such as, say, Jean-Michel Basquiat, could be interpreted with hardly any mention of the Caribbean, yet it can only make sense—it can only really interrupt Eurocentric sense-making—if we bring it closer to the disruptive effects of Atlantic insularity permeating western fantasies of tropical space (Sheller, 2003; Thompson, 2006). In much of his work, Lam exposes objects of exoticist desire, and creates an iterative ethnography of what one might call the colonial viewer (as embodiment and subject of the colonial gaze at work in globalized institutions of modernist art forms). We also ought to acknowledge that our experiences of *The Jungle* cannot fully grasp the various interferences stemming from colonial, ethnic, and epistemic pasts. For *The Jungle* interpellates viewers via various iconographic traditions and referents, and it expresses singularly the ideological location of avant-garde culture in the Caribbean, as well as elsewhere in the insular Atlantic. Seeing *The Jungle*, one realizes that the island cultures in the modernist Atlantic are not only the objects of metropolitan desire, but also the critical self-reflections of cosmopolitan situatedness. They cannot, in other words, be read and explained away as 'isolated' from the fragmented, and fragmenting, experiences of globality/globalization, but as the multifaceted subjects of those very experiences (Brennan, 2004; Trouillot, 2003: 47–78). Island cultures often produced self-exotic images in the 1920s and 1930s, and in both insular and continental tropical locations, strategic uses of stereotypes were a commonplace for most of the 20th century. However, Lam's deliberate choice of a landscape (in the Cuban avant-garde context) would seem to stand in a contrapuntal relationship with sophisticated reflections on the place of insularity and some of its political-economic symbols. Indeed, one must wonder precisely what kind of relationship is established here between 'primitive' bodies and landscape, or between the biopolitical 'landscape' of Cuba and the Caribbean at the time of the making of *The Jungle* and the highly codified discourses of symbolized, tropicalized nature. And one must continue to insist on the fact that perverted or sacrilegious uses of landscape such as *The Jungle* express an ideological response to the exoticizing domestication of the insular Atlantic, as much as they entail an avant-garde structure built on manifestos, theoretical reflections, and the ultimate goal of achieving social, aesthetic, and political disruption.

Lam

Art historians, as well as literary and cultural critics, have furnished students of Lam's work, and of Cuban avant-garde culture more generally, with precise, if sometimes repetitive or uncritical, accounts of the biographical, cultural, and political contexts. How *The Jungle* may have been seen in 1943 is an important question, and a rapidly changing one, as our concerns with discourses and practices of insularity, diaspora, globalization, and a post-créolité vision of Atlantic studies continue to reshape insular and cosmopolitan avant-garde practices.² A new critical understanding of global and regional diasporas makes it possible to better perceive how transnational, cosmopolitan, or 'global' cultural artifacts function as metonymies for diasporic bodies, and as indexes of unstable borders (Fisher, 2008; Steiner, 2001). As Johannes Fabian reflects: 'It is no coincidence that an anthropology of the body and of sensual experience emerged together with, or at least alongside, modern material culture studies' (2007: 57–8). The traces of communities, political discourses, institutions, and visionary projects coincide and often interlock on the surfaces of such artifacts. Furthermore, the stories they tell often question the myth of the originality of autochthonous places and complicate both original locations and new spaces of display (Myers, 2001: 3–61). Cultural artifacts of this kind can be said to dislocate authoritative narratives on place and space—their migration records tell stories of alterity and transformation, of displacement and cultural reinscription. The story of *The Jungle* shows just how such reinscriptions are a constitutive aspect of Caribbean modernities, as well as a critical function of Atlantic globalizations (Piot, 1999).³ What I find particularly interesting about the object's migration is the archival suggestiveness of its displacements, so open to ideological appropriation and simplification, and the possibility of telling the story of the construction of inadequately modern times, places, and subjectivities, through the critical viewpoints that such itineraries provide. If by 'modern', that elusive signifier of Eurocentric historical consciousness, we understand a concept or a set of concepts that impose the West's political, economic, and cultural supremacy globally, then 'modern' and 'colonial' would seem to be a logical paradox, if not a contradiction. What is perhaps most intriguing in the itineraries of cultural artifacts is the recuperation of all those elements of experience that become de-valued and obscured in processes of cultural, economic, and epistemic reinscription. We can imagine such processes as the realm of 'epistemic opacity', in the sense described by Édouard Glissant:

If we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce. (1997: 190–1)

The opaque itineraries of ‘race’, as expressed in the cultural inscriptions of these objects, are not only the product, but also the content, of racialist differentiations—an anxiety of origins, identity, and ownership inflects discourses on territory, land, and landscape, as much as on bodies and racial difference (Glissant, 1997: 192–4). This is where a reflection on Lam, the national, cosmopolitan, and ethnic icon, becomes relevant to a renewed critical understanding of *The Jungle*. I want to turn now to those facts of Lam’s life often cited by art historians and critics, and to some of the ways through which they have sought to imply or suggest racial and cultural transparency. Wifredo Lam was born in the small Cuban town of Sagua la Grande in 1902, and died in Paris in 1982. His father was a Chinese tradesman by the name of Yam Lam, and his mother was a Cuban *mulata*, the descendant of African and Spanish ancestors (Fouchet, 1986: 7–11; Leiris, 1970). After studying art in Havana, Lam left Cuba in 1923 to continue his formal training in Madrid. He fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, and met Picasso in Paris in 1938. The two artists became close friends, and Lam soon felt drawn into the small circle of André Breton and the Paris Surrealists (Martínez, 1994: 157–8; Sims, 2002: 5–33). After the Franco-German Armistice of 25 June 1940, Lam, like many other intellectuals and foreigners, fled Paris and took refuge in Marseilles in August of that year. There he awaited, with the bulk of the Paris Surrealists, the arrival of papers and boat tickets to travel back to his native Cuba (Aching, 2002; Benitez, 1999). In Marseilles, Lam participated in the Surrealist activities of the mythical Air-Bel villa, and he famously illustrated Breton’s poem *Fata Morgana*. In a letter to a friend, Breton comments that:

I intend to publish a long poem here, ‘Fata Morgana,’ with illustrations by Wifredo Lam, a young painter born of a Chinese father and a Cuban (black) mother, who is, among all the artists I know, the one who in my opinion has the most to say. (1992: 1786)⁴

Thus, Breton formally endorsed Picasso’s perception of Lam as a respected, although novel, figure among his contemporaries. Lam eventually found a way out of France and Europe, and returned to Cuba in 1941 (Aching, 2002). In the summer of 1942, Alfred H. Barr (then director of the MoMA), and curator Edgar Kaufmann, met Lam in Havana and bought several pieces from him. Lam went on to participate in the important ‘First Papers of Surrealism’ exhibition in New York in October and November, 1942. He also showed his work in the prestigious Pierre Matisse Gallery, just a few days after the closing of the ‘First Papers’ show (Sims, 2002: 66–7). Interestingly, a *New York Times* critic labeled Lam ‘A Cuban Picasso’. Soon after, he started work on *The Jungle* and, legend has it, finished it ‘in roughly one month’, in the weeks extending from December 1942 to January 1943 (Benitez, 1999: 81). Somehow, the story of Picasso’s exposure to African

masks and other artifacts in the months leading to the ‘discovery’ of a new primitivism in his *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) is echoed here, through the trope of Lam’s reencounter with his *pays natal* in 1941, after the long, hard European years. After the MoMA bought the painting in 1943, it was mounted on canvas, and it has been in the museum’s main collection ever since, in close proximity to one of its much-noted ‘precursors’, Picasso’s own *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, which the MoMA acquired in 1937. The story is customarily told that Lam painted *The Jungle* at a point in his career when he was capable of connecting with the ‘authentic essence’ of Afro-Cuban culture. Indeed, there are abundant references here and in most of his paintings from this point on to the world of the *orishas*, the gods of the Yoruba cosmology or Afro-Cuban religion (Ortiz, 1950; Núñez Jiménez, 1982: 169–77). Most critics have underscored how this painting expresses Afro-Cuban experience through the medium of modern art—a ‘language’ fluid enough to translate cultural difference into universal expression.

Yet some critics have attempted to move beyond the predictable, often compulsory gesture to locate and explain *La jungla/The Jungle* almost exclusively in the context of Lam’s relationship to the Parisian avant-garde (David, 1991; Desnoes, 1963; Ortiz, 1950). This move expresses a development away from initial reactions to the painting, and to Lam’s work more generally, when it was first exhibited in New York in the 1940s. And yet *The Jungle* cannot be easily or uncritically removed from its art-historical, aesthetic, and spatial vicinity to Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*. I want to argue, however, that neither a contextualization of the painting as the product of Lam’s Parisian encounters, nor an interpretation of the work as an ethnic artifact embedded in modernist style and form provides a convincing narrative for the status of *The Jungle* in the history of the Atlantic avant-garde. Instead, *The Jungle* is both a product of Surrealist primitivism and a declaration of cultural specificity. To reduce the painting to one of these aspects would be misleading, and to claim that its cultural or aesthetic value resides more obviously in one of them would reveal precisely that ideology of colonialist hierarchy that Lam wished to expose in this and many of his other Surrealist, Afro-Caribbean works.

The MoMA acquired Picasso’s *Demoiselles* in 1937 thanks to a gift from Lillie P. Bliss, after it had been owned by the Paris couturier and collector Jacques Doucet, who in turn had purchased the painting from Picasso on André Breton’s advice in 1923 (Daix, 1995: 254; Dupuis-Labbé, 2007: 125–44). Clearly, the contexts of Picasso’s and Lam’s most important ‘primitive’ paintings are not contiguous, but both works came as the result of a personal revelation of extraordinarily important artistic consequences. Almost four decades separate the birth-dates of *Les Demoiselles* and *The Jungle*, and these are the central decades of modernist experimentation and debate.

Without going into much detail, we may recall that art-historical accounts have grounded the complex genesis of *Les Demoiselles* in Picasso's encounters with 'primitive' artifacts at the Musée du Trocadéro in Paris. Picasso spent over nine months in 1906–7 on this lyrical ('ugly,' according to numerous contemporary critics and friends) exploration of his memories of a brothel in Barcelona, the vibrant modernist city of his adolescence.⁵ Lam had started painting cubist portraits, self-portraits, and nudes in Paris in 1938, before he left for Marseilles in June 1940, then for his native Cuba in March 1941 (Laurin-Lam, 1996: 245–80). Among these, a series of 'têtes' (heads), *Máscara* (oil on canvas), *Femme sur fond bleu* (tempera on paper), and *Couple* (gouache on paper), all from 1940, are just a few of several paintings enunciating a transition to the style that he would develop in the months before he painted *The Jungle*.

While *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *The Jungle* are erotic scenes and primitivist fantasies, the historical, cultural, and biographical differences between the two paintings may prevent us from exploring the critical analogy further. But these paintings can be seen as 'revolving doors', if I may use a Surrealist image coined by André Breton for his Surrealist text, *Nadja*. Picasso's view of an interior eroticizes space and ironically displaces primitive objects (masks) from their 'natural' environment at the Musée du Trocadéro. *The Jungle* suggests what we may call a secluded exterior that returns to the modernist tradition of *beigneuses* (female bathers) and, once again, ironically blurs the traditional limits between inside and outside—for what is a jungle, but a thick, even impenetrable interior system? Indeed, *The Jungle* challenges us to see the exterior or the landscape that we imagine nature to be through the bodies of the four 'posing' figures. Picasso's revelation in 1906 was the world of 'primitive' art. Lam's, in 1938, was freedom provided by Surrealism's openness to the marvelous and the sacred, and by Picasso's long cubist explorations, one of whose points of departure was the *Demoiselles*, unquestionably 'one of the epic works of our time' (Steinberg, 2007: 169). These paintings stand in a dialectical confrontation whose parallel, yet obviously asymmetrical stories are curiously intertwined through the art-historical and literary histories of Surrealism and Cubism in avant-garde Paris and modernist New York. But there is another story, to complicate things further, and it is called Cuba.

While it is understandable that many critics have insisted on constructing and defending Lam as an important modern artist in his own right, it is also important to remain aware that the ideological logic at work in this construction cannot be completely divorced from a politics of iconographic imitation and affiliation. Let me explain. Lam has traditionally been presented as a sub-product of Picassian genius, albeit a displaced one, in order to guarantee a much-evoked structure defining metropolitan–colonial relations. This strategy tropicalizes Picasso through his protégé, while it also certifies the authenticity of the Latin American's cultural inscription in the temporality

of western modernity. This structure not only satisfies colonialist ideology, but also speaks to the Cuban elites' desire to belong in, and be perceived as in intimate contact with, the metropolitan present and cultural values. A devaluation of class, national, and even authorial cultural capital is the risk when a tropical, or colonial artist is 'discovered', since the meanings produced by tropical differentiation from the metropolis fit negatively in an economy of western territoriality. The discourse of Lam's Cubanness and Caribbeanness has been effective in its production of the prototypical Cuban artist, or of the artist as an intellectual witness to Cuba's identity as a young nation state in terms of 'the mulatto nation metaphor' (Moore, 1997: 1). Thus the construction of the artist's originality reinscribes, through the back door, as it were, western values of romantic subjectivity and national symbolism. Not surprisingly, interpretations of *The Jungle* have often rehearsed, rather than questioned, a discourse of artistic value and authorship where referents such as 'the people' fit comfortably as 'the nation', thus obscuring the artwork's capacity to exhibit tensions in the articulation of these categories. In the end, the repetition of the ideologically charged tropes of this 'mulatto nation metaphor' undermines the painting's polysemic effectiveness as a repository of genealogical traces and historical indexes that open up the experience of the work of art beyond the historical limits of Cuban nationalism and racial politics as they confronted Lam in 1942. It is useful at this point to remember that, in Glissant's thought, relation is neither a stable historical category nor one that can be subjected to the spatial or political contours of an island or an insular region. He speaks in *Poetics of Relation* of the 'unimaginable turbulence of Relation' and of an 'immense friction' (1997: 138). Glissant also warns against grounding the idea of relation on a certain rhetoric of identity:

The old idea of identity as root, whenever it proves hard to define or impossible to maintain, leads inexorably to the refuges of generalization provided by the universal as value. This is how the elite populations in southern countries have usually reacted when choosing to renounce their own *difficult definition*. A generalizing universal reassures them. (1997: 141–2; emphasis added)

Interestingly, here Glissant points at processes of nation-formation in the context of 'southern countries', having very much in mind not only Africa, but also Martinique, the Caribbean, and the Americas, and thus suggesting the postcolonial cartographies of Atlantic and inter-oceanic relations.⁶ Against the 'old idea of identity as root', he affirms that 'Identity as a system of relation, as an aptitude for "giving-on-and-with" [*donner-avec*], is, in contrast, a form of violence that challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates even more stringent demands for specificity.' Hence the important question he asks: 'Why the necessity to approach the specificities of communities as closely as possible? To cut down on the dangers of being bogged down, diluted, or "arrested" in undifferentiated conglomerations' (Glissant, 1997: 142).

Relation, then, accounts for the ‘immense friction’ expressed in opacities, and questions the reassuring universals presumed in transparencies. From this perspective, art criticism’s hermeneutical efforts to center or locate *The Jungle* in a Caribbean locus translate today as an anxious discouragement from complicating the artwork’s ‘difficult definition’, or confronting its relational, that is, Atlantic, epistemic opacity (Glissant, 1997: 189–94). Yet, epistemic opacity, however iconoclastic in the context of the critical tradition, is the most interesting aspect of *The Jungle*’s story, as well as being a facet that permits an Atlantic understanding of its critical discourses.

While Lam’s work was initially categorized as a function of primitivist avant-gardism, it was Lam himself, portrayed as the exotic Caribbean artist—not just a ‘Cuban Picasso’—who allowed his first admirers and reviewers to *understand* his difference. And like other Caribbean intellectuals—Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, Nicolás Guillén, and Alejo Carpentier—are contemporary examples—Lam performed his part to an extent. In this discourse, ‘the myth of primitivism’ is deployed through the fantasy of savages ‘hitting back’ (Coutts-Smith, 1991; Lips, 1966). But ‘hitting back’ became possible from the 1920s on as an aspect of what we may call the trope of the modern-primitive in Europe, or of ‘primitives within’ in Colin Rhodes’s words (1994: 23–67; Hiller, 1991). I am referring to the conceit of primitivist ‘innocence’ and ‘purity’, not as it existed in the French 18th century, in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other thinkers, but as it appears in paintings and sculptures by enormously influential European artists in the second half of the 19th century. Among them Paul Gauguin, who traveled to the French Caribbean, Tahiti, and the Marquesas Islands in search of primitive paradises; or Henri Rousseau, known as the Douanier Rousseau, whose ‘naive’ paintings evoke the unspoiled natural realms of a mythical Eden. In the early 20th century, avant-gardists like Picasso and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, among many others, painted their own primitive visions, those that are now considered central to our understanding of modern art movements, from Cubism and Expressionism to Surrealism.

The trope of the modern-primitive helped configure the metropolitan avant-gardes as transgressive, and so there was a space here for a cosmopolitan discourse of colonial primitivism. Such a displaced vision of Lam was grounded on uses of Afro-Cuban religion, or *santería*, and was supported by French and Cuban ethnographers, as well as by critics, from early on (Clifford, 1988). In this discourse, Lam’s early training in Cuba and his long years in Spain are often minimized in order to highlight a teleology deploying a colonial narrative where the local and peripheral unknown migrates and reaches international recognition in metropolitan-sanctioned centers through ethnic inscriptions of individual genius. I want to suggest that this narrative can be

further complicated through a more careful analysis of the migration story, and through a more critical stand on the necessity of the individual genius in the context of modern cultural forms, where the performance of self-exoticism takes central stage. The fact remains that, despite his exclusion from the official art scene in Havana in the early 1940s, Lam was soon perceived as the quintessential Cuban artist. The context of his relationships in Havana has helped ground and qualify historically and biographically a construction of Lam as a perfect paradigm—almost a perfected standard—of transculturation and Antillean cosmopolitanism.⁷ In this regard, Lam figures as a Hispanic Caribbean ex-ample of not only *négritude* and *métissage*, but also *créolité*. His search for reality in painting supports this interpretive strategy, borrowing from a certain version of *négritude*, inspired by the work of Césaire and Senghor, and by a sustained dialogue with the former and with the vision of *Tropiques*, but it also complicates it by grafting it onto Latin Americanist and modernist discourses on race.

These two discourses—Lam the cosmopolitan genius, and Lam the Afro-Cuban symbol—were often mobilized by state nationalism in post-1959 Cuba, when internationally renowned intellectuals were chosen to represent Cuba and Cuban cosmopolitanism in the realm of non-aligned cultural politics. Lam, once again, fitted the figure of both the national intellectual and the international leftist intellectual intervening in Cold War cultural politics. Lam's success as a member of the international avant-garde contributed to Cuba's seemingly endless repositories of cultural capital as a leader in anti-imperialist Third-World politics. And although Lam's position was interstitial in more than one sense, it was also emblematic of much so-called 'Third World', Caribbean, and postcolonial cultural production. Indeed, Lam's later work can easily be made to illustrate some of the critical categories and theoretical concerns expressed by postcolonial critics, cultural anthropologists, and art historians: hybridity, mimicry, interstitiality, and cosmopolitanism. There is no paradox, then, in the recognition of *The Jungle* as a 'modern' artifact, but its insular, culturally specific opacity remains fraught with neo-colonial constructions of local and regional exoticisms. This is so because of the object's imperfect modernity, its simultaneous evocations of a local present, cosmopolitan coevalness, and a mythical past where 'the modern' can mirror itself and measure its material and historical identity as modern. Because of its lopsided relationship with 'modern time', *The Jungle* can be readily absorbed, or consumed, in art-historical paradigms, as a Caribbean artifact (Sheller, 2003). Because of its historical suggestiveness and circuitous dealings with Paris, Havana, and New York cultural politics, it is an Atlantic object—it embodies an Atlantic genealogy that complicates the contours of the modern/primitive simplification, it is a *nessological* statement.⁸

Race

Avant-garde practices have been responding to the histories of imperialism and territorial ideology since the late 19th century. They express the cultural and political imaginaries of the West since Gauguin's exoticist paintings, sculptures, and texts, and since that canonical turning point in modern art, Picasso's 1907 *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Within these scenarios, identities and subjectivities, however fluid or strategic, still need to be constructed, rehearsed, and performed at the demand of different interlocutors and places. This is symptomatically the case for the art market, since what art does, it does, to a large extent, under the surveillance and constraints of market-ridden globalization, and one of globalization's genealogies is 19th-century imperialism (Seymour, 1998). Foucault's archival intuition might have been accurate after all. When considered from a Caribbean or tropical Atlantic viewpoint, the 20th century is, once again, the century of discontinuous space and interconnected loci.

In the figure of Wifredo Lam, as I have tried to show, race has been evoked and produced as the necessary 'core identity' signaling the deviancy of the insular avant-gardist, never entirely a product of the metropolitan avant-garde, and never fully at home in the tropical milieu. It appears obvious that the structure underlying this production of race is colonial because of its primitivist and exoticist underpinnings. Yet, for many 'exotic' modern artists, this predicament also meant a liberation from hegemonic constructions of race and other identities that obtained at home in insular locations. While colonial subjects may speak within/without race, they may not escape race as the imposed locus of enunciation. Escaping racial politics in 1940s Cuba had its consequences, as we have seen through the context in which Lam rehearsed his artistic return and experienced a kind of exilic homecoming in Havana in 1941. The paradoxes of metropolitan recognition and insular misrecognition express a dialectic that reveals underlying colonial relations. For the cultures and places that modern-primitive artifacts signal or represent, processes of reinscription have meant inadequate representation, often leaving the realms of the political, the social, the economic, and the stereotypical, intact. The *negrito* or little Cuban black, the *mulata*, and idyllic, ahistorical tropical landscapes, still figure centrally in representations of 'authentic' Cubanness and Caribbeaness, while modern, cosmopolitan signifying processes may successfully suggest a de-colonizing of the asymmetrical local/global imaginary. Some of the most daring gestures in the work of Lam suggest that we can ground processes of modern circulations of Atlantic imaginaries in a critical, ethical, and political praxis where aesthetics infuses and refigures our thinking about the Caribbean as a global 'space'.

Lam's appropriation of a primitivist pictorial grammar reclaims the diverse location of Afro-Cuban religion, not as a field of symbols of the Cuban nation, but as a thick 'jungle' of icons of exclusion and suffering. The defiant sexual suggestiveness of what we may call the pose in *The Jungle* is inextricably connected with an ambit of spirituality and transcendence. There is here and in many other paintings an assertion of confidence in the sacred character of the Yoruba mythology kept and developed by generations of believers, and linking successive and overlapping communities of slaves. The morphing of bodies, the natural environment, and ritual symbols interrupts and challenges a universalist belief in the solidity of western systems of categorization and hierarchy where the human and the sacred, the civilized and the natural, the instrumental and the sublime are forced into strict fantasies of transparency and rational intelligibility. And while it might seem naive to propose such a thing today, this is the critical challenge brought to us by certain forms of Caribbean art. We may want to call it a 'primitive' cultural form of *altermondialisation*, or a response, in the form of cultural evidence, to those who think that there are no alternatives to the imposed temporalities of neo-liberal democracy and its ideological necessities: Third-World dependency, social 'chaos', and cultural 'deviancy'. Anna Tsing described this process eloquently at the turn of the 20th century as 'the specter of neoliberal conquest—singular, universal, global' (Tsing, 2001: 188). My analysis here is grounded in an awareness that such polarities, although much critiqued in Caribbean and postcolonial studies, still form the persistent grid through which variously reinscribed forms of cultural, epistemic, and, in one word, colonial, hierarchy function across Atlantic loci.

Lam's own black identity, expressed in interviews and political gestures, inscribed his work after the Second World War in a diverse map of 'Third World' or non-aligned countries, where Cuba sought and, indeed, achieved leadership in the midst of Cold War politics. As Jean Franco has eloquently put it, 'The Third World is the imagined community of the Cold War period, when newly decolonized nations in Asia and Africa sought alternative forms of national development to those of the polarized great powers' (2002: 103–4). But in 1942, when *The Jungle* was still enmeshed in the convulsive present of world war politics, race in Cuba was a different experience than race in pre-Occupation Paris. Lam's return to the native island threw him and his second wife into the politics of national racism in a country where the majority was not white. It was clear that Lam no longer wanted to, and no longer could, work as an exotic artist in a cosmopolitan space. Instead, he pitted his work against the work of those local avant-gardists who viewed him as an inauthentic trespasser, an intruder in his own country. Lam would later say that he experienced their ostracism as racist rejection, and as a violent reaction to his recognition as a cosmopolitan artist—a title not everyone,

and certainly not everyone in Cuba, could claim.⁹ His friendship with a well-connected ethnographer, Lydia Cabrera, as well as the support he received from her and from Cuba's foremost anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, are telling. His interactions with communities of both Cuban and Caribbean intellectuals helped him imagine himself as a black Caribbean artist, and as a modern, cosmopolitan artist—a Cuban artist, but not simply, and not exclusively in a nationalist sense. His contributions to these communities, in turn, provided Caribbean intellectuals with a non-European visual imaginary that continues to dialogue and to stand in tension with metropolitan images. Race, as we see it expressed in *The Jungle*, appears in the articulation of a visual language that is not only national, insular, or ethnic. The questioning, fragmented character of the painting posits race as the unavoidable space of both historical and present diasporic suffering. But it also moves forward and beyond this threshold, as if propelled by an endless desire to reclaim the multiple appearances of the body.

Atlantic Jungles

I spoke earlier in this essay about *The Jungle* as a 'landscape'. As my reflections on contexts and places grow more explicit, I want to say now that in reading a landscape here, I have become trapped in the irony of this configuration of the painting as tropical 'space'. All along, I have tried to explain how *The Jungle* ironically unmasks the violence implicit in supposedly innocent tropicalizations of the island as 'landscape'. I find the ambivalence, if not the impossibility, of reading 'a landscape' (or the lack thereof) in *The Jungle* intriguing, not because of how much it reveals of a well-charted desire for domesticated nature, but because of how it subtly obscures other contexts. As I have been arguing, those other contexts are the opposite or necessary counterpoints of the 'space' that critics have attempted to explain, and explain away, in their readings of *The Jungle*. These other spaces help produce meaning when we situate *The Jungle* within its historical and material contexts. *The Jungle*, then, read from these other places, reappears as a visual text where cartographies of metropolitan chaos (precisely what the 'modern-primitives' were trying to escape) and tropical dystopia are seductively woven as interrogations thrown back at viewers. For this dreamlike vision of the natural and the human, the human and the monstrous, remains a declaration of unintelligibility, of opacity, not the rationality and transparency offered by tropical landscapes and ethnographic accounts. The various, fragmented locations of place within the painting offer no less suggestive challenges to the conceptual lexicons of avant-garde, Caribbean, and globalization criticism. But where does *The Jungle* take place? There are no toponymic traces here, no misleading Avignon, for example, nor direct references to Cuba. This is not a statement

on the *pays natal*, but a sort of fixed, common-sense signifier that appealed to a contemporary understanding of the word's sensuous, connotative, and denotative radii.

In his choice of the word 'jungle', Lam sought perhaps to universalize, or to tropicalize his painting. Clearly, the title appealed to a primitivist sensibility, it performed an indexical gesture hinting simultaneously at inter-oceanic connectedness and rupture. But regardless of Lam's taste or distaste for imperial fantasies, his choice made sense for the global, imperialist imaginary. For the word *jungle* is derived from the Sanskrit *jangala* (dry, desert) and subsequently the Hindi *jangal*, 'an area of wasteland'. It was through its usage in Anglo-Indian that *jangala-jangal* became resemanticized as *jungle*: 'an area of thick tangled trees', the quintessentially tropical landscape in much of the colonial imagination. *Jungla*, an Anglicism in Spanish, entered a lexical field where *selva*, *bosque*, *monte* and other words signified related spaces, yet *jungla* specifically connotes exotic, non-western referents, as one can see in definitions of the word in Spanish dictionaries. Read locally, a Cuban *jungla* has been teased out through its semantic proximity with national landscapes charged with ethnosymbolic meanings: *monte*, *manigua*.¹⁰ But, as Edward J. Sullivan points out, 'the jungles painted by Lam are essentially fictions' (2007: 184; see also Ortiz, 1982: 19–20). I would argue that 'the jungle' signals a less specific, pan-colonial, and even precolonial space, yet one that is historically situated and contains both local and transcontinental resonances. Place, or the singularities of the local, is only hinted at here through the context of production and relocation, but the title serves the purpose of making the work of art 'translatable' for cosmopolitan and urban publics in Manhattan. For such audiences, what would *The Jungle* mean? More importantly, what are the meanings that remain obscured by the vague, tropical reference? One suspects a rather distant echo of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* and *Second Jungle Book* (1894–5), or of Upton Sinclair's 1906 best-seller *The Jungle*. But a more sinister specter haunts visions of the jungle in 1943, barely concealing its entanglements in discourses of colonial hygienics, contagion, and civilizing redemption.

The long-forgotten 'jungles' (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines) annexed in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898 had been abundantly reported and photographed (Díaz Quiñones, 2000a, 2000b; Gabara, 2006). The French empire had exhibited its own 'savages' in the colonial exhibition of 1931, and such civilizing monuments as the Musée des Colonies, or Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) further explained tropical spaces for the metropolitan — and avant-gardist — explorer (Morton, 2000). In André Breton and André Masson's 'Le dialogue créole', included in *Martinique, charmeuse de serpents* (1948), the island is also explored, its interior 'jungle' (*forêt, sous-bois*) lyrically located within Surrealism's oneiric cartographies (Breton, 1973).

From the end of 1941, the jungle has new meanings, as the United States wages war against the Japanese Empire in the Pacific. Close encounters with jungle perils, nightmare scenarios, and tropicalized subjects, also bring postcolonial readings of *Heart of Darkness* closer to the foreground, ‘The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?’ (Conrad, 2006: 35). Indeed, in the context of a somewhat celebratory atmosphere among newly relocated avant-gardists, *The Jungle* not only conjured visions of primitive places, of indistinct, tropical savagery, but it also satisfied Surrealist desires for enigmatic, eroticized spaces of tropical depth.

The Future of Lost Origins

The Jungle clearly embodies one of those cases in modern art where form reproduces a fantasy of content, and the specificities of cultural referents are obscured by an insatiable demand for modern-primitive forms (Price, 1989). We know that primitivism made it possible for a myriad of tropical places, and therefore for Cuba, to be formally inscribed in modern spaces (both discursively and physically) through displacement. These signifiers became avant-garde forms precisely when a kind of cosmopolitan, anti-industrial modernism expressed some of the contradictions that had been shaping and dividing discourses about life inside/outside the modern city and modern territoriality. Thus the local, and often the colonial-local, was redefined as interesting to the moderns, precisely because it presented them with ammunition against the imposed modernity of late 19th century imperialism, through the bestowal of new value in metropolitan contexts. What the contemporary consumer, that is, us, desires to experience—full access to nature in a tropical location, ready-made pleasure (Sheller, 2003)—is hard to see. The remnants of place are also metaphors of the present and the future, not so much the distant echoes of ahistorical, primeval man. How the islands are being consumed as places, I would add, was also a preoccupation for the artist, and, to a large extent, the object of avant-gardist perplexity. These metaphors exhibit, ironically, the *political* condition of insularity, perceived in Caribbean locales as not solely interstitial or ectopic, but as inescapably global. Islands, here, although they are clearly the subjects of enlightened and industrial power-knowledge, are only interstitial in that they show liminally and ironically—for there is nothing *of real value* to show, but the desired knowledge decided and imposed by the subjects who drew the maps, classified the species, investigated crop patterns, drew the blueprints for massive tourist development and eventually managed environmental catastrophe. Still today, *The Jungle* faces these scenarios and opposes its opaque language of vegetal and bodily contours to the elision of local and transnational insular subjects depicted in the imaginary places and desirable landscapes of the tropicalized Caribbean.

In performing a colonial subjectivity, one has perforce to perform identity. Sylvia Molloy has made a provocative critique of the ways in which ‘magic realism’ has become the blanket identity imposed on most Latin American and ‘World’ literatures (Molloy, 2005). In performing your identity, you are often expected to perform more than one; thus, Cubans must self-represent so that they can be read as Cubans, Caribbeans, Latin Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, and so on, in an endless dance of self-exotic generosity. Here, Molloy’s incisive critique echoes Glissant’s responses to western demands for transparency and, I would add, identifiable location: ‘As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam’ (1997: 192). The more particular these self-representations become, the more opaque they are, and thus less valued in mass-cultural markets. Be too specific, too local, or too cultured, and you risk falling off the pantheon of postcolonial readings or, worse, you go down in the rankings of appropriate exemplars of exotic market-products. There is always a political economy at work here, always a geopolitics pushing against you, bordering and splitting you in violent and often grotesque ways. However, Lam and other Caribbean artists have not sought a complacent, self-centered reiteration of coherent *representation*, but have demanded negotiations with the politics of transnational form that made room for a renewed critique of national, regional, ethnic, class, and gender categories. Nor were these simply imitative appropriations of ‘foreign’ forms, or of empty and sterile formalism (Hernández Adrián, 2007).

One of the most destructive results of unquestioningly accepting a metropolitan, West-centered, view of eccentric modernities is that the flux of cultural artifacts and forms becomes elided in the course of asserting this very misconception of the process of incorporation in the transparency of globality. How *The Jungle* continues to signify today remains inextricably linked to the stories of its displacements and to its complex inscription in various aesthetic, ideological, and geopolitical contexts; from Lam’s encounter with Picasso and Breton in Paris, to his ‘homecoming’ and primitivist approaches to the sacred world of the *orishas*, through his contacts with Alfred H. Barr and Edgar Kaufmann in Havana in the summer of 1942, and his subsequent interventions in the New York art scene. *The Jungle* remains, perhaps, a quintessentially Caribbean painting in that it resists conflation with Eurocentric versions of Atlantic territoriality and with long-standing fantasies of a commodified, intelligible Caribbean space. Neither Lam nor his interpreters could fully account for the figural depths of *jangala*’s migrations through the discursive and visual imaginaries of modern imperialisms. Yet Lam, the once living artist, is perhaps the most eloquent limit to *The Jungle*’s adriftness, or the index deferring the painting’s unintelligibility towards the chosen sites of the marvelous. What remains at issue is not so much the status of the artist as a

national symbol, but the location of local and transnational voices and bodies in the world of globalized inequalities. The spaces of cultural representation and political dissidence intersect and often operate back to back, but the critical questions that these changing maps pose are the real questions, violent and elusive as *The Jungle*, and never transparent or easily located.

NOTES

1. I refer here to 'faces', although most critics have preferred 'masks' in their efforts to locate *The Jungle* alongside Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, and to ground the painting in the genealogies of avant-gardist primitivism.
2. For a survey of international newspaper, journal, and catalogue reviews of *The Jungle* and of Lam's work generally, see Núñez Jiménez (1982: 248–59), and Sims (2002: 261–4).
3. I choose to refer to globalizations, in the plural, to engage Michel-Rolph Trouillot's attentiveness to 'North Atlantic Fictions' (2003: 29–46), as well as his recognition of the long historical genealogies of Atlantic modernities: 'The world became global in the sixteenth century' (2003: 29). Charles Piot's 1999 study on the Kabre culture of northern Togo is another engaging example of the plurality of globalizing processes and of Atlantic worlds.
4. Letter to Léon Pierre-Quint, quoted by Étienne-Alain Hubert, in Breton (1992: 1786).

Je me propose de publier ici un long poème: 'Fata Morgana' avec des illustrations de Wifredo Lam, un jeune peintre né de père chinois et de mère cubaine (noire) qui est, de tous les artistes que je connais, celui qui me paraît actuellement avoir le plus à dire. ...

On 24 March 1941, Lam traveled back to the Caribbean in the same small cargo boat as André and Jacqueline Breton, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Victor Serge. This trip has been famously recounted in Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Surprisingly, there is no mention of Lam in Lévi-Strauss's account. In Fort-de-France, the first Antillean port they reached, Lam met Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. At last in Havana, he befriended Lydia Cabrera, an ethnographer of Afro-Cuban culture. Cabrera translated Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* into Spanish, and Lam made the illustrations for the poem, which came out in Spanish in 1943. Pierre Loeb, his old Paris *marchand*, had also moved to Cuba (see Hertzberg, 2001).

5. See e.g. Leo Steinberg's famous essay, 'The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large' (2007: 125–234). See also Dupuis-Labbé, 2007: 35–65; Daix, 1995: 246–55. Jean Clair comments on the shocking effect that *Les Demaiselles* had on its first viewers by citing Apollinaire's silence, Gertrude Stein's use of the word 'cataclysm', and Leo Stein's indignation, a 'horrible mess' (Clair, 1988: 45).
6. For a provocative reflection on the uses of 'national images' in the Mexican case, see Tenorio Trillo, 2003.

7. Thus, for instance, Lázara Menéndez's evocation of *La jungla* in light of Fernando Ortiz's notion of transculturation:

Entre 1941 y 1943 Lam hace nacer la obra que ha sido considerada el paradigma de su actividad creadora: *La jungla*. Manigua misteriosa, insumisa y altiva como el mismo proceso de transculturación. (Between 1941 and 1943 Lam brings to life the work that has been considered the paradigm of his creative activity: *The Jungle*. A quagmire as mysterious, unsubmitive, and haughty as the very process of transculturation.) (2002: 15)

8. I have suggested the expression 'Atlantic *nessologies*' as a critical paradigm for understanding the many genealogies and archives linking and differentiating Atlantic archipelagos beyond the simplified dialectics of colony and metropolis, colonizer and colonized, inside/outside of western epistemology. What the story of *The Jungle* tells us is not idyllic, but a revealing tale involving various configurations of race, space, and place (Hernández Adrián, 2006).
9. 'De mí decían, en tono discriminativo, que era un pintor negro. Ellos reflejaban su impotencia ante la acción que yo había emprendido' (They used to say of me in a discriminatory tone that I was a black painter. They reflected their impotence in the face of the action I had undertaken.) (Núñez Jiménez, 1982: 172)
10. The first that comes to mind is *el monte*, or sacred woodland described by Lydia Cabrera in her remarkable *El monte*, a long ethnographic study of Afro-Cuban religion and culture, that appeared in Havana in 1954. As Edna M. Rodríguez-Mangual has pointed out:

'[i]t is hard to give a definite translation of the title of this enormous ethnographic contribution to an understanding of Afro-Cuban religions and culture. *Monte* can be translated as "mountain," but also as "wilderness," "jungle," or "woods"; in the context of the Afro-Cuban religion it is a sacred or magical place where the divine is found' (2004: 12).

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