Marvelous Returns: Readings of Wifredo Lam by Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier and Aimé Césaire

Retornos maravillosos. Lecturas de Wifredo Lam en Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier y Aimé Césaire

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Abstract:
Cuban painter Wifredo Lam (1909-1982) returned to the Caribbean in 1941 after spending eighteen years in Spain and France. In the following four years his painting practice transformed, generating the iconic imagery that he would become known for inventing. His return from Europe figures prominently in essays that Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier, and Aimé Césaire wrote about him soon after his 1943 completion of La jungla, his most famous painting. These Caribbean writers had close relationships of friendship and collaboration with Lam, and while their essays have become important sources for Lam criticism, they rarely receive critical analysis. In my analysis, I am interested in how they illuminate the role of return in shaping the dichotomy that Alejo Carpentier went on to establish between surrealism and the Americas-located aesthetic he dubbed “lo real maravilloso.” For Carpentier, the aesthetic of the marvelous that the surrealists sought to render emanated readily from social reality in the Americas.
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I understand this idea to be predicated upon his own return from Europe, and I argue that his earlier work on Lam, alongside Cabrera’s and Césaire’s, offers coordinates for a theory of return, from Europe and surrealism, through which to understand the real-marvelous aesthetic in Lam.

Keywords:
Lo real maravilloso, surrealism, Wifredo Lam, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Aimé Césaire.

Resumen:
El pintor cubano Wifredo Lam (1909-1982) regresó al Caribe en 1941 luego de pasar dieciocho años en España y Francia. Durante los siguientes cuatro años su práctica pictórica se transformó; en ese período se gestó el imaginario distintivo por cuya invención se le conoce. Su retorno de Europa es un tema importante en un grupo de ensayos sobre la obra de Lam escritos por Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier y Aimé Césaire poco después de terminada La jungla (1943), su pintura más conocida. Estos escritores caribeños mantuvieron lazos estrechos de amistad y colaboración con Lam, y si bien sus ensayos son ya fuentes importantes para el estudio crítico de la obra de Lam, rara vez han sido ellos mismo objeto de análisis crítico. En mi análisis me interesa examinar cómo estos ensayos elucidan el papel del retorno en el proceso de articulación de la dicotomía que Alejo Carpentier estableció posteriormente entre el surrealismo y la estética americana de “lo real maravilloso”, según la designación del cubano. Para Carpentier, la estética de lo maravilloso que los surrealistas se esforzaban por producir manaba espontáneamente en la realidad social americana. A mi entender, esta idea tiene como premisa el retorno de Europa del propio Carpentier, y sostengo que en su trabajo anterior sobre Lam, junto con los de Cabrera y Césaire, encontramos coordenadas para una teoría del retorno, de Europa y del surrealismo, que nos permite entender la estética de lo real maravilloso en Lam.

Palabras clave:
Lo real maravilloso, Wifredo Lam, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Aimé Césaire.

Resumo:
O pintor cubano Wifredo Lam (1909-1982) voltou ao Caribe em 1941, depois de passar dezoito anos na Espanha e na França. Nos quatro anos seguintes, sua prática pictórica transformou-se; foi durante esse período que foram criadas as imagens distintivas pelas quais ele é conhecido. Seu retorno da Europa é um tema importante em um grupo de ensaios sobre a obra de Lam, escritos por Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier e Aimé Césaire logo após a conclusão de La jungla (1943), sua pintura mais conhecida. Esses escritores caribenhos mantiveram laços estreitos de amizade e colaboração com Lam e, embora seus ensaios já sejam fontes importantes para o estudo crítico da obra de Lam, raramente foram objeto de análise crítica. Em minha análise, estou interessado em examinar como esses ensaios elucidam o papel do retorno no processo de articulação da dicotomia que Alejo Carpentier estabeleceu mais tarde entre o surrealismo e a estética americana do “real maravilhoso”, como o cubano a chamou. Para Carpentier, a estética do maravilhoso que os surrealistas se esforçavam para produzir fluíu espontaneamente da realidade social americana. Em minha opinião, essa ideia tem como premissa o próprio retorno de Carpentier da Europa, e defendo que, em seu trabalho anterior sobre Lam, juntamente com os de Cabrera e Césaire, encontramos coordenadas para uma teoria do retorno, da Europa e do surrealismo, que nos permite entender a estética do real maravilhoso de Lam.

Palavras-chave:
O real maravilhoso, Wifredo Lam, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Aimé Césaire.
It is impossible to return to a precolonial time or place.\(^1\) Therefore, the figure of return in anticolonial discourse has been critiqued to the point of eroding its intellectual currency.\(^2\) But multiple returns exist in the anticolonial record, and they signal other routes beyond the impossible return to a time or place before colonialism. In the case of Wifredo Lam (1909-1982), a Cuban painter of African, Chinese, and Spanish descent, his voyage of return home to Cuba significantly impacted his painting. His style transformed upon his homecoming as he generated the iconic imagery that he would become known for inventing. As the Cuban writer and ethnographer Lydia Cabrera explains, when she met Lam very soon after his return to Cuba in 1941 he was still painting in the manner of Picasso (“pintaba Picassos”).\(^3\) By 1945, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased his most famous painting, *La jungla*, he had already established a unique and recognizable approach to painting including hybrid forms that combined humans with plants and animals as well as symbolic references drawn from Afro-diasporic religious imagery. His return from Europe figures prominently in essays that Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier, and Aimé Césaire wrote about him soon after he completed that work in 1943. These Caribbean writers had close relationships of friendship and collaboration with Lam; while their essays have become important sources for Lam criticism, they rarely receive critical analysis. In my reading of their texts I am interested in how they illuminate the role of return in shaping the dichotomy that Carpentier went on to establish between surrealism and the Americas-located aesthetic that he dubbed “lo real maravilloso” in his influential 1948 essay “Lo real maravilloso de América.”\(^4\)

For Carpentier, the aesthetic of the marvelous that the surrealists sought to render through various experimental procedures emanated readily from social reality in the Americas. I understand this idea to be predicated upon his own return from Europe, and I argue that his earlier work on Lam, alongside Cabrera’s and Césaire’s, offers coordinates for a theory of return—from Europe and from surrealism—through which to understand the real-marvelous aesthetic in Lam.

Shows of Lam’s work primarily categorize him as surrealist. But what does it mean for Lam to be surrealist? How does a Cuban painter’s surrealism register in the international circulation of ideas? How does his work differ from French surrealism? Before returning to Cuba, Lam had been a part of the surrealist circle in Paris, and he remained connected to the group’s leading figure, André Breton, afterwards.\(^5\) However, in a 1980 interview with Gerardo Mosquera, he explained that he did not consider himself a surrealist painter, although he acknowledged the movement’s impact on his work: “Surrealism gave me an opening, but I haven’t painted in a surrealist manner. Rather I keep providing a solution to surrealism.”\(^6\) Surrealism, he contends, posed a problem that he solved.

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1. Thanks to Paloma Duong for feedback on this essay; to the SDO Lam and to Eskil Lam and Dorotea Dolega-Ritter for great generosity; to the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami and their generous librarians, especially Martin Tsang; to the Morgan Library and Museum and staff; and to Jacqueline Frost, Paget Henry, Alex Gil, Aaron Kamugisha, Fredo Rivera, and Kora Véron for formative conversations.


4. The essay first appeared in the Venezuelan newspaper *El Nacional*; it would re-emerge as the untitled prologue to the 1949 first edition of *El reino de este mundo*, published in Mexico.

5. Breton connected Lam to the New York-based Pierre Matisse Gallery, which started to represent Lam in 1942. Breton also appears to have taken a percentage of Lam’s sales during the 1940s (Pierre Matisse Gallery Archives).

Lam’s relationship to Surrealism in the international circulation of ideas should be understood as one of affiliation rather than filiation, or of connection rather than derivation.7 Surrealism lived beyond its definition as a specific principle in Breton’s first surrealist manifesto (1924): the rendering of sur-reality following the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis to access the way the conscious and unconscious aspects of life together make up what is real; the dream world (latent) and the material world (manifest) brought together by the method of “automatic” writing or painting with and through the unconscious.8 Surrealism also meant practices and paradigms at odds with the binary logics encoded into (Western) modernity. Consider, for example, the great impact of African, Asian, and Indigenous art and culture in the European avant-garde, including surrealism.9 Georges Bataille would sum up these influences as follows: “the quest for primitive culture represents the principal, most decisive and vital, aspect of the meaning of surrealism, if not its precise definition.”10 Although Bataille and the group associated with the journal Documents (which he edited) became dissidents of Bretonian surrealism by 1930, the position bears weight in relation to Breton and the broadest reach of surrealism as a form of thought and practice.11 The surrealist impulse to attain so-called primitive culture becomes of primary import to its Caribbean/Latin American influence. Bataille employs an ambivalent idea of ‘primitive culture’ in which ‘primitive’ indicates a (conceding) temporal anteriority to (European) modernity and simultaneously a future-oriented ideal for avant-garde artists who sought to break down the binary rigidities of modern European culture.12 If the surrealist problem was how to break down the false binaries of (European) modernity, Lam’s paintings solve that problem by dialoguing with the non-binary, or non-dualist, ways of understanding the world that he knew growing up and that he continued to learn about alongside Cabrera and Carpentier after his return to Cuba. In the same Mosquera interview, Lam further explains that santería (Yoruba, lucumi, regla de ocha, regla de ifá), which significantly influenced his poetic paintings, “es surrealismo puro.”13 The non-dualism between waking and dream life evoked by Breton’s notion of the surreal already existed in those African and Afro-diasporic religious practices that posit a non-dualism between the material and the spiritual world. Lam thus calls for a (re)ordering of intellectual history for those of us who have been educated to position European creation at the center and understand it as flowing outwards into its empires rather than imagine it receiving an undertow of flows through the routes of empire. As both Bataille and Lam suggest, empire’s outposts catalyzed the surrealist impulse as a rupture with the dualism encoded into Western theories of knowledge. African and Afro-diasporic sources of non-dualism contributed more to this paradigm shift than the textual record indicates. When
Lam returned to the Caribbean from Europe in 1941, he returned to these sources and renovated his work through them.

In their short essays about Lam from 1944 and 1945, Cabrera, Carpentier, and Césaire teach us how to see Lam’s paintings and how to read their own work in relation to his. Their texts situate Lam in different ways: nationally, regionally, and universally, performing the pressure to locate his work that his marginal position as a Caribbean/Latin American painter seemed to demand. And they situate Lam and themselves as artists of return. Like Lam, these three authors spent a formative period in Europe, and they all lived in Paris before returning home to the Caribbean. Upon returning, each sought a greater connection to African thought and practice as it persisted in the Caribbean. Their essays recount Lam’s return from Europe and explain why his painting should be considered beyond the framework of European surrealism. Surrealism and the real-marvelous are both traveling art forms; the difference is that the surrealists traveled away from Europe, actually and symbolically, whereas Lam and his Antillean writer-critics traveled to Europe and back, encoding the consciousness of return into their work.

**Becoming Lam**

Wifredo Óscar de la Concepción Lam y Castilla grew up in the small town of Sagua la Grande, Cuba, having been born to a Chinese father who had migrated to Cuba by way of San Francisco and Mexico, and a Cuban mother of African and Spanish descent. At least one of his mother’s parents was born in Africa before being enslaved and forcibly sent to Cuba. Given how late the slave trade to Cuba ended (1867) and how late slavery itself was abolished there (1886), she, along with many other African-born Cubans, lived in brief the entire drama of slavery from start to end.

Lam grew up close to where African spiritual practices were celebrated by African-born Cubans and their descendants, and doctors in his hometown simultaneously employed Western medical practices and ancestral African medicinal practices. As a child, Lam’s spiritual godmother, Mantonica Wilson, guided him into the spirit world of Yoruba; she had in fact chosen Lam as her heir, but he had other plans. He studied painting in Havana, receiving academic training focused on nineteenth-century techniques at the Escuela Profesional de Pintura y Escultura de San Alejandro, and he showed early work for the first time there at the Salón de Bellas Artes de la Habana in 1923. That same year he rerouted his education by a voyage out to Madrid. In Spain his studies consisted of seeing art in museums and exhibitions. In Madrid he attended his first exhibit of Picasso’s works and saw African masks and sculpture for the first time. He also befriended...
Alejo Carpentier there, and they would continue their friendship later in both Paris and Havana. Lam exhibited his painting in the Círculo Artístico de León in 1932, the same year he declared his commitment to fighting in the Spanish Civil War for the Republic. According to Fouchet, by this time Lam had consolidated a revolutionary historical materialism in his worldview, which informed his decision to take up arms until the fascist defeat of republican forces in 1937.\(^{18}\)

In 1938 he fled fascist Spain for Paris. He took a letter of introduction to Pablo Picasso from the Spanish sculptor Manolo Hugué who he met while staying at a hospital in Caldes.\(^{19}\) Lam never formally studied with Picasso, but Picasso certainly influenced him. According to Lam, the Spanish painter had brought attention to the originality and force of African mask-making.\(^{20}\) With Picasso’s help, he had his first Paris showing at the Pierre Loeb Gallery in 1939. Through Picasso, he entered modernist and surrealist circles of painters and poets, including Breton. Along with Breton, Lam would go on to leave Nazi-defeated France in 1941, as fascism closed in further on Europe.

On his way back to Cuba, Lam spent three weeks in Martinique where he met Aimé Césaire. Based on the force and tenderness of their exchanges, and existing testimonies about their encounter, one can easily surmise that something extraordinary occurred between them, defying the basic order of time: something marvelous that I imagine as a mutation of exponential dimensionality. They would collaborate and work in explicit and implicit dialogue on and off until Lam’s death.\(^{21}\)

Once Lam returned to Cuba, he also met and became close to Cabrera and reconnected with Carpentier. Like his connection to Césaire, his friendship with Cabrera has received some attention among Lam scholars, especially because Cabrera named several of his paintings.\(^{22}\) She and Lam were quite close, and she attests to painting alongside him. She also organized his first professional show in Cuba, which—shockingly—did not occur until 1946. That relationship must have been a marvel too, and its impact surely went both ways, though there is more scholarly speculation about how her decades of field work on African religions, folklore, and languages in Cuba entered Lam’s poetic painterly imagination than about how Cabrera absorbed Lam’s work. He also continued his friendship with Carpentier in Cuba. Lam, Cabrera, and Carpentier attended Abakuá rituals together on numerous occasions.\(^{23}\) Carpentier receives less credit from critics for influencing Lam’s work than Césaire and Cabrera, but Lam’s work surely entered his.

**LAM AS CARPENTIER’S REAL-MARVELOUS MUSE**

Lam served as Carpentier’s muse for his 1948 rebuke to surrealism, where he argued that an aesthetic that he described as “lo real maravilloso” emerged.

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intrinsically out of the Americas. This essay, which would become the prologue of Carpentier’s most famous novel, *El reino de este mundo* (1949), would also serve as the foreword to the literary tradition of magical realism, overwriting Latin American letters for many decades.  

This text suggests that while his European contemporaries endeavored to produce the marvelous, their efforts yielded a moribund failure—by force of their distance from the “real” marvelous of the Americas. Lam serves as Carpentier’s quintessential example in comparison to the French surrealist painter André Masson:

>Pero obsérvese que cuando André Masson quiso dibujar la selva de la isla de Martinica, con el increíble entrelazamiento de sus plantas y la obscena promiscuidad de ciertos frutos, la maravillosa verdad del asunto devoró al pintor, dejándolo poco menos que impotente frente al papel en blanco. Y tuvo que ser un pintor de América, el cubano Wifredo Lam, quien nos enseñara la magia de la vegetación tropical, la desenfrenada Creación de Formas de nuestra naturaleza—con todas sus metamorfosis y simbiosis—, en cuadros monumentales de una expresión única en la pintura contemporánea.

Carpentier’s opposition of Masson’s drawings of Martinique to Lam’s paintings seems to pit the former’s failure (impotence) against the latter’s success (virility), describing Masson as being swallowed by the fruits of Martinique (like a vagina dentata) and Lam’s brush (strokes) as masterfully exacting in its revelation of the Forms of nature. This tableau vivant diminishes the force of surrealism’s marvelous versus the “real” prowess of the artist of the marvelous from the Americas.

Scholars tend to agree that Carpentier’s proposition deeply engages with surrealism even if he situates it strategically so as to turn away from it. Carpentier did not invent the idea of a real-marvelous; he rather revived existing terminology. Sylvia Molloy instructively shortens the aesthetic distance between surrealism and *lo real maravilloso* and articulates its strategic value when she explains Carpentier’s notion as “an excrecence of French surrealism ‘transculturated’ to Cuba and, by extension, to the rest of Latin America [...], a strategical, polemical element in a transnational literary quarrel born on the same operating table on which Lautréamont’s umbrella hobnobbed with the sewing machine.” Carpentier’s ideas indeed emanate from the same sources, as he participated in and later dissented from the surrealist group in Paris, and *lo real maravilloso* indeed strategically maneuvers a Latin American difference. But in addition to being an “excrecence” of surrealism, as Molloy suggests, Carpentier’s conception of *lo real maravilloso* cathects both to colonial violence—as it lives in material and psychic life in Latin America and the Caribbean—and to Afro-diasporic

24. Not all scholars connect Carpentier’s sense of *lo real maravilloso* with Latin American magic realism, but I understand Carpentier to have produced the theoretical inception of that literary genealogy.
26. Bernal Bermúdez, *Más allá de lo real maravilloso*, 70-79. Bernal Bermúdez notes that the very idea of a real-marvelous existed already in Europe (70) and that the irony of Carpentier’s use of this term to distinguish himself from the surrealists is that the expression itself demonstrates how close he was to surrealist thought (79). Melanie Nicholson summarizes several scholarly accounts by explaining that surrealism provided a particular outlook that Carpentier utilized upon his return to the Caribbean. Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin American Literature*, 43.
non-dualist cosmologies, including the non-dualist imbrication of humans, spirits, animals, and plants.

I argue that Carpentier’s essay, although limited by his own colonial, racist, and misogynist frameworks, includes a truth claim worth taking seriously about a radical difference in worldview that results both from the history of colonialism and the polyphony of philosophies of existence in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁸ This claim germinates out of Carpentier’s research on the Haitian Revolution for *El reino de este mundo* as much as it does from his study of Lam’s work during the 1940s, which positions persisting forms of colonial violence into a visual dialogue with Afro-diasporic, Chinese, and Indigenous aesthetics and knowledge systems. Although it would be easy to conclude from Carpentier’s essay that European artists were not able to access the purportedly real or true marvelous of the Americas, I seek here to recover Carpentier’s concept without forwarding that categorical view. I do not believe that anticolonial vision or insight is autochthonous or foreclosed to outsiders; Carpentier himself was an inside-outsider, and I also do not think we can wholly ascribe the colonial/racist limitations of his own work to his outsider status. However, I do think that the experience of imperialism made what Walter Mignolo later called “border thinking” accessible for those artists living through and with it.²⁹ I contend here that the return from Europe further enabled such artists to pass through that imperial border between Europe and the Caribbean, as a form of travel in consciousness.

This very debate about whether surrealism or something different emerges from Caribbean and Latin American art, about how valid or not surrealist propositions may be for Caribbean and Latin American artists, pertains to one of the layers of what Paget Henry outlines as “communicative inequality” in the Caribbean. Henry identifies communicative inequality as the colonial condition through which European forms of knowledge outpace Indigenous, African, and Asian forms in their representation and proliferation, producing a state at odds with the idealism that Jürgen Habermas understood as communicative reason. According to Henry, “peripheral cultural systems are characterized by a polarized, internal competition between imperial and indigenous sites of production over the supplying of symbols and discourses that will define and legitimate personal identities in their societies.”³⁰ This polarized competition for intellectual representation, in which the empire has an overwhelming control over infrastructure and usurped capital on its side, makes it challenging to see (the stakes of) an alternative framework to surrealism. Henry’s analysis foregrounds the non-dualist African legacies of Afro-Caribbean philosophy that also greatly inform my perspective in this essay. He also suggests that instead of describing African nondualist cosmologies as “magical” we might consider calling them “symbolic;”

²⁸. For a critique of the limits of Carpentier’s vision of Haiti in *El reino de este mundo* see, for example, Natalie Léger, “Faithless Sight: Haiti in *The Kingdom of this World*,” *Research in African Literatures* 45, n°. 1 (2014): 85-106. I think it is fair to ascribe anti-racist intentionality to Carpentier, but his depictions of Black characters at times employ exoticist (and demeaning) tropes. I discuss the misogyny of his essay on the real-marvelous in the conclusion of this essay.


although he does not directly explain why, I understand him to mean that in calling them “magical” one excludes them from the realm of the real, while in fact they offer an-other approach to what is real.\textsuperscript{31} Rereading Carpentier with Henry adds a layer of weight to the real-marvelous that may not otherwise be considered: the push against communicative inequality, a sisyphean struggle. This push marks Lam’s work as well as the essays that his kindred collaborators wrote about him as their poetics of return surged.

**LYDIA CABRERA’S MAGICAL AND CUBAN LAM**

One question drives Cabrera’s 1944 newspaper article “Wifredo Lam:” “¿Por qué Wifredo Lam, cubano, el único pintor cubano de esta generación de veras conocido y estimado fuera de Cuba y el más desconocido en Cuba, no expone también en su país? ¿Por qué se le silencia?”\textsuperscript{32} In this article Cabrera explicitly seeks to counter Lam’s neglect by the Cuban art world. By 1944 Lam had exhibited in Madrid, Paris, and New York, but since his first show in Havana, in 1923, he had not shown work in Cuba; his next Cuban exhibition would be organized by Cabrera in 1946. Oddly enough, in response to Lam’s isolation from the Cuban art world, Cabrera establishes his Cubanness.

To garner the authority to locate Cuba as the source for Lam’s better-known works, which he produced during this period, Cabrera establishes herself rhetorically as witness to his painting process. She grounds her certainty that his work could only be produced “por inspiración” and that in it one cannot even find “una línea que no susurre algo mágico” on her daily observation of his work: “después de haberle visto trabajar día a día.” The magical whispers that inspire Lam, she assures the reader, emanate from Cuba herself: “Aquí en contacto directo con su tierra materna, con esta tierra nuestra tan mágica de por sí, y a la vez tan difícil de captar en su aparente superficialidad y transparencia —que es su más secreta y válida belleza [...].” The magic she ascribes to the paintings passes through the painter, now connected to the land of his birth, and it becomes the apparition that drives his work. Cabrera, herself a Paris-trained painter, describes elsewhere a daily ritual of night painting together with Lam.\textsuperscript{33} Cabrera derives the telluric abstraction of Lam’s paintings during this period from Cuba’s secret magic beyond its visibly ascertainable beauty, pointing to a beyond that Lam’s paintings foretell—one that she does not quite convey in words for the reader but that she hints to have witnessed herself.

Cabrera’s Lam had approximated African divinities while in Europe, but back home in Cuba he had reunited with them fully: “Las milenarias divinidades negras y ancestrales que retraídas a la suave y envolvente luz de Europa allá le obsesionaban, aquí se le aparecen tangibles en su luz verdadera en resplandecencia

\textsuperscript{31} Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 25.


\textsuperscript{33} Blanc, “Interview with Lydia Cabrera.”
Marvelous Returns: Readings of Wifredo Lam by Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier, and Aimé Césaire

de perenne verano. En cada instante, en cada rincón de paisaje, en cada árbol-divinidad, en cada hoja fabulosa de su jardín de Buen Retiro [...].”

In Europe, her Lam had been obsessed with divinities whom he could only dimly glimpse there, but she now portrays him as vividly encountering them in each tree-that-is-also-a-divinity, in each instant of life at home. Cabrera thus foreshadows Carpentier’s conception of a marvelous that is more real in the Americas than in Europe, for in her description of Lam’s connection to African deities, they appear scant and vague in Europe but ubiquitous and tangible in Cuba.

Cabrera too grew closer to the African divinities that she had reconnected with during her own European sojourn. By 1944, the year of this article, she had already begun the research for El monte, her epic ethnographic compendium of lucumí (Yoruba) and palo monte (Konga, Congo) spiritual and naturopathic practices and beliefs. She later told her biographer Rosario Hiriart a story about herself similar to the one she tells about Lam:

> En mi caso, mi país, Cuba, empezó a interesarme en Francia, creo que eso puede sucederle a todo el que se aleja de su tierra natal: hay una especie de redescubrimiento de lo que está lejos. Tengo un recuerdo muy específico [...]: estudiando la iconografía del Borobudur, el templo de Java, hay un bajorrelieve en que aparece una mujer con unas frutas tropicales en la cabeza. Me dije: ¡Pero si esto es Cuba! Y claro, a la distancia había crecido en mí ese recuerdo ilusionado, esa especie de nostalgia, entonces inconsciente, que se siente fuera del país propio. Iba descubriendo o mejor, redescubriendo, lo que nunca puede verse de cerca.

Cabrera imagines a Lam who, like her, dreams of Cuba while in France; she too, upon returning, would devote herself to researching African cultural persistence in Cuba, and she would complete her research in dialogue with Lam during this shared formative period.

Return figures evocatively in Cabrera’s essay. Cabrera calls Lam the painter who “sueña el trópico deslumbrado en el trópico;” rather than the distant dazzling of an exotic tropics rendered by foreign painters, she suggests that in Lam the tropics dazzle in and for the tropics. Cuba as tropics, Cuba as home to African divinities, Cuba as Lam’s home, Cuba positioned by Cabrera to be self-dazzled in the image of Lam’s work. The tropical location of Cabrera’s description resonates with Carpentier’s later efforts to situate the real-marvelous in the Americas and beyond the grasp of French surrealists. Carpentier constructs the dichotomy between surrealism and lo real maravilloso through analogies between death and life and between impotence and virility. The difference Cabrera illuminates in Lam’s work is less stark, but nonetheless suggestive: it is the difference between gleaning the tropics as memory and evocation by the European other on the

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34. Cabrera, “Wifredo Lam.”
35. In 1947 she published the first essay based on this research, “Eggüe o Vichichi Nfinda” in Revista bimestre cubana; according to Isabel Castellanos, custodian of Cabrera’s estate, she was already working on El monte during the period in which Lam painted La jungla and sometimes they even worked together in the same space (personal interview).
voyage out and seeing its reality revealed up close upon return. Lam’s homecoming serves to transform his work and its capacity to dazzle.

Cabrera also translated the title of Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* for a 1943 Havana-based publication as *Retorno al país natal*, as if to bolster the force of return in the poem. Although she extends its force in her translation, the notion of return already plays an important role in Césaire. The poem imagines a return home to Martinique from Europe, one that Césaire would eventually make in 1939. But return may also be understood figuratively, for the poem stages a transformation of the poetic subject’s process of disalienation and coming to possess a radical Black consciousness. Césaire began writing the poem on a trip to the Balkans, looking over the bay at the coastal town of Martinska with Petar Guberina, his college friend in Paris who had invited him to travel home to Croatia with him. The uncanny “return” of the poem is symbolic rather than real—to a Martinique of the Balkans inspired the poem.

Return, in Césaire, in Cabrera’s Lam, and in Carpentier’s idea of the marvelous real means a vision that is acquired by physically leaving, or symbolically turning away from empire’s center toward a home in the margins. This return means to see something at home that is not at the imperial center, that which the center appears poised to engulf but cannot quite reach. In other words, to return means to decenter Europe from vision. To return also means to take a position that has a travel route; to stake out a direction away; to come back, in the future, in a way that marks having gone away.

**Carpentier’s Antillean and Atmospherically Marvelous Lam**

Alejo Carpentier’s 1944 essay “Reflexiones acerca de la pintura de Wifredo Lam” delivers a Lam whose work is both marvelous and Antillean. The essay appeared in *Gaceta del Caribe*, the short-lived literature and politics magazine published under the auspices of Cuba’s Partido Socialista Popular, where Carpentier had also published an early installment of *El reino de este mundo* the same year. It would be another four years before Carpentier published his essay on the real-marvelous, but this essay on Lam and the first installment of the novel for *Gaceta del Caribe* indicate that by 1944 he had begun incubating that set of ideas. Unlike Cabrera, Carpentier does not concern himself with Lam’s Cubanness for this publication; he sketches instead an Antillean and simultaneously universal Lam, in line with *Gaceta del Caribe*’s own self-portrait.

Carpentier begins by presenting Lam as an example of the universal artist. In his view, aesthetic greatness resides not in originality but in the creation of an environment, and this is precisely what Lam achieves: “*Muchos logran eludir una influencia: no parecerse a nadie. Pero no por ello son capaces de crear una atmósfera*”

37. As Maguire notes, the choice to cut “Cahier” out of the translated title “emphasizes the power of the spatial shift” of return rather than “the text—and language—as the tools for enacting this return.” Maguire, “Two Returns of the Native Land,” 130.

38. Miller puts into perspective the notion of return in Césaire quite beautifully when he reads it as a reorientation of the triangle trade, suggesting that the poem goes “to Africa by going to France” and then returns to the Caribbean “only in revolt, ‘standing and free.’” Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 96. Edwards has made a compelling case for the importance of anaphora, or repetition, Césaire utilizes throughout the poem, as the literary device of return. Brent H. Edwards, “Aimé Césaire and the Syntax of Influence,” *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 2 (2005): 8.


In making this point he draws on a psychoanalytical observation about how artists come to explore this particular aesthetic dimension: “Muy a menudo la creación de una atmósfera peculiar, inseparable del estilo, se debe en el artista, a una obsesión de elementos atados a raíces subconscientes.” According to this, the obsession that fuels the work as an atmospheric construction connects explicitly to roots that lie beyond consciousness. Although he does not cite Jung here, the archetype in Jung functions much like this, as a deeply lodged image with a meaning that we draw on and access.²² Carpentier’s atmospheric and Jungian argument about Lam’s work foreshadows Max-Pol Fouchet’s highly influential biographical book on Lam, which likewise uses Jungian vocabulary and a spatial analysis to describe Lam’s work: “Lam’s thought, I must repeat, does not move or develop on the surface; it is always drawn by a magnetic background which is the meeting-place for the present and an immemorial past common to all mankind.”²³ What Fouchet calls a background approximates what Carpentier reads as atmosphere in Lam.

Carpentier locates the atmosphere of Lam’s work in his mixture of the human, the plant, and the animal: “Lam comenzó a crear su atmósfera por medio de figuras en que lo humano, lo animal, lo vegetal, se mezclaban sin delimitaciones, animando un mundo de mitos primitivos, con algo ecuménicamente antillano, profundamente atado, no sólo al suelo de Cuba, sino al de todo el rosario de islas.”²⁴ Carpenter thus connects Lam’s universal grandeur as a painter who has achieved an environment to the Antillean location of his work. As if to merge the universal and the Antillean, he uses the Catholic (which etymologically means “universal”) imagery of the rosary to evoke insular Caribbean geography. Carpentier’s pan-Caribbean prayer invests the paintings with the power to create the archipelago. On what basis, you might ask? While pan-Caribbean arguments were germane to the communist-leaning Gaceta, which established links across the region and explicitly sought to produce a pan-Caribbean solidarity, Carpentier grounds his argument by describing Lam’s fusion of humans, plants, and animals as distinctly Antillean.

Lam most likely developed his singular take on the fusion of people with animals and plants in conversation with the writings of the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius. Although many of Frobenius’s theories about African civilizations have been discarded, his work was highly influential. His theory of cultural difference between civilizations that are closer to animals and those that are closer to plants has a fascinating legacy in art and thought from Martinique and Cuba. I imagine that Frobenius’s research on early African rock drawings that depicted human-animal and human-plant fusions, often accompanied by his own photographs of these extraordinary images, inspired Lam’s own approach. Lam began fusing humans and animals in a collection of drawings called Carnets de Marseille.

43. Fouchet, Wifredo Lam, 19.
44. Carpentier, “Reflexiones,” 27.
from the 1940-1941 period in which he, along with Breton and others, waited in Marseille for boat passage out of Vichy France to Martinique. He would not fuse humans and plants until his return to Cuba and after visiting Martinique in 1941. Lam, Carpentier, Cabrera, and Césaire had read or knew about Frobenius’s work by 1940. The French-translated volume *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* emerged in 1933, and *La cultura como ser viviente* was published in Spanish in 1934. Cabrera and Léopold Senghor, Césaire’s friend and collaborator in 1930s Paris, both refer to the ethnographer’s impact on the European avant-garde and his role in challenging the intellectual foundations of racism. Suzanne Césaire wrote essays in dialogue with Frobenius in *Tropiques*. Although her essays on plant-people and animal-people make for a fascinating dialogue with Lam’s aesthetics, Lam surely began to paint in response to Frobenius earlier. We also find plant and animal people in Aimé Césaire’s poetry and in the work of the Cuban poet Virglio Piñera, written in dialogue with Césaire’s.

Carpentier’s reading of plant-human figures in Lam also suggests a kind of violence in the pictures that viewers might miss: “Era frecuente que un personaje fuese más vegetal que humano, llevando vestido que evocaba el tejido de lianas y parásitos que, en el trópico, suele ahogar lentamente un árbol por proceso de asfixia.” The idea of strangulation and asphyxiation that he connects to Lam’s figures demands attention. Carpentier does not perceive an idyllic environment in Lam’s paintings but rather points to their way of evoking the violence embedded in plant life.

The atmospheric focus of Carpentier’s essay on Lam signals his own highly atmospheric writing. At the time of this essay Carpentier engaged in a kind of creative conversation with the work of Edgar Allen Poe as he set to work on *El reino de este mundo*. Whereas Poe’s influence manifests quite obviously in his early novel draft for *Gaceta del Caribe*, the direct references to Poe drop out by the time the completed novel was first printed in Mexico in 1949. What remains, however, may be seen to reside in his own understanding of atmosphere as an aesthetic dimension. In this novel, and in other short fiction pieces from this period, Carpentier produces images of impending death and revenge through his evocations of the intolerable conditions of slavery in the Caribbean. *El reino de este mundo* foreshadows the vindication of enslaved Africans from its very first scene with the juxtaposition of dead cattle heads and the heads of enslavers at a barber shop. His own atmospheric writing appears poised to perform or incite revolt in response to the kind of violence that passes for peace in what Stuart Hall has called “societies structured in dominance.”

In this essay, Carpentier does not yet use the term “real maravilloso” to refer to Lam’s work, but he purposefully eschews surrealism. About *La jungla* and other paintings of the period, he says: “Hay creación en función de ambiente. La realidad...”

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46. Sims also notes that Lam began to explore hybrids before he had met the Césaires. Sims, *Wifredo Lam*, 41.


el sueño se confunden. La poesía y la plástica se hacen una.” Carpentier treads closely to Breton’s conception of the “surreal” in the blurring of dream and reality, but he evades the term, suggesting instead that Lam’s work employs “un cierto barroquismo.” What would have been easily coded as surreal thus becomes baroque, as Carpentier distinguishes himself and Lam from surrealism. In his almost-forgotten chapter draft from the same year, Carpentier marks this difference more explicitly. Told through the perspective of a character named Lucas who travels to Haiti, the draft revisits Carpentier’s 1943 trip to the monumental citadel at La Ferrière that King Henri Christophe had built. As Lucas reflects on his surroundings and a litany of loas and Haitian ancestors, he thinks: “¡Que otros pensaran en el surrealismo!” The exclamation introduces the notion that Haiti’s spiritual and historical life tell another story. Although the term “lo real maravilloso” is not yet used to categorize the story, Carpentier comes quite close to doing so when he later summarizes: “América no necesitaba hacer grandes esfuerzos para crear cosas sorprendentes, de un terrible valor poético.” The claim later developed in the essay is already outlined: the marvelous-effect pursued by the surrealists is already there in the Americas, awaiting only to be seen by those who know how to see it. Carpentier already stakes out a difference from French surrealism that goes beyond strategy and points to the living power of Afro-diasporic spiritism along with the conscious and unconscious violence of the colonial record. Both colonial violence and spiritism constitute the epistemological difference in Carpentier’s rhetorical strategy of breaking from surrealism and inaugurating a located conception of the real-marvelous. As I contend, his return from Europe was key to this insight.

More directly than Cabrera, in his 1944 essay on Lam, Carpentier also underscores the importance of return. As he puts it: “El trópico sólo suele comprenderse y sentirse cuando se regresa a él después de prolongada ausencia, con las retinas limpias de hábitos contraidos.” To understand and feel the tropics, he claims, one must go through the experience of return. Like Lam, Cabrera, and Césaire, he could sense that a specific kind of knowledge had been produced by this return to the tropics after a prolonged absence. For these artists, return proved extraordinarily productive, but Carpentier’s account is more totalizing. If he later ascribes the power to represent the real-marvelous exclusively to artists from the Americas who know it up close, he goes even further in this essay: to know the tropics one must first be born or grow up in the tropics, then leave for a prolonged period —perhaps specifically to France, where one absorbs the modernist avant-garde— and then return. The requisite voyage out and back drops out of his later formulation, but here it appears as an explicit condition, one that I surmise may be read back into his later formulation. This will allow us to rewrite the link between surrealism and the real-marvelous: neither opposed nor equivalent, the latter emerges as a return home from the former.

Aimé Césaire’s Synesthetic and Internationalist Lam

Aimé Césaire does not directly evoke the notion of return in Lam, but he portrays the effect of return on the painter. Whereas Cabrera and Carpentier’s 1944 essays appeared in publications based in Cuba with national and regional circulations in the Caribbean and Latin America, Césaire’s 1945 short essay “Wifredo Lam” accompanied a selection of the painter’s work featured in the French journal *Cahiers d’Art*, the same selection that would become the focus of Carpentier’s 1948 reading of Lam as the painter of *lo real maravilloso*. In this piece, Césaire delivers an internationalist Lam who paints from a similar perspective to his own and whose synesthesia derives directly from his own mutation into the plant-humans he paints.

Lam greatly impacted Césaire, who had dedicated two poems to him by the time he wrote this essay. One poem, “Tam tam II,” appeared in the New York-based surrealist magazine *VVV*, and the other, “Simouns,” remains unpublished, although Césaire sent it to both Lam and Breton. Lam would much later ask Césaire for poems for a book called *Annonciation*, which Césaire produced and later included in a book titled *Moi, laminaire*, which he published the year of Lam’s death, 1982. The word “*laminaire*” in this title refers to the French term for kelp — *algue laminarie*, a species found in the depths of the ocean — and serves moreover as a portmanteau for their two names, Lam + Césaire. This decision to write himself and Lam together as a kelp-like *moi* resonates back with his 1945 essay on Lam, in which like Cabrera and Carpentier he partially imagines Lam as himself.

Césaire’s Lam(*inaire*) has an internationalist scope anchored in a spirit of revolt located in the very shipments of exploitation. In the introduction to the piece he references the desolation of “*ces pays*” where he first situates his writing, describing them as ships: “*Bord sur bord leur cargaison de bêtes bagardes ou lassés.*” The image refers to the dehumanization inflicted upon those who were shipped for forced labor to the Americas, represented as beasts subjected to degradation through the process of becoming a shipment. Césaire then situates Lam’s painting as a direct response to this circumstance: “*Et la peinture de Wifredo Lam roule bord sur bord sa cargaison de révolte.*” Although the image certainly evokes the history of slavery, it seems important that Césaire evades an explicit reference to Black Africans: Indigenous peoples and Asians were also enslaved in the history of empire, just as Black Africans were indentured along with Asians, and in some cases the boundaries between the regime of slavery and that of indenture were difficult to delineate, and both certainly included forms of dehumanization. Whether or not Césaire thought carefully about bringing these histories

55. Part of the poem was published without the dedication to Lam and with a different title, “Les oubliettes de la mer et du déluge” in *Les armes miraculeuses*, 69-70. In a letter to Breton from September 22, 1943, Césaire mentions having sent the poem to both Breton and Lam. The manuscript poem is located in the Fonds Breton in Fort-de-France.

56. Arnold, “*A ‘África’ con Aimé Césaire y Wifredo Lam,*” 161.


58. See also Arnold, “*A ‘África’ con Aimé Césaire y Wifredo Lam,*” 155-156.
together in his choice not to explicitly racialize this metaphor as he emphasized the role of revolt in Lam’s painting, his approach evokes Lam’s aesthetic indeterminacy as a painter concerned with decolonization in a broad sense. As Lam put it in his late interview with Mosquera: “My painting is an act of decolonization, not in a physical sense, but in a mental one.”59 In other words, Lam sought to intervene in consciousness with his paintings.

Césaire interprets Lam’s work as a form of “ceremony” in order to conceptualize the painter’s approach to intellectual decolonization. He offers a universal and internationalist Lam whose revolt works against capitalist alienation writ large: “Dans une société où la machine et l’argent ont démesurement agrandi la distance de l’homme aux choses, Wifredo Lam fixe sur la toile la cérémonie pour laquelle toutes existent: la cérémonie de l’union physique de l’homme et du monde.”60 Césaire’s Lam confronts capitalist alienation by undoing the distance between the human and all other things (choses), a reading of Lam’s merging of human, animal, and plant forms that Césaire seems to extend to the possibility of human communion with everything from which modern (capitalist) society severs us. Césaire thus prefigures Sylvia Wynter’s conception of “finding ceremony,” explaining how in Lam he encounters a ceremonial convergence of human and world, a union that may be read as a being-with- or being-in-the world, although Césaire seems to extend the image beyond the strict confines of Lam’s plant-human and animal-human fusions. This is a ceremony that involves becoming the world in yourself, becoming the plant, the animal, and perhaps even constructed objects and the built environment; in other words, Césaire evokes a non-dualism between self and other, between self and the world.

Césaire’s Lam paints “au nom de ces rescapés du plus grand naufrage de l’histoire.”61 As in the image of Lam’s revolt taking over shipped cargo, Césaire here obliquely positions the shipwrecked subjects for whom Lam speaks. This obliqueness allows Césaire to invoke colonialism, slavery, and indenture all at once. In the pivotal year of 1945, as Césaire wrote these lines, they could also be read as invoking those who had suffered the global war, including the millions killed in the Shoah.

Given that critical attention to Césaire rarely fails to appeal to his conception of blackness as négritude, it bears mentioning that in this essay he avoids both this term and any singular reference to blackness. In 1935 Césaire had coined the idea of “négritude” to articulate a Black consciousness that is resistant to anti-Black racism. His use of this term in his Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, where he is careful to avoid a metaphysics of blackness, popularized the term and created camps in favor and against it. In the most useful and germane definition of négritude that we find in the Cahier, the poem’s speaker describes “ma négritude” as taking root “dans la chair rouge du sol” (in the red flesh of the

59. Mosquera, “‘My Painting is an Act of Decolonization,’” 3.
60. Césaire, “Wifredo Lam,” 357.
If Césaire has négritude in mind in his essay on Lam, it is this version of a re-rooted diasporic blackness, an immersion or oneness with the earth. Lam, in turn, distances himself even more from négritude than from surrealism in his late interview with Mosquera. In his words: “Nor am I in agreement with the doctrine of Negritude. In the end the real issue of history is not about race but about class struggle.” His use of the term “doctrine” speaks volumes here, for it indexes a more metaphysical conception of “négritude,” one that Leopold Senghor promulgated and that Césaire became associated with, although Lam also disavows race as the primary historical category in favor of class struggle. In light of this statement, Césaire’s careful attempt to describe Lam’s work without relying on categories of race, and his preferring instead to use categories of oppression and alienation, makes even more sense. Although critics have sought to produce a “négritude Lam” by focusing on his decolonizing practice of recovering Black representation as form, this Lam only makes sense through a conception of négritude as a practice of disalienation, and as a non-dualist ceremony with the earth, rather than as a transcendental category that would overtake class affiliation.

In Césaire’s conclusion he goes beyond the evocation of people as plants in Carpentier’s depiction of Lam. Instead, Césaire depicts Lam painting as a plant himself: This synesthetic Lam does not paint what he sees but rather smells his own tropical sap and transmits it to the canvas: “Wifredo Lam ne regarde pas. Il sent. Il sent le long de son corps maigre et de ses branches vibrantes passer, riche de défis, la grand sève tropicale.” “Sentir” in French means both “to feel” and “to smell,” and Césaire profits from both meanings here. Although Lam could be understood to feel his own body as a plant, the use of the verb “sentir” alongside a reference to sap, a substance that emits a strong smell, suggests a Lam who smells rather than feels his own sap. Lam’s transformation into a plant in Césaire’s image describes more precisely the unity between the human and the world that he seeks to portray in this essay. Unity here exceeds being-with and becomes a fusion between human and plant.

Césaire’s proposition seems to expand upon Carpentier’s conception of the environment created by Lam’s painting. While Césaire describes Lam as a plant en vrai, as a tangible reality, it is nonetheless a marvelous proposition—marvelous because unthinkable within the prevailing dualistic theories that posit a subject/object separation between humans and other animals, plants, and objects. In a later version of Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, Césaire adds his own becoming-tree to his poetics: “A force de regarder les arbres je suis/ devenu un arbre (From staring too long at trees I have/ become a tree).” This is a fascinating play on Cartesian dualism: If for Descartes one is inasmuch as one thinks, Césaire adds an object of thought and thereby reformulates the precept. Descartes’s account of being as thought paradigmatically indicates (if not inaugurates) the
Enlightenment conception of mind/body dualism, while Césaire dissolves that
dualism by renovating the subject-as-object-of-thought. From the perspective of
the tree, not as an object but as another subject, he performs a subjectivity of the
human-as-subject tree.

Is Césaire’s Lam surrealist? His essay does not mention surrealism.
Surrealism was indeed important to Césaire, and in his theory of poetry, elab-
orated the same year in a published talk that he presented in Haiti, “Poésie et
connaissance,” he cites Breton as a reference, although he does not define himself
as a surrealist.66 Césaire abstains from subscribing to official surrealism, drawing
from it without adopting it. Three years before Carpentier’s conception of lo real
maravilloso, Césaire’s image of a plant-Lam who paints from the smell of his very
own sap evokes a real-marvelous that prefigures Carpentier’s concept and con-
nects it to non-dualism.

Although return does not play the same role in Césaire’s text as it does in
Cabrera and Carpentier’s, his image of a plant-Lam does stage a kind of return,
as the painter’s homecoming facilitates the ceremony that allows him to unite
with the earth. His description viscerally evokes Lam’s access to the marvelous as
a becoming-plant that he transmits to the picture. Return, in Césaire’s account, is
more than a simple homecoming to Cuba; Lam here appears as a painter who has
returned home to the earth from the alienation of capitalist modernity. Return
functions as a ceremony of being: a real-marvelous of infinite possibilities.

**Marvelous Returns and Violence: A Conclusion**

In the background of the essays discussed in these pages there is a text by the
French surrealist writer Pierre Mabille, another theorist of the marvelous. After
the war, Mabille became cultural attaché at the French Embassy in Haiti and
visited Lam, Cabrera, and Carpentier in Cuba; he also maintained connections
to Césaire.67 His essay about Lam’s La jungle first appeared in a Spanish transla-
tion by Cabrera and later came out in French in the literary magazine Tropiques,
co-edited by Césaire.68 In this essay, Mabille makes an extraordinary point about
this work by Lam, which is that it lacks a singular vanishing point.69 He then adds
that, in this sense, Lam breaks with a long history of painting based on the use of
visual spaces structured by clear vanishing points. He further argues that in this
painting Lam has produced a kind of antidote to fascism:

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(1945): 173-187. Although it may have appeared elsewhere in French first, “La manigua” predates
the Tropiques publication.
libre, peligrosa, surgiendo de la vegetación más exuberante, dispuesta a todas las mezclas, a todas las transmutaciones, a todas las posesiones, y esa otra jungla siniestra donde un führer, plantado en un pedestal, espía, a lo largo de las columnatas neo-helénicas de Berlín, la marcha de las cohortes mecanizadas dispuestas, después de haber destruido todo lo vivo que existía [...].

Mabille stakes out a dichotomy between the vibrant life of the jungle in Lam’s painting—a dance—and Nazism, but he misses the violence that Lam found in Cuba’s structural racism, and the fact that he positioned himself against the tourist imaginary of blackness that Black Cubans faced regularly. “For me, trafficking in the dignity of a people is just that: hell.” Perhaps in response to Mabille’s idyllic reading of his painting, or because the latter eventually established itself as his most famous work, Lam broke his general rule against explaining his intentions and told Fouchet about this picture. Comparing it to the jungle imagery produced by Henri Rousseau, he stated: “[Rousseau] does not condemn what happens in the jungle. I do.” The violence imposed on Black Cubans that Lam evokes in this painting thus pertains to Nazism in a sense that Mabille could not fully grasp. Mabille’s antifascist dance is a desire machine.

The return from Europe to the Caribbean also meant grappling with two forms of violence: the material and psychic emissions of the colonial present and misapprehension by those European artists most poised to support you. Breton reportedly reviled music, and Lam’s wife Helena was witness to his revulsion in both the Dominican Republic in 1941 and in Haiti in 1945. In rejecting music in social and ritual contexts, Breton displayed an aesthetic closure to hearing the real in the marvelous that he assessed around him during his travels. Mabille’s misapprehension is more subtle: he doesn’t quite see.

Carpentier’s harsh push against surrealism and Lam’s self-positioning as not-a-surrealist need to be considered against the backdrop of both Breton and Mabille’s limitations. Carpentier goes so far as to invoke sexual violence, at the expense of women, to illustrate the difference between surrealism and "lo real maravilloso", symbolically rendering both as aesthetics of violation or rape: “Vous qui ne voyez pas, pensez à ceux qui voient. Hay todavía demasiados ‘adolescentes que bailan placer en violar las recién muertas’ (Lautréamont), sin advertir que lo maravilloso estaría en violarlas vivas.”

In this image, both surrealists and real maravilloso artists are metaphorically rendered as rapists; while surrealists appear as necrophiliacs, the real maravilloso artists rape living bodies. I find this violent image hard to bear, and its misogyny patently limits the force of Carpentier’s overall argument. I wish Carpentier had kept his earlier draft in place, rather than using rape to make
his point about a superlative violence of revolt in the Americas. In the 1944 draft these lines read as follows: “¿Que otros pensaran en el surrealismo! [...] La imprecación de Bouckman volvía a su memoria: ‘Arrojen el retrato del dios de los blancos, que tiene sed de nuestras lágrimas; escuchen, en sí mismos, la llamada de la libertad.’” This anti-Christian imagery evokes the violence of colonialism and slavery that the Catholic Church largely participated in and calls for revolt through a reference to Dutty Bouckman, a revolutionary leader in Haiti. Rather than figuring art itself as a form of violence, Carpentier here signaled the structuring violence that lo real maravilloso draws from. I find it important to recover the wish for the work of art to enact psychic violence as an aesthetic-social intervention, even if I find Carpentier’s image of sexual violence upon women’s bodies abhorrent.

For Lam, returning from Europe meant returning to colonial violence at home and allowing the violence occluded by the fantasy of the tropics to enter the picture. Over and over he marvelously returned, in revolt and ceremony, at once.

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