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Poetic Traditions of Revolt in the Caribbean: René Ménil's Theory of the Public.

By Oscar Guardiola-Rivera & Juan Felipe García

Introduction.

How to reciprocate a precious gift? Paget Henry has given us one. It is extremely precious and important. Published in last years' Fall issue of *The CLR James Journal*, his "René Ménil's Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition" recognizes the importance of the Martinican philosopher's work to a tradition of philosophy that operates under conditions of erasure.

Despite the decisive efforts of many of its practitioners, Latin American Philosophy and Critical Theory as well as Political Anthropology still struggle to be recognized as a worthy partner or adversary in and out of academic settings. Even public Literary and Art Criticism, which had gained recognition in the 1960s and 70s on the back of the world success of such movements as Tropicália, Third Cinema, and the so-called "Boom" of Magical Realism now suffer a kind of strange, slow death.¹

Strange, because it happens at the same as Latina/o and Latin American novelists, poets, and artists take a dignified position in their respective publishing and exhibition industries, drive circulation, appear on festival circuits, or win prestigious prizes. A time when even philosophical concepts first developed or coined in Latin America (together with Africa and Asia), or at least conceptions infused with strong Latino spices such as "decolonial turn", post-

¹ See René Ménil, "Julio Cortázar por él mismo en ocho lecciones", *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, trans. by M. Montero (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, [1999] 2005) 375-8. Also, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez & Mario Vargas Llosa, *Las Cartas del Boom*, ed. by Carlos Aguirre, Gerald Martin, Javier Munguía & Augusto Wong Campos (Barcelona: Alfaguara, 2023) 14, 51, 70n43, 81 making evident connections between Boom literature and Latin American Existentialism, New Left critique, Black music and Caribbean literature that transform the archive into a place of dreams and "mythic matter" in the Americas – making possible moves from the local to the universal, and between poetics and philosophy.

and “decolonial critique,” phenomenology of *relajo*, philosophy of liberation, the cosmo- or “ontological turn” in anthropology, and Critical Race Theory are now being debated and even declared enemies and demonized as evil in policy settings, the press, parliaments and academic centers in the Global North and South.

Slow, in the sense that the waning or co-optation, even the branding and marketization of radical critique in the art world, literature, philosophy, law and politics today both reveals the sedimentation and pacifying effects of given frames of judgment in our so-called post-classical public spheres and the blindness of those operating in such spheres to the effects of current tendencies to turn off the light of the public imagination and extinguish critique at a time of global meltdown, raised inequality, and liberal surprise about rising neo-fascism.

As we will see, Ménil’s original concept of the “velocity of the Spirit” and “the marvelous” emerge in this context. As a potent antidote against the publicity-driven poisoning of the public imagination that, as the cliché goes, makes it easier nowadays to imagine the end of days than to imagine the end of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.

Magic against magic, so to speak.

Paget Henry’s gift is therefore public, precious, and a new ceremonial. It is an act of recognition. A prestation that ensures the reciprocal acknowledgment and engagement between two groups or historical trajectories in agonistic relation (as opposed to enmity).

This is how Paget presents to us his gift:

The primary goal of this paper is to bring to the center of Caribbean philosophical reflection the complex psychoanalytic/surrealist/Marxism that was fashioned by Ménil [...] Within the Caribbean Philosophical Association, one of our goals has been the reconstruction of the erased philosophies of the region along with their authors. This reconstruction has been a vital part of our attempts at ‘shifting the geography of reason.’ [...] René] Ménil remains largely unknown in the English-speaking world. In the 2020 issue of *The CLR James Journal* we attempted to re-

introduce M énil to the philosophers of the English-speaking Caribbean, and this essay can be seen as an addendum to that effort.²

Our aims in this essay are also humble. We hope only to express our gratitude to Henry’s work and that of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, and to reciprocate by modestly adding our own work to the ongoing collective effort. To overcome previous limitations to accessing M énil’s works, referred to by Henry, we offer our views on a wider array of his works, at least most of the collection published in 2005 in Spanish under the title *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos* based on the French original, which we also consulted, published in 1999 as *Antilles déjà jadis prec. de Tracées* (1999). This version has the advantage of bringing forward M énil’s trajectory to the point where it intersects that of other Latin American writers like Alejo Carpentier and Julio Cortázar in ways that allow for a better insight on crucial notions such as “the marvelous,” the “velocity of the Spirit,” the passage from poetry to philosophy, publicity, temporal naturalism, and his interest in the exemplary character of jazz in relation to poetic rhetoric, the philosophy of time and freedom.

Our own effort is driven also by our lived experiences. Especially what we have learned from and while accompanying a peasant community from the Caribbean coast of Colombia for over two decades. Throughout, this Afro-Amerindian creolized community has responded to victimization attempts by far-right paramilitaries, transnational capital investors, and state violence, by rekindling their collective memory and imagination via inventive forms and apotropaic gestures -which we call “magic against magic”- belonging to a poetic tradition of

² Paget Henry, “René M énil’s Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition,” in *The CLR James Journal. A Review of Caribbean Ideas*, vol. 27, numbers 1-2, (Fall 2021): 143-168.

revolt that seemed to us best systematized and illuminated by critical theorizations such as those offered by Ménil, among very few others.

Thus, in sections 1-4 we situate Ménil's theorization within the orbit of the wider effort that his co-editor in the *Légitime Défense* journal, Pierre Yoyotte, described as the task "to systematize the poetic tradition of revolt" that also happens to be an ethical one. An effort presented from the outset as an antidote to what "the fascist hordes" were forming.³

Then, in sections 5-7 our attention shifts to this concrete question of forming, formation, and forms. Both the encounter between form-giving imagination and animated structures (which may be human or not) and the essay-form as characteristic of Ménil's theorization, which he conceives as most inventive and adequate to respond to the challenges of time and content. In doing so, as Paget Henry suggests, Ménil comes closest to other Caribbean writers like Frantz Fanon. But we argue that Ménil can also be seen as actively renewing the formula of the "poetry of the future" in original ways which we term cosmographic, attentive to the power of frames and symbolic forms and, in the main, mounting a decisive attack against the Cartesian ocular-centrism that has informed the expansionist enterprise in the Americas - colonial, fascistic, and capitalist.

Sections 8-11 dwell on the importance of the connection between musical and poetic essayistic or improvisational forms in the critical theorization undertaken by Ménil. We propose that they provide the basic elements for what we would like to introduce as a theory of the public and of making things public (*res publica*). This situates Ménil's work at the heart of a series of crucial debates taking place in Latin American philosophy nowadays, which

³ Pierre Yoyotte, "Antifascist Significance of Surrealism," in *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. by Franklin Rosemont & Robin D. G. Kelley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 42-44.

concern the fates of humanism and republicanism in the Americas, so-called populism, and the stakes for a new wave of left-leaning governments currently sweeping through Latin America in stark contrast to the far-right move taking place in other parts of the world.

We would also like to re-orient such debates in the direction of a keener analysis of publicity and the making of things public, its means and content, which we suspect can prove decisive to better our understanding of not only the so-called public sphere but also, crucially, of institutional political forms. Specifically, the empire-form vis-à-vis the nation-state. To go across and beyond left and right assumptions concerning territory, spatiality, occupation, and plunder as essential features of empire or settlement and constitution-making, which tend to obscure the ways in which empire in the Americas (and elsewhere) may have gone beyond the need to annex or occupy territory in favour of a selective treatment of populations, and instead of simply engaging in plunder may have attempted and found ways to answer the difficult question of the realization of capital by exploiting spatializing and temporal (or speculative) delays, overlays and dimensions. Ménil's emphasis on the temporal dimension seems to us better suited to illuminating speculative dimensions of capitalist expansionism that seem to go unnoticed when we continue to operate under spatializing (Cartesian) assumptions.

Finally, sections 12-14 expand on the conditions for a Ménil-based theory of the public in resonance with the work of contemporary writers like Paget Henry and Lewis R. Gordon, before presenting our provisional conclusions.

1. Poetic Traditions of Revolt.

What does it mean to speak of a "poetic tradition of revolt"?

The use of this term can be traced back to the group behind the famous 1930s *Légitime Défense* manifesto. “It is extremely significant that during the myth-building post-WWI period, while the fascist hordes were forming, a group of young men [and women] got together in France in order to systematize the poetic tradition of revolt -which also happens to be a moral one,” wrote Pierre Yoyotte, a signatory of the manifesto, between 1932 and 1934. He was referring to the surrealists in general, and to a group of young Caribbean poets and philosophy students plotting from a small apartment on the Parisian Rue du Tournon, in particular.⁴

Internationalist in scope, the twenty-four pages of the *Légitime Défense* journal covered “an astonishing range of material: a hot mix of surrealist manifesto, poetry, revolutionary theory, and sharp criticism of the Antillean bourgeoisie, its docile politics and complacent culture.” It provoked an angry response from the middle-upper classes as well as the government and, according to some accounts, it was banned by the authorities in the Latin American island of Martinique. For those reasons, despite its considerable impact and influence, the planned second issue of the journal never appeared and, thus, it remained largely unknown in the island for decades.⁵

The manifesto itself was composed and signed by the members of the group, all of them in their early-to-mid-twenties, surrealists through and through, with a strong back up of left Hegelian and Marxian philosophy. The grouping was notable not only for its refreshing youthfulness, originality, and daring, but also for its most interesting characteristics and contributions: its bold internationalism, the steepness and fastness of its rise from the social

⁴ Pierre Yoyotte, “Antifascist Significance of Surrealism”, 44.

⁵ René Ménénil, *Preface to the reprint issue of Légitime Défense*, cited by Robin D. G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont, “The First Black Surrealists,” in *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 22 also for quotation.

and historical legacy of the sequence initiated by the Haitian revolution in the Americas, and for driving home the crucial point that Surrealism wasn't merely an ornamental literary or artistic current but a much more expansive effort.

Understood as a wider effort, Surrealism was concerned not only with freedom and its pathologies (including the fetishization of the imaginary in the era of capitalist and fascistic expansion, expository value, and visuality), motion, and transformation. But also, importantly, with the effects of the framing system of geo-political coordinates and traditional thought, or the defensive mentality that had informed the enterprise of European colonialism and expansionism in the Americas and elsewhere.

Traditional thought had left behind habits of judgment and thinking associated with the perspectival conventions of horizontal spatial perception, which project all that exists and can be perceived spatially on the one-eye view of a sovereign spectator placed on a zero-point vanishing from the scene. As if he were a painter located outside of the reality being arranged, looking at it from above or from a still center, the immobile, sovereign spectator can nevertheless orchestrate and organize every perceived motion in the peripheries out there. The artifice allows for the creation of an empty space and homogenous time, which can be calculated, classified, predicted, and managed.

The master-painter, who can thus classify all entities without thereby himself being classified is like an absent *ego cogito*. And the entities, the *cogitatum*. The latter is the colonized world, projected onto the one-eye viewpoint of the master. The Sovereign. Or the Eye of the Law. The convention of perspective was first established in early European modernity, and its toolkit decisively informed expansionism and empire, but you can still see it represented as the eye of the providence printed on the back of a US One Dollar bill. Ditto, perspective makes the single eye the center of the visible world, and everything else is arranged for the sovereign

eye as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. Of course, there is no reciprocity in such a world, just as there is no need for God to situate himself in relation to others: he is himself the situation.⁶

The contradiction inherent in the system of perspective -that it structures all images of reality to address a single spectator that can only be in one place at a time (unlike God)- was made visible as the crack on the wall of the house of empire and cracked wide open through the use of the essay forms and montage-like techniques used by the Surrealists and the Cubists, among others, akin to the tools and techniques of vanguard poetry, the kino-eye, and cinema. As they saw it, together with the habits of common-sense thinking and rhetorical disputation, an entire politicized aesthetics of persuasion had persisted after the demise of conventional perspective and traditional thought as a philosophy. In what shape or form? In the shape of a call for a decisive frame of reference in which everything and everyone would have its place and keep to their station.

2. A Shifting Cosmography.

To be precise, the critical emphasis of the experimental, poetic and essayistic strategies displayed by the young Caribbean writers of *Légitime Défense*, stepped in pre- and post-Marxian revolutionary traditions of intensified realism, focused on the Cartesian ocular-centrism that had presided over the opening up of Europe to the spaces and historical trajectories across and beyond the Atlantic Ocean and from there to the Pacific. Which gave Europe the capacity to survey, read, and unify (in feigned unity) such historical trajectories

⁶ See, Enrique Dussel, *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 2017) 268n22 on perspective and coloniality, referencing Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero. Ciencia, Raza, e Ilustración en la Nueva Granada, 1750-1816* (Bogotá: Editorial Javeriana, 2005).

and the technical archives of other great cultures. Thereby enabling Europe's assimilation, appropriation, and management of their dispersed knowledges, sciences, and technologies.⁷ Crucially, this capacity had been made possible by the mathematical system of symbolic coordinates deployed by conventional perspective and visual thinking which aimed at establishing, from an imaginary central position, the *impedimenta* or the obstacles that supposedly stood in the way of created things and creatures falling into their presumed determined place. Especially, the *humana impedimenta* that we would nowadays call "sociocultural," which Europeans perceived, covered over, and judged negatively as they travelled to Africa and the Americas encountering dwelling peoples with "inveterate customs" derived from the assumed "fact of being naturally but little constant in everything they start, and above all lacking fear and subjection." And, therefore, presumed to need civilization and conversion.⁸

That system of symbolic coordinates and economies of trope, imagery, and investment (psychic as well as financial) was materialized in conquering, catechistic, and "just war" theories and strategies, in Reformist and Jesuit Counter-reformist practices of spacetime measurement, self-discipline, spiritual exercises, and, ultimately, if not in a mode of being at least a *mode of appearing* stepped in post-Aristotelian and Cartesian analytic geometry as well as speculative geography. Such is the geography we should be shifting.

⁷ See Enrique Dussel, "Are Many Modernities Possible," in *Decolonizing Ethics. The Critical Theory of Enrique Dussel*, ed. by A. Allen & E. Mendieta (University Park: The State University of Pennsylvania Press) 22-41 at 27-8 and T. W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, trans. by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 144-47 for some sources of the ideas refined in these paragraphs. Also, Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, 15-24 and 183-88.

⁸ Jesuit chroniclers Nóbrega and Anchieta cited by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in *The Inconstancy of the Indian Soul. The Encounter of Catholics and Cannibals in the 16th Century*, 8-9.

To be clear, a mode through which European eyes saw Native American and African societies. An imaginary, resulting as an effect of the symbolic system of reference and the management of centrality. And, therefore, as an imaginary, derivative of the set of rhetorical effects of that framing symbolic system as opposed to being constitutive of rhetorical or poetic effect at large.

If one understands this shift in the symbolic framework of geography, spatial perception, or sensing and sense-making, which inverts the traditional idea that imagined intersubjective relations are the efficient or final constitutive cause of rhetoric, poetic, and cultural effect writ large, one begins to understand how high the stakes were in a thinking and action such as that which the young *Légitime Défense* writers committed themselves to. A thinking that investigated such effects and phenomena by bringing into touching distance the boundaries between analytical approaches (psychiatry, institutional analysis, psychoanalysis), symptomatic readings of political economy (liberal, anthropological, Marxian, etc.), and efforts to systematize poetic and rhetorical rebellious traditions which were also ethical (Surrealist, Cubist, ethnographic, African, Native American, etc.). To insist, that was the task of thinking that the signatories of the *Légitime Défense* manifesto sought to undertake during and after their period together.

Although these approaches might differ and at times seem to stand at cross-purposes on the question of the uses of reason, art, and science, let us argue that their conceptions of poetics, rhetoric, and critique become allied at some crucial junctions.

First, a conception of trope or image as not just a mere ornament but an experimental art-as-philosophy, or even cosmography. Second, a symptomatic reading of relational systems in which that which is relegated to a secondary, hidden, accessory position, or negated as mere outer dressing, crudely colored, a décor or ornament, unworthy of being seen or invisible, in

fact rises as an index of determinate negation, reality, or truth, to call to our attention more fundamental practices of relation and gaps of non-relation. Third, an awareness that as the symptomatic appearance of so-called ornaments is denied or covered over, wider pandemics or pathologies (which Frantz Fanon correctly termed “pathologies of freedom”) are allowed to extend and take over society and nature. Ultimately threatening us all with extinction, not only its purported sacrificial victims.⁹

On this fundamental aspect, let us recall that the term “ornament” comes from *ornata-um* and *ornatus*, the perfect passive participle of *ōrnō*. Meaning furnished, arranged, or equipped, and originating from *ordō* as well as a doublet of *ordinō*, referencing an arrangement or methodical series, like a cosmic system or an architecture. As in the Greek term *kosmos*, which refers in an ontological perspective to the relationship between particular parts and the whole and, therefore, references the specific order that holds among them. Which is not necessarily a timeless law but rather a set of past precedence and undecidable fate in time. The term also references the status of not being in isolation or invisibility but appearing and becoming part of an interconnected fabric or arrangement.

In ulterior analyses, the term comes from proto-Indo-European and non-European roots such as **h₂or-d*, from **h₂er-*, whence *artus*, as in “fit together” or con-joined, which cognates include the Sanskrit *rtá* (meaning “order” but also “right”) and the Avestan for “truth”, and

⁹ See, Lewis R. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness* (New York & London: Farrar, Straus and Girouz/Allen Lane, 2022) 17, for the source of our third point of contact: “the guiding theme of these pandemics -antidemocracy, colonialism, racism, and a disease- is invisibility. As pandemics of invisibility, they are nurtured by the insistence, whether psychological or ideological, against the appearance of their symptoms.” Also, Pierre Bruno, *Lacan and Marx. The Invention of the Symptom*, trans. by J. Holland (London: CFAR/Routledge, 2020) 152-69 on symptoms as the shocking “return of truth as such into the gap of a certain knowledge,” and Lacan crediting Marx for a critique of Hegelian) absolute idealism and (liberal) political economy, inventive of a relation between knowledge and truth in which the symptom becomes an irruption -or truth as rupture.

the same root for *ars* and *artis*, including the modern Spanish *arte* and the French *art*. All of which conserve an ambiguity that includes aesthetic dimensions (art), productive (skill, craft), as well as ontological and ethical-political (power, force, trans-motion, relation).

The *ornatus*, therefore, is never something that belongs to an isolated particular or to the perspective of an ordering viewpoint abstracted from the ordered set or scene. Only in relation to something else, a whole, does the particular receive its essential meaning or orientation and only as it becomes part of an interconnected arrangement, a play, an architectonic, or a system.

This specific, richer meaning (sense as significance and sense as orientation) is central to the trajectory of members of the *Légitime Défense* group such as René Ménil, and to successors in that trajectory such as Frantz Fanon, as they move literarily and critically. On the one hand, from Kantian and Hegelian understandings of judgment or language, system, and architectonics, to Marxian perspectives on the relation between the “poetry of the past” and the “poetry of the future.” Which is to say, to the crucial question of history-making in conditions not of one’s choice, or chance determinant, and the making of things public in history.¹⁰

And, on the other hand, from colonial and medicalized accounts of mind or the Spirit’s relationship with Nature or affording environments, norms and normality, to analytical and aesthetic perspectives concerning the ornamental character of tropes in the older sense of principles of relation, differentiation, and interconnection that produce domains, subjects, and their imaginal-discourses (as in the debates engaging Henri Ey, Francois Tosquelles,

¹⁰ Neil C. Gibson, *Fanon’s Renewal of the Marxist Formula*, in *New Frame*, posted November 2018, available at <https://www.newframe.com/fanons-renewal-marxist-formula/> Also, Michael Taussig, *Fieldwork Notebooks*, (Ostfildern & Kassel: documenta/Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012) 5 on ‘chance determinant’ as a principle of investigation.

Jacques Lacan, Gaston Bachelard), and within African and Native American cosmographies and cosmologies that emphasize being-in-relation, being-in-public, and modes of appearing or address.

In other words, this is the question of the generative character of the trope. Or the practical operations of an economy of ornament that, on a first glance, seems only to supplement an account of (absolute, timeless, anthropo-centered) human discursivity, motion and transformation within an a still spatial background, but which, on further analysis, serves as the constitutive principle for a (de-centered and time-bound) account of agency; or a different beginning. This is the second question: of in-sight, or the priority of *inventio* over *disputatio* (purely rational, inquisitorial discourse) which allows things to appear and provide “a vital sense of orientation” for a historical community of ethical agents whose flesh is riveted to time or history and in accordance with the affordances of material circumstances, as René Ménéil observed.¹¹

3. Best Défense.

Two orders of inter-related questions. Each with its own emphases and equipment, would allow the members of *Légitime Défense* and their related movements or groupings, to analyze and study the anti-systems of colonial and capitalistic political economic (non)relationality. But also, to reflect critically and rhetorically on their own passages between poetic and philosophical rhetorical languages. Especially when the latter seemed to forget or remained

¹¹ René Ménéil, *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, trans. by Margarita Montero (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica [1999] 2005) 17-8 and *Antilles déjà jadis/Tracées* (Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1999) for the French original. Also, Amy Allen & Eduardo Mendieta, “Introduction,” *Decolonizing Ethics. The Critical Theory of Enrique Dussel*, 12-3 for ethical agency as ethical flesh riveted to history.

blind to the ontological, ethical, and political sense of process, address, and connectivity across or beyond boundaries. Or fall for the mainstream metaphysical argument (running from Plato to John Locke) according to which sensibility and the sense of the poetic trope must be subjected to several disciplinary attempts to make them secondary to a primordial essence or substance. To be framed and represented as mere aesthetic ornament, as color and accessory. Such argument has projected the metaphysical connotations of the primacy of substance or form-giving essence (i. e. the arrangement of the visual world as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God), and the supposedly reduced value and significance of color and ornament, widely into space, peoples, and history.

The task of exploring addressivity and connectivity across and beyond boundaries, turning towards a process-driven, newer, transformative cosmography with different principles, was undertaken by the group of writers in question. Chief among them, the brilliant philosopher René Ménénil -of which contemporary sociologist Paget Henry has written in an attempt to introduce the thought of the Latin American thinker to English-speaking audiences. Together with his kin. Among them, Henry Etienne Léro, Simone and Pierre Yoyotte, Raymond Tchang and related others such as the Nardal sisters as well as Suzanne and Aimé Césaire.¹²

Légitime Défense, both the grouping and its manifesto, has been described as a crucial link between the work of Jane and Paulette Nardal in the *Revue du Monde Noir* (1931-31) and the publication *L'Étudiant Noir* (1935-36) in which the term *Négritude* appeared in print for the first time. As such, it proved decisive for the rise of the influential journal *Tropiques*. Both *L'Étudiant Noir* and *Tropiques* emerged within the *Négritude* network comprising Suzanne

¹² Paget Henry, "Réne Ménénil's Aestehtic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition," 143-168. Our views are intended here as both a reply and to provoke continuing dialogue and research on Ménénil's philosophical work as well as that of the greater Caribbean tradition.

and Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas. *Tropiques* counted René Ménénil among its key contributors. It has also been argued that the work of *Légitime Défense* in general and that of Ménénil in particular, are closer “in spirit and program” to the 1930s Cuban *Negrismo* of Nicolás Guillén, the jurist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, and Alejo Carpentier (who had also been a member of the Collège de Sociologie in Paris with other practitioners of surrealist ethnography such as Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Pierre Klossowski a once co-author and translator of Walter Benjamin) as well as the humorous prankishness of writers like the Cuban Juan Breá or Mary Low than to the essentialism of “what later became known as Négritude”.¹³

We tend to agree with such assessments. In any case, the point is that despite their differences the work of these authors is part of the longer and more proximate historical trajectories and experimentalism of native literary traditions of continental liberty in the Americas, the fates of republicanism and humanism this side of the Atlantic -including in the latter category that which Ernst Bloch called the “Aristotelian Left.” But also, of Afrocentrism as opposed to Eurocentrism, International Surrealism, the aesthetic dimension of anti-colonial revolutionary struggle, and some notable political and clinical critical efforts. Chief among them, surrealist ethnography, institutional analysis, and psychoanalysis thought of not only as therapy (practices of healing or cleansing) but also as subversive critical activity. Hence the links between the longer history of such experimental practices in Native American, African and Africana philosophy, and the newer experimentations of *Légitime Défense*, the

¹³ Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, “The First Black Surrealists”, in *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings From Africa and the Diaspora*, 26. Also, René Ménénil, “El paso de la poesía a la filosofía,” *Senderos/Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005) 102-118 for a critique of traces of essentialism in Négritude, emphasizing the distinction between poetry and philosophical prose.

work of W. E. B. Du Bois, the Harlem Renaissance, Marcus Garvey, Afro-Cuban *Negrismo* and *Grupo H*, Haitian *Indigènes* ferment, and, as suggested before, the anthropological experimentalism of the Collège de Sociologie, leading to some strands of anthropological and sociological research during and after structuralism such as that of Colombian sociologist, historian, and anthropologist Orlando Fals Borda.

In all these cases the emphasis is on symptomatic reading, the analysis of traumatic or transpositional experience in concrete contexts of violence in the international level, institutional and rebellious responses to co-existent practices of labor-extraction, and racism in colonial and post-colonial or capitalist contexts, as well as the richness and creativity of the lived experience of those subject to such contradictory violence. As in music, for example.

And in all such cases the aim has been to learn from the “lived history” of the Greater Caribbean in the shadow of colonialism, including the contemporary period since the 1930s onwards.

The focus is on the temporal register, time and history, on the dynamics of change and transformation that Marx and Fanon termed “the poetry of the future,” and, thus, also, on the kind of language and the formulas best suited to indicate and investigate such dynamics: the essay critical or poetic, the manifesto, visionary prophecy, realist ‘marvelous’ writing, and tales of survivance and negotiations including political constitutions (reformist or revolutionary). To gain insight into “the contradictory tensions and complexity of ordinary life, [and] to bring into being from within them a sense of vital direction for the community,” as Ménil put it at the very beginning of his collection of essays *Tracées*.¹⁴

¹⁴ René Ménil, *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 17.

4. Tracées (The Formula).

At the very beginning of *Tracées*, Ménil clarifies his usage of the term. “In the Antilles, *une tracée* is a path. A rudimentary trail blazed to gain access, ingress, or insight into the tropical forest. It is also, in a geo-historical reference, the land, the region, the geographical and historical trajectory opened to transit by such means.”¹⁵

The Oxford-Hachette dictionary provides a view into the rich polysemy of the term and its linguistic vicinity. From the verbalized form *dessiner* (as in drawing a line, which brings to mind Ménil’s philosophical struggle with Cartesians), to writing or *écrire*, to the orientation of a route. The latter seems closer to the noun used by Ménil. But as it happens in every linguistic dynamic the other meanings are always irreducible and haunt one’s usage.

Importantly, Ménil introduces the term in the context of a clarification of the form and content of his collection: “These texts are essays.” And to describe his own literary trajectory as “still in transit, not yet ready to end clearing its paths (*tracées*).”¹⁶

As can be seen, from the outset, the noun enters a constellation in motion, indicating the beginning of a transit. A new beginning. A principle of orientation, or sense. Not only sense as (linguistic) meaning but also in the sense of that word which can be borrowed from geo-historical and cosmographic science: sense as orientation. Thus, Ménil clarifies the aim of his adventure as a writer in general, and of this collection of essays in particular, as that of an adventurer entering the tropical forest to be schooled by it, to be transformed by it, and to bring into being or make visible the “living history” and “vital sense” of the Caribbean and its communities. Like the sun entering the constellation of our planets. Which is why Paget Henry is stupendously correct in quoting Anjuli Gunaratne’s rendition of Ménil’s text as revolving

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

around the English term “ingress” (meaning the action of entering, a means of access, and the arrival of the sun and planets in a transiting constellation).

It would be important, though, to retain the wider meaning of the term *tracées*. Not only as “linguistic trace” but also as an existential mark or an “ethical trace” of the historical transit of a community. And, as such, “the centerpiece in the architectonic of Ménéil’s” critical poetics, as Henry says.¹⁷

After all, the root of the polysemic constellation indicated by the word *tracées* can be traced, in turn, to the root “trans-.” Which signifies going across, beyond, and through, suggesting sustained motion, but also changing and changing thoroughly, suggesting significant metamorphosis, mimesis, and production. In this respect, it is important to notice the coherence between the expressive forms chosen by Ménéil and others like him to conduct their investigations -namely the essay, the manifesto, and the collection- and the material content constituted by the real relations of a community going through history while attempting to transform it under conditions of alterity and erasure. Such is the object of these investigations.

This form-content dynamic vis-à-vis the task of historical transformation in conditions not of one’s choosing (negotiations, reform, revolution) is what both Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon referred to as the content “exceeding the form” and as “radical mutations.” Or the affordances for change and the ways in which people change in struggle, respectively. Nigel C. Gibson has

¹⁷ Paget Henry, *Réne Ménéil’s Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition*, 161 citing Gunaratne’s observation in “The Tracées of René Ménéil: Language, critique and the Recuperation of History in Literature” (in *CLR James Journal* 21, nos.1-2, Fall 2020: 87-117) that Ménéil would have fused two French words, “*un tracée*, which means outline or route” and “*une tracée*, which means imprint, mark...” thereby accessing the plural constellation of connotations and, specifically, “to counter and undo ‘the effacement of history that building entails’,” in reference to both the static grammar of Cartesian “grounding” epistemology and “the erasures, the disappeared in the colonial narratives” [162].

appropriately identified this crucial matter in the philosophical and political trajectory of the Americas as the [for instance, Fanon's] "renewal of the Marxist formula."¹⁸

Let us keep this matter in mind as we explore the form-content dynamic of Ménéil's investigation.

And before anybody declares the work of writers like him formalistic and ornamental and dismisses it as such (as poetic modernist formalism, unscientific, or rhetorical in the sense of an exterior ornament and persuasion) it is important to take the likes of Ménéil at their word when they observe: "These texts are essays. They aim to make present (or visible) and evaluate in critical form the lived history of the Caribbean Antilles since the thirties. For it is then when our literary adventure began, still in transit, not yet ready to end clearing its paths (*tracées*)."¹⁹

5. Experiments in Writing (*Pasajero en tránsito*).

Why the essay form?

Such is the question of "the method of the anti-methodical, so to speak."²⁰ The essay form is an anti-methodical method in the precise sense of being the form in which contradictory aspects can coexist without immediately pressing for a final solution, an ultimate decision, or last a judgment. Or, for the refutation of theses or premises subject to dispute and aiming to effect, as a consequence, some kind of necessity or quasi-geometrical certainty.

¹⁸ Neil C. Gibson, *Fanon's Renewal of the Marxist Formula*, in *New Frame*, posted November 2018, available at <https://www.newframe.com/fanons-renewal-marxist-formula/>

¹⁹ René Ménéil, *Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 17 (my rendition).

²⁰ T. W. Adorno, "Letter to Elisabeth Lenk, October 31, 1967" in *The Challenge of Surrealism. The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. and trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015) 156-9.

As such, the essay presents itself as an alternative to the philosophical and juristic practice as well as the conception of rationality that co-emerged together with modern European expansion. The latter uses pedantic precision and language as if it were both timeless and universal. And it takes recourse to a demonstrative method modelled on siege and forensic architectures based ultimately on the geometric calculus of what is spatially perceptible (as in the martial sciences and siege arts of poliorcetics and castrametation, themselves dependent on the visual conventions of linear perspective) supposedly able to ground and guarantee certainty of knowledge once and for all.

Such was, to be precise, the methodical conception proposed by and often associated with people like René Descartes, Malebranche, or Thomas Hobbes during the first half of the baroque period in the seventeenth century. Extended and consolidated as a predominant or even as the exclusive version of rationality from the second half of that century onwards, and still widely accepted despite the strong criticism formulated against it from philosophical approaches as varied as logical positivism, critical thinking and theory, hermeneutics and phenomenology.

Perhaps the most widely accepted realization of this conception of rationality lies in its application between theology, modern science, and technology which extended geometric calculus from mathematics and martial architectonics “to political science (Hobbes) and the social sciences (Comte, Spencer... Durkheim, Stuart Mill,)” Thomas Carlyle’s concept of visuality applied to history, and Jeremy Bentham’s work on political reform and laws.²¹

²¹ Ambrosio Velasco Gómez, “Racionalidad, Diversidad Cultural y Controversias Políticas en el Mundo Iberoamericano: Humanismo Republicano ante Racionalismo Moderno,” in A. Velasco G. & J. L. Villacañas Berlanga, *Humanismo Republicano Iberoamericano. Un Debate* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Nueva/Minerva, 2019) 29-58 at 31.

As the Mexican historian of ideas Ambrosio Velasco observes, the identification of this version of modern rationality with scientific knowledge as such has occurred to the detriment of “other [older and newer] conceptions of rationality such as rhetoric and dialectics... dismissed because such forms of dialogical rationality aren’t totally dependent on methodical precision and conclusive rigor aiming to guarantee decisive and definitive truth or certainty.”²²

In contrast with the aim of timeless infallibility, posited as the end-goal of demonstrative (Cartesian) reasoning from at least the period of European expansion onwards, rhetorical and dialectic practices of rationality such as those materialized in the surrealist essay and the artistic or political manifesto focus on time-bound phenomena and go through fallibilist negotiations. They aspire to “defend the individual phenomenon without considering whether it contains the totality within itself or is somehow typical,” and to conduct controversies on temporal matters which may give place to temporary consensus or remain fallible, as Elisabeth Lenk says apropos of the essay-form in her exchanges with T. W. Adorno. Thus, essays let go of supposedly essential attributes, substantive premises, or presumably unchanging frames of reference. The essay “frees itself from the dictates of the attributes that since the definition in [Plato’s] *Symposium* have been ascribed to ideas.” It shies away from dogma, “from the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally invariable concept, is more deserving of ontological dignity than the individual phenomenon that it grasps.” Which is why Walter Benjamin, in the preface to his book on the German tragic drama, called the essay “the alternative of philosophical form,” as Lenk says.²³

So, the essay is meant to dwell on matters that are temporal. It deals with time-bound phenomena, which can be corrected and transformed in the course of ulterior negotiations.

²² Ibid.

²³ Elisabeth Lenk (with T. W. Adorno), *The Challenge of Surrealism*, 158.

Opening new paths and leaving traces. Or making visible the traces of other processes that would like to erase their own historicity and instead appear “natural” or somehow determined and unchanging. Like sovereignty, colonialism and empire, or capital. Which are self-erasing and admit of no critique or replace critique with double-entry bookkeeping. To this extent, the form of the essay cannot be an expression of dogma or pedantic precision in critical thinking or theory, “but its corrective,” as Lenk observes.²⁴

Which is to say that the essay problematizes the connection between critical thinking or negotiations (creative of institutions) and (institutional) decision in at least two ways:

First, by pointing out that we cannot exactly know whether or not we can trust our decisions, but what we can do is say what we are actually against when we take time to think, when we take a break, or refrain from doing something like carrying out a command or a given order. Like Bartleby in Herman Melville’s short story. Crucially, this is where agency and (non-pathological or not alienated) freedom resides.

Second, we can distinguish between the kind of dogmatic or pedantic precision that looks at an individual phenomenon or act, seeks out the relevant framing posited law, and comes to a judgment. And, on the other side, a fantastic precision that takes apart the phenomenon or the act into its various motifs and sub-motifs, setting in motion a constellation-like process that leads to an end-point where judgment cannot be the final consequence.²⁵

6. Shocking Return.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. Also, Alexander Kluge, *Differentiation and Orientation* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2019) 435, 439 for the distinction between “pedantic” and “fantastic” precision in the connection between judgment and decision.

Ménil distinguishes between two kinds of essays: the critical-literary essay and the poetic essay.

His essays are literary, Ménil says, “in regard to what they transmit in terms of anger and emotion,” but also critical “insofar as they take time and distance from the contradictory tensions and complexity of ordinary life and from within them bring into being a sense of vital direction for the community.” Poetic essays or stylistic experiments are distinguished from and added to the critical ones in a collection because “the former function as an index of the reality of a dimension that is complementary to that of existence: the imaginary domain or space of bodily frisson,” like the sudden restitution of a memory, involuntarily activated by a photo in an album collection. Which is thrilling, hits you like a lightning bolt and brings back, in shocking return, the warmth of nostalgic moments and torrid spaces that constitute the natural elements of our identities in process.²⁶

Ménil’s characterization of the function of the poetic essay, together with the critical essay in a collection, resonates very strongly with what another practitioner and student of surrealism, the German literary critic and sociologist Elisabeth Lenk had to say about the meaning of modernism in surrealist practice. Modern, she observed, “is the element of surprise that attaches to chance... No longer does the modern consist only of things that assert their novelty in opposition to the old, or that, as ephemera,” or mere ornament, “elude the comprehension of the classically minded. It is whatever emerges” and is brought into being, “when a sensuality that has become completely subjective comes in contact with the world.”²⁷

²⁶ René Ménil, *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 18.

²⁷ Elisabeth Lenk, “Sense and Sensibility. Afterword to Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant,” in Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk, *The Challenge of Surrealism, 187-196* at 188-9.

She is speaking of an objective process, “the concretization of ideas.” This, she elaborates in a way that chimes not only with Ménéil’s characterization of the function of the poetic essay but also with concept of *choc en retour* or “shocking return” that features prominently in the work of other writers in Ménéil’s vicinity, including Suzanne and Aimé Césaire as well as Frantz Fanon. She says apropos of surrealism in general and Louis Aragon’s in particular:

The frisson that takes the place of surprise is not evidence of a psychic state; instead, like evidence itself, it is an index of reality. Poetry stretches beyond its own limits, toward myth. Pan, ‘this thrill-exciting being’, returns, and with him the feeling for nature that Hegel, in his History of Philosophy, described as that of the Greeks. It is not only in the frisson, shudder, or shiver that Aragon’s modern mythology coincides with Hegel’s definition, but in its concept of nature as well. ‘The Natural holds its place in their minds only after undergoing some transformation by Spirit -not immediately,’ says Hegel. ‘Man regards Nature only as an excitement to his faculties, and only the Spiritual which he has evolved from it can have any influence over him.’ Aragon [like Ménéil] rediscovers this type of pagan nature in the metropolis. He mounts a polemic against the monotheistic, Christian concept of nature, which reserves the realm of the objective for a nature that is untouched by man and reduces everything else to a mere artifact [or fetish]. Our nature is the city. The countryside is denuded of gods. The peasants, one-time creators of myth, have moved their fields to Paris.²⁸

Thus, the distinction between the distancing effect of critique and the frisson-like experimental effect of the poetic essay or stylistic writing means that, when brought together in a collection of essay-forms, they allow for a dynamic between distance and shocking return, or the journey back from the imagination to the here and now. The end-result of this dynamic of distance and journey back is a re-enchantment of nature and the cosmos. But of a different

²⁸ Elisabeth Lenk, “Sense and Sensibility. Afterword to Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant,” at 189 setting Aragon against Cartesianism, citing G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (new York: Colonial Press, 1899) 234-5 and T. W. Adorno on city arcades turned into a still life. My add-ons.

kind, as Lenk's passage suggests. Ménil and the other surrealists were well aware that by the early twentieth century, like fairies and tricksters and witches and pirates, the lost world of cosmic fullness had been cast into childhood. In 1902, Georges Méliès had infused the cosmos with the new magic of film in his *A Trip to the Moon*. But the man-in-the-moon, like the fairies and tricksters and witches and pirates, "had long disappeared into the fenced-off precincts of childhood, and the adult's imagination of the child's imagination" or the magic of law and the state was no longer "up to the task," as the surrealist anthropologist Michael Taussig remarks.²⁹

The poetic figures of frisson, who turn out to be the real-life historical inventors of rebellious things that terrified the colonizer in the Americas – the survivance of indigenous tricksters, the hydrarchy of Caribbean pirates, the matriarchy of women-, were repressed in the fantasies and nightmares of our parents. And then, "in your face with a rush and bang came the return of the repressed." Like the moon and the sun and the forest as a school in a world blighted by "primitive accumulation" and climate change. Capital accumulation ate its own debt, birthed the bastard fascists, and the cosmos returned like a vengeful beast or the stepmother of children's tales.³⁰

Add the new quality of connectedness that Ménil would call "the velocity of the Spirit," with an obvious nod to the dazzling technologies that make us fly fast and high, mimetic beings in wonderlands of what until not long ago was pure make-believe. Or the metamorphic sublime of runaway images, photos, goods and metamorphoses we have observed in the oil palm plantations of the Caribbean coast of Colombia, owned by corporations and landowners that

²⁹ Michael Taussig, *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020) 55.

³⁰ Ibid.

use paramilitaries to force out the peasants living in Papayal and Las Pavas. What you get is the dialectical image of body-space, the sun and the tropical forest arising in the sky of history, and experiments, essays, in the techniques of awakening from the fantasies and nightmares of our parents. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical, the Copernican, turn of remembrance that was covered over in the metaphors of the new centrality of Man.³¹

What follows, and this is what Ménil is getting at, is the anti-method of metamorphosing into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things. That is, the invention and practice of a kind of judgment and precision different from the pedantic precision of cartesian earth-flattening and forensic, juristic, final judgment or decision. A fantastic judgment made possible through the essay-form, which translates “fantastic” or “the marvelous” into a part of the imagination and then into a point of shocking contact with real relations. Which is why the trajectory of the marvelous initiated by Ménil in 1941 the more idealist (Hegelian) “Introduction to the Marvelous” could shift its direction and turn towards and intersect the intensified realism of the marvelous in the theoretical work of Alejo Carpentier in Ménil’s 1990s critical essay “On the Theory of Marvelous Realism.”³²

In “Introduction to the Marvelous” (1941) Ménil had distinguished between two forms of the mimetic faculty. On the one hand, mimesis as the imitation of nature for its domestication and management by mankind (let’s call it Mimesis 1). “But if we stray too far from the forces

³¹ René Ménil, “Evidencias relacionadas con el espíritu y su velocidad” [available in English as “Evidence Concerning the Mind and its Speed” in M. Richardson’s *Refusal of the Shadow*, -147-152] and “Anuncios publicitarios, 1920” both in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 167-175 and 326-8. Also, Juan Felipe García, *El exterminio de la isal de Papayal* (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Javeriana, 2019).

³² René Ménil, “Introduction to the Marvelous” in *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 82 [also available as “Introduction to the Marvelous”, in Michael Richardson (ed.) *Refusal of the Shadow. Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996) 90-95] and “Sobre la teoría del realismo maravilloso” in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 360-66.

of nature in order to domesticate them, we risk missing their reality and in fact missing an aspect of our own destiny.” Thus, on the other hand there’s mimesis (let’s call it Mimesis 2) as the receptivity of nature and its gifts. Which are the gifts “that are the result of mankind’s response to the powerful shocks of life...,” he says in a way that resonates with Suzanne Césaire’s understanding of the new science of anthropology, as Paget Henry has pointedly observed.³³

The comparative study of civilizations is not only a clarification of the past, Suzanne Césaire says, “of what it means to be human, but also a glimpse of the future.” As such, it shows “that the idea of uninterrupted progress, cherished by the nineteenth century, which thought civilization progressing along a single line from primitive barbarism to modern high culture, was a false idea,” she says. “Instead, it goes in multiple directions, from one ‘shock’ to the next, just as the vital force goes from mutation to mutation among the diversity of living species.” In receptive response to the forces of nature and according to its material affordances (what we have called Mimesis 2). This is how “the stars, the seasons have determined in plant-man, animal-man a ‘revolution of the mind’, a veritable alteration of his nature that is the distinguishing feature of the ‘shock’...He was turned upside down by a sudden emotion, urgent and irresistible. Thus, the appearance and disappearance of the moon gave rise to the seizure of the concepts of time and death... Man became conscious of his individual existence and the problem of his destiny,” Suzanne Césaire points out.³⁴

It is true, as Henry says, that the essayistic and poetic practice of Ménéil (and others like Suzanne Césaire) reaches here an ontological level that is richer than the cartesian

³³ Paget Henry, *René Ménéil’s Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition*, 157.

³⁴ Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage. Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, ed. by D. Maximin (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009) 7-8.

understanding of reality as a delimited zone of spatial perception. It is also true that at this point a poetics rises to the world's scale. Which can be identified with absolute reality or "Spirit" to use Ménéil's Hegelese, a system of perception and imagination going across the ego cogito. That is, onto an aspect of the expanded view of reality revealed by the imaginary complement of co-creating poetic imagination: "the land of the marvelous as the most stunning revenge we have at the level of subjective reality -against a life that... depresses us to the extent that it is in thrall to practical reason" in its utilitarian garb. "The marvelous is the image of our absolute liberty," he said, only to immediately qualify the statement: "But a symbolic image."³⁵

If so, what about the cogitatum? Isn't it the case that the essay-form in its mimetic function as an index of reality, a point of contact with reality receptive to its impact in return, is also pointing beyond the encompassing Hegelian framework that retains the sticking point in the absolute subject? It would seem that in bringing their poetics as close as possible to Hegel's Spirit, Ménéil and others traverse it and find themselves on the other side. The side of the poetry of the future: including decolonization, de-racialization, but also a transformation of philosophy in the name of the de-absolutization of the creative subject (i. e. Mankind) and the reality of time. Taking time to think, to negotiate, and transform.

7. Decolonize!

We have found in Ménéil's work a form of judgment which pauses decision and gives itself time to think, also time to negotiate and transform real relations. Isn't this precisely what the signatories of the *Légitime Défense* manifesto meant when they specified the form they were

³⁵ René Ménéil, "Introduction to the Marvelous", in Michael Richardson (ed.) *Refusal of the Shadow. Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996) 90-95 at 91.

using as well as their conception of practical reasoning and judgment by saying: “This is only a preliminary warning”? An emphasis on real relations and time that is also apparent in Ménéil’s characterization of transformative historical agency (i. e. Marx’s formula of the “poetry of the future”) as “the process of playing the decisive card of the Spirit -in the Hegelian sense of the word.”³⁶

On the side of real relations and the politics of the time, phrases such as this one meant the need to break free from the hold of the white plantocracy over the future of Guadeloupe, Martinique and the rest of the Caribbean as well as Latin America. It also meant putting an end to the uncritical support given to it by the colored and *criollo* bourgeoisie. During the *Légitime Défense* years, it meant that Ménéil would help creating institutions, such as the Martinican Federation of the French Communist Party and, together with his co-editors, aligning their politics with the Third International, for good and ill.

Diverging from, but complementary to the anti-capitalist critique coming from the internationalist leftist movement, the critical eye of the internationalist surrealist movement focused on the ways in which the production and extraction of surplus-value was becoming more and more dependent on practices of management, exhibition, exposition, and spectacle as well as finance’s use of ethnographic and geographic “knowledges” and imaginaries to monetize largely tropical speculative ventures. This included the publicity-driven production of pacified publics wedded, in fascination of abomination, to a model of the human that was projected from the metropolises of the world as an ultimate point of reference and the gold standard. It was against this centered, absolutist model of the human, “along with the

³⁶ René Ménéil et al. *Légitime Défense Manifesto*, in Franklin Rosemont & Robin D. G. Kelley (eds.) *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 36.

assimilated version of the *evolué* for the colonized, that the surrealist movement had declared all-out war,” as Paget Henry observes.³⁷

On the side of poetic critique and philosophy, these political economic observations, at times clothed in Hegelian garb, meant that the psychological misery which resulted from the spectacular paradoxes of expansionist capitalism, projecting sublime sentiments and images for id- and ego-identification while at the same time irritating or repressing them, was internalized in different but related ways by the middle classes of the metropolis and the *evolué* and *criollo* elites of the peripheries. The former engaged in exoticist voyeurism “naturalized” in cultural production and reciprocal infantilization, while the latter denied themselves, made up their faces with white powder, and sought to imitate the style and culture of the metropolis coming to view themselves as exotic to themselves. For Ménil’s comrade, Pierre Yoyotte, the former, excited by the naturalism of voyeurist exoticism and infantile fascination, would be “absolutely ripe” for fascist counterrevolution. For Ménil, the latter would tragically espouse a “bad consciousness” expressed firstly in the poetry of “colonial exoticism” but which could later infuse rebellious, even anti-colonial and surrealist poetry.³⁸

As a good dialectician, Ménil deploys the opposed themes of economic misery and psychological misery, fascism and colonialism, naturalist exoticism and colonial exoticism, or the opposite and the same (*vis-à-vis* colonial difference) in ways that make them appear as either two sides of the same coin, not really opposites, or sides that being opposites reappear rejuvenated on a higher level or at a different moment in history. But his dialectics are no

³⁷ Paget Henry, *René Ménil’s Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition*, 149.

³⁸ René Ménil, “Sobre el exotismo colonial,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 23-32, originally published in *La Nouvelle Critique* in 1959.

longer affixed to identity or grounded in the understanding of an absolute subject, mere ornamental elements of some encompassing frame.

With M n il, we can say that dialectics are deployed without reservation, regret, or anxiety. His historical (as opposed to linear or Cartesian) perspective is no longer *R cksicht* (a backward glance, a nostalgic look) but rather *R cksichtslos*, to use the German term associated in critical theory with the ruthless migration of tropes, metaphors, and motifs from the timeless and transcendence to the profane and geo-historical. And from the eternal look *ad pessimum* of generic, pedantic judgment to the detective-like look of those who try to show what is it that they are up against and engage with fantastic precision in determinate negative judgment. "Because jazz itself is the result of a process using the very contradictions of being and its style consists of forming by means of music or any other means (note this also applies to poetry) -emotions and images in progression or transition," M n il says.³⁹

He's describing the movement of determinate negation: from the contradictions of spatialized, framed, timeless) being to the invention of tropes, images, and resonances that create in us the feeling of the reality of appearance, moment, and transition. This is a ruthless movement, an upright walk from being seen as a generic negative term (or not being seen at all) to a human being who responds to determinate negativities -structural, invented, human, and not. Thus, this is not just about becoming other but becoming becoming itself. As in jazz improvisation, in bebop, blues, rock, and other musical techniques and technologies born of the fusion of Africa, Native America, and Europe in the Caribbean.

The site of decolonial struggle is the moment. For the site of the struggle against coloniality is less a mode of being (eternity) and more a mode of appearance (the objective reality of the

³⁹ Ren  M n il, "Poetry, Jazz & Freedom," *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 82-3.

moment and the denial of truths outside of time): it is about seeing and being seen in a certain way.

To decolonize we must see-hear otherwise.

8. The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, But the Protest Will Be Sampled.

Music brings about humor, irony, dance-provoking suasion, and insight in what we see and hear through the manifestation in trope, sound, lyrics, and performance of what Ménéil calls, after others, “double consciousness.”⁴⁰

We speak of a performance that evokes prophetic imagination, and which turns us to enjoyment in the exercise of consciousness itself. We use the terms “prophetic” and “turn toward” quite carefully here. Being reminded of the former’s derivation from the Greek *pro-phainestai* in relation to vision and poetic or rhetorical work done *before* or in advance of and constituting the means and modes through which something appears and appearances function (i. e. prophetic address, symbolic forms, etc.). Also, of the latter’s derivation from *pro-trepein*, meaning precisely *to turn toward*, which is different from the Greek term for persuasion *-peitho*.

Thus, we are talking about performances that sway us to enjoying something because it’s valuable in and of itself, or “protreptic” performances that are different from rhetorical or publicity’s persuasion and help us gain in-sight. Artistic interpretation of this kind goes beyond

⁴⁰ René Ménéil, “Psicoanálisis de la historia,” in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 59-65 at 60: “Martinican society as a whole, under colonial dispensation, is trapped in the dead-end of a *double consciousness*: It is pushed in one direction by a Martinican consciousness that refuses to die, or to be reduced to silence and zero, and is instead committed to hard work here and now (for this physiology, this economy, this country and its geography, etc.). And in another direction by a different, metropolitan consciousness that is intransigent and wants Martinican consciousness to have its center outside of itself; in the French metropolis (via radio exhortations, the press, and the French state).” My rendition and emphasis.

itself. It cannot be reduced to mere ornament or advertisement, and instead relies on eliciting enjoyment in shifting consciousness toward the better life.

Here, the emphasis is on the *shifting* and *prophetic* function of trope, sound, lyrics, and performance. Also, on how it elicits enjoyment. This is perhaps the most important implication we can draw from Ménéil's work. For it offers an account of a kind of reasoning and call to action ahead of the situation that cannot be reduced to utilitarian or pragmatic context, probabilistic approximation, or persuasive publicity.

If it is true that we are called to act in this situation by a determinate injustice, and often *before* we know the truth about the situation, it is important to understand better the nature of this *call*.

We believe this may be the most important contribution of the work associated with the Caribbean Philosophical Association, as expressed in its motto: "Shifting the Geography of Reason." We propose this means not only "resurrecting the disappeared houses of Caribbean philosophy," making scholars like Ménéil visible again, or simply adding the Greater Caribbean as a region to the existing canon of academic philosophy and to the history and philosophy of ethics and human rights.⁴¹

But also, most importantly, clarifying the nature of the call to act in the name justice. As one that takes place *before* we have absolute or complete knowledge of the situation and deploys formal means to sway, to shift or *turn toward* action on the reality of the situation (outward-oriented action). Not because we can guarantee beforehand that our action will be consequential. But, precisely, because if no one knows the absolute truth of the situation or the end of the story beforehand then no theory of the impossible can hold -including the

⁴¹ Paget Henry, "René Ménéil's Aesthetic Marxism and the Caribbean Philosophical Tradition," 162.

theory that the overthrow of such structures as coloniality and capitalism is unimaginable. And because such thinking and action is joyful and prized in and of itself, even if it is inconsequential and we do not gain immediate recompense or a price for it, insofar as it provides us with the means to value ourselves as well as others.

After all, isn't that what philosophy and the revolutionary formula are all about? Since at least the Ancient Egyptian *Immortality of Writers*, written by Irsesh some 3,200 years ago, and Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (rather than *Poetics*) written about 2,370 years ago, whether the question of thought and action concerns self-discovery and self-value, a search for truthful knowledge, or an investigation to invent new means of sensing and making sense of facts as well as institutional attitudes -as in aesthetics, law, and politics- it always involves an aspect of reality obscured by some form of erasure or invisibility that needs to be overcome. In this case, the "price" of truthful thought and action designates not only the courage required to recognize proven facts, objective structures, and to refuse the veils, lies, and even the commands standing in the way of responding to structures and institutions when faced with newer facts or unprecedented challenges. Also, the creativity or inventiveness necessary to invent or re-invent structures and institutions when such forms are less than the content that challenges them. At that point in time, "there is no model for what has not yet come into existence," as M n il correctly observes and is, therefore, necessary to invent new means and forms of sensing and making sense.⁴²

⁴² Ren  M n il, "Poetry, Jazz & Freedom" in *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 85. Also, Drucilla Cornell, "Derrida's Negotiations as a Technique of Liberation," *Discourse. Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 39.2, Special Issue: Photoelectric Techniques of Liberation, edited by Oscar Guardiola-Rivera (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, Spring 2017) 195-213 at 197: "negotiation demands that we develop techniques of liberation."

In that respect, at least, the question of truthful thought and action has been intertwined with the question of why and how to disobey, or protest and inspire revolt, since at least the dawn of philosophy. In short, we gain consciousness, disobey, protest, and revolt because not doing so would be too diminishing and deadly. Every profound political protest and revolt responds to a call made by a justice that is absent, a form of negativity. Hence the question: how to make negativity apparent? The answer: we must invent the means by which such negativity can be seen and heard. New techniques of liberation. New music, new choreographies, new writing, a different performance.

Further, acts of disobedience, protest, and revolt are often underpinned by a hope that in the future justice will be established in better institutions. But this hope is not the first reason for such acts to happen. Rather, to protest is to refuse being reduced to invisibility, to silence or zero, to no value, or to the kind of value that reduces our different qualities to nought or can be priced and accrued by someone else, here and now. Disobedience, protest, and revolt are attempts to salvage the present, this moment, its value and our value in it, whatever the future holds.

In that respect, at least, such acts may be inconsequential. Notice such adjective is temporal. The problem is how to live with the inconsequentiality of our acts of protest and refusal time and again. That is why M n il's view of the moment is important. "For us, we do not hesitate to view the moment... as the arena where all the problems that are common to humankind must be resolved," he says. "In the moment is found all the previous instants to a particular action in the process of becoming," both the *before* (the memory-work ahead of the situation) and the *turn toward* the (performance-work or address form to shift to) that which is coming to be. In other words, the moment exists in the present, "however, the present itself exists in a particular existence that is the outcome of its extension through duration in time." Against

essentialist abstraction or performance-measure (average-labor, clock-time, priced time), M n l helps us recognize and salvage time (and our work in it) in and of itself. As in music. True performance. And in protest.⁴³

The moment of disobedience and improvisation, when revolt or a protest is made, if it is made, matters. It becomes indelible. And matters most because it makes things and people mattering. Although passing, like every moment in and of time, the act acquires a certain indelibility. It becomes imprinted in memory, so to speak. Further, an act of disobedience, revolt, or protest, always improvised insofar as it happens before having full knowledge of the situation, is not principally a sacrifice for some alternative future. It is an inconsequential salvage of the present very much in the same way that Irsesh and Aristotle urged the young to turn towards the pursuit of truth, writing, or philosophy not because of its effects but rather because they're valuable or prized in and of themselves. To make ours the famous lyrics of Scott Gill-Heron, the revolt and the revolution will not be televised. But the protest will be sampled.

9. Illuminations.

To borrow from the language of economics and speak of a "price" in relation to truth and truthful performances such as Gill Scott-Heron's, of dissent and disobedience, music, or philosophy immediately strikes us as inadequate.

With good reason. We would be hard pressed to find examples of a situation where truth could be bought and sold. It is inconceivable that in exchange for monetary prizes one could

⁴³ Ren  M n l, "Poetry, Jazz & Freedom," 84-5. Also, John Berger, *Bento's Sketchbook* (London: Verso, 2011) 79-80 for the inconsequentiality of acts of protest that, nevertheless, become indelible in the moment in which they happen.

obtain scientific results, great music, spiritual depth or value, and legal as well as political new precedents or true justice and better institutions. At the most, one could secure indirect benefits that would fall, appropriately, under the category of corruption. In short, when it comes to gaining consciousness when we fall short of true self-consciousness, as individuals or people, as in the case of enslaved or oppressed peoples, as was the case of entire communities or countries during the apotheosis of war in the lands of our childhood, to speak of a price to justify so much death and silence makes no sense. Just as it doesn't make sense to speak of "the circulation of women" the same way one would speak of the circulation of messages or money.⁴⁴

For we are talking about what is valuable in and of itself: truth and memory, for example. Which has less to do with the ability to remember and be remembered than with a visionary power providing access to the past and, here and now, turn our eyes to the open future. The inspired execution of the music and song of the poet and the musician *performs* access to such a domain of vision, which the contemporary philosopher and critic Drucilla Cornell appropriately calls the "imaginary domain." Only that here we are emphasizing not only the imaginary but also, or rather, the power of signs and symbolic forms -as in music, ritual dance, or poetic language- to have its effect in producing such a domain as what it states, and to shift our thought and action in the direction of rupture shown in such domains as joyful thought and action.

⁴⁴ "The case of entire communities or countries during the apotheosis of war in the lands of our childhood." The reference here is to Colombia, as per the former Director of Colombia's Truth Commission, Rodolfo de Roux S. J. in *Clase en vivo: Qué significa el informe de la Comisión de la verdad para Colombia?* Streamed on 22 September 2022 from Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=rR-65g6dMJs>

Crucially, we don't need a hero to embody such actions into the light of *alétheia*. For this is what common people do.

This is how they make history in conditions not of their own choosing.

This is how we gain consciousness, which is what those who rule by fear in turn fear the most.

To go across and beyond the veils that obscure our consciousness of ourselves and the times we are in. Including overgeneralized conceptions of the search for truth, memory-as-*alétheia* (literally, un-veiling), the memory of the dead or the disappeared in our deified wars, the vexing question of monetary compensation for speech or poetic performance versus philosophy, and what Ménil referred to when he used the term double consciousness.

It is worth quoting at length Lewis R. Gordon's brilliant illumination of this concept:

The concept, emerging from nineteenth-century philosophy, is well known in Africana thought through its various formulations from W. E. B. Du Bois, who explored, phenomenologically, the experience of being seen as a negative term and the awareness of the perspective through which that comes into being. In this formulation, to be black is to be a problem instead of a human being who faces problems. In the former, white is right and black is that which disrupts legitimate spheres of existence. In the latter, there is a world created by whites that obstructs the mechanisms, technologies, or options available for black people to live ordinary modes of existence. Realization of the latter raises what Fanon calls sociogenic (individual organic) and phylogenic (species-oriented) problems. Such realization places one in a dialectical relationship by virtue of identifying the contradictions posed by false gods (avowed, intrinsically legitimate whiteness). The collapse of presumed universal whiteness doesn't entail universal blackness, however. Instead, it particularizes both, through an ongoing interaction and unveiling of contradictions in a universalizing process instead of one that posits a presumed complete, universal outcome. This dynamic process Paget Henry calls *potentiated double consciousness*. I have also referred to it as *teleological suspensions of disciplinary practices*, by which I mean the

paradoxical going beyond systems for the sake of reality. In music, this means performing forms of music beyond music.⁴⁵

The point here is that in the colonial/capitalist mode of appearance, people at the periphery are generally seen as a negative term, as a problem, or not seen at all. Paget Henry speaks of color eclipsing culture. “The latter became more invisible as Africans were transformed into negroes and niggers in the minds of Europeans.” Gordon notes that the issue of double consciousness arose for Du Bois in the shadow of a question that remained as the background frame of his personal interactions with white interlocutors: “How does it feel to be a problem?” A question that presupposes the consciousness and subjectivity of the black person being addressed, and yet in the same moment covers over and denies the humanity of that black addressee, reducing the latter to zero.

Such rhetorical scenes of address (which Henry pointedly termed “Calibanization”, in reference to the Shakespearean address between the European colonizer Prospero and native Caliban in the tragic drama *The Tempest*) involve a form of pedantic, indeterminate judgment. Meaning we won’t understand what is involved in these rhetorical situations if we focused too intently on that which appears -the subject, his speech, its effects on an audience-

⁴⁵ Lewis R. Gordon, “Rockin’ It in Blue: A Black Existential Essay on Hendrix,” *Discourse. Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 39.2, *Special Issue: Photoelectric Technologies of Liberation*, guest-edited by O. Guardiola-Rivera (Wayne University Press, Spring 2017) 216-229 at 227. The concept “double consciousness” can also be traced back to African-American folklore, where it refers to a capacity of vision into the future (similar to Colombian surrealist artist Heriberto Cogollo’s tale of the “vision of the Nohor”), to medical and psychological literature, and to the alienation of white Americans, *evolué* Caribbeans and Latin American *criollos* from European ethos. It can also be seen as the theorization of “a period of racial/imperial domination in the self-consciousness of the Africana subject that is absent from the life of Hegel’s European subject.” See on this, Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications (2005) 94. See also, Heriberto Cogollo, “The World of a Nohor” in *Black, Beige & Brown. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 133.

and such other generalities. We also need to develop means of seeing what is at work behind, or rather, before the appearance or in this case the disappearance of African and native peoples.

To see that which in fact exerts a determinant role in structuring the modes through which such simulations and dissimulations, appearances and disappearances function. Only then we could make a determinate judgment born out of fantastic rather than pedantic precision. To take a stance or a position that is neither mere affirmation nor indeterminate negation. An ethical position able to escape essentializing and generalizing the affirmative or the negative sides of simplistic binary oppositions such as those that have “linked the binary black/white to other binaries such as primitive/civilized, irrational/rational, body/mind,” and the rest of bi-dimensional determinations drawn, as it were, on a Cartesian plane of representation.⁴⁶

10. Other Dimensions (of the Public).

The conclusion that we begin to draw from the previous sections is that the Du Boisean question of “double consciousness,” which M n il and others in the tradition of Caribbean philosophy have written about in their poetic and critical essays isn’t just of epistemological significance. It also concerns how to best account for the concrete moment and the concrete means through which subjects and their modes of relation to others are structured or constituted. These other dimensions of the question pertain, in other words, to a theory of the public.

One that does not primarily name either a sphere of discursive procedures, demands, and cultural products for public consumption, or an insular realm of (inter-subjective) human

⁴⁶ Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason* (2000) 11-2.

affairs. But the moment and domain at which subjects come into being, or appear, and through which an economy of tropes, investments, and commitments that structures or constitutes subjects trans- or inter-temporally acquires a determinate form in history, is animated, and can be transformed.

It is in the context of such a theory of the public, of public appearance and disappearance, that we can best understand the profound implications of Du Boisean and Ménéil's uses of the concept of double consciousness. Including the work of members of the Caribbean Philosophical Association such as Paget Henry and Lewis Gordon. As when the latter says, speaking of existence in *Black and Blue*: "Black people, after all, didn't exist -appear, come forth, stand out- prior to a colonial world that transformed peoples of the variety of ethnic groups of Africa, South Asia, and Australia into such... Blackness, as indigenous to Euro modernity, suffers from the condition of rejection from the only world to which they could belong."⁴⁷

Moreover, he explains, such an existential condition, brought about by colonization, racism, slavery, as well as older and newer Jim Crow regimes, has been justified by public rationalizations of the ultimate goodness of these peculiar institutions. If so, the task is one of "having to contend with unreasonable reason reasonably," as Gordon says. Something similar to the task of having to make sense of that which makes no sense, which is precisely the task that surrealists like Ménéil and others undertook through their essays and poetic performance. And such efforts require being able to see and evaluate one's situation. That which requires, in turn, inventing the different means of sensing and sense-making that would allow such precise evaluation -a marvelous and fantastic precision.

⁴⁷ Lewis R. Gordon, "Rockin' It in Blue: An Existential Essay on Jimi Hendrix", 220-1.

“The blues, as an art form and philosophical view of life, takes on such a task in form and content,” Gordon explains before expanding on his clarification of the trajectory that goes from jazz through rhythm & blues, rock, and hip-hop, consider the work of Jimi Hendrix as a great exemplar, in ways that strongly resonate with Ménéil’s argument apropos of jazz, poetry and freedom. Keep in mind that Ménéil’s argument on jazz and freedom traverses the whole of his life work. From the 1944 essay *Poetry, Jazz & Freedom* just referenced to his late 1990s rendition of the “lessons” of Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar in *Julio Cortázar por él mismo en ocho lecciones*, included in the Spanish 2005 edition of Ménéil’s *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*.

In the latter, Ménéil renders Cortázar’s fourth lesson ‘Jazz,’ as follows:

Jazz interested me because at that moment (1930) it was the only music that came close to the idea of automatic writing, improvisation as a totally different form of writing [...] Jazz seemed to me the musical equivalent of surrealism (Breton, Crevel, Aragon), a music without partiture. Jazz is based on the principle of improvisation.⁴⁸

Back in 1944, Ménéil had written:

In its essence jazz is improvisation. If one created a theory of aesthetics using jazz as a basis, it would mean creating it using as a means the invention of the marvelous as one went along [...] The musician doesn’t know, cannot know, what his next note will be, nor will he know his next phrase, or the next possible adventure. [If] at this point our existence is drugged by the poison of eternity, jazz is one of the best antidotes to that poison, creating in us the feeling of the moment of transition [...] the new creation although it may not be ‘valued’ or regarded presently as valuable -combines all the resources of that particular social group... [A poet, a musician] is

⁴⁸ René Ménéil, “Julio Cortázar por él mismo en ocho lecciones,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 375-7 at 376,

a living negation and a living preservation of all the old cultural forms [but these] cannot serve as model, there is no model for what has not yet come into existence.⁴⁹

The future, yet unformed, is envisioned by the (jazz or blues) musician and the poet who performs access to it for the entire community. And although at first the latter may not consider the new creation valuable, perhaps in the same way it does not see itself as valued or valuable, not only it comes to see in the new form all the resources of that particular group, those moments of past existence which are affirmed and denied at the present moment of creativity, but, moreover, comes to see before it the future, yet unformed. Throughout these dialectical moments of negative value, preservative affirmation, pessimist decadence, and/or trans-valuation in rebirth, the particular group that was affected by denial and non-appearance comes see itself, through the new means and symbolic forms created by common poets and musicians, anew, as a public: “before *us* the future,” Ménéil says.

Compare this to Lewis Gordon’s take on Jimi Hendrix as an exemplar of such historical dialectic of freedom:

[Hendrix] is like Charlie Parker and John Coltrane simultaneously on the saxophones and their revolutionary impact of bebop, their contributions to blues music, and free jazz. In fact, freedom, as we have seen, is a fundamental element of existence in black/blue [...] Similar to them, his life was marked by the realities of American antiblack racism, the poverty it cultivated, and the tragedies it unleashed as features of everyday existence in black [...] He in effect asks us to see what we fail to see, as the aesthetic realm is ‘entered,’ so to speak, through being willing to let go of the fears and prejudices that block our path from life’s richer significance. Even though rejected by a world to which black people are indigenious, beauty in black,

⁴⁹ René Ménéil, “Poetry, Jazz & Freedom,” *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 85.

accompanied also by enjoying and celebrating such beauty, inaugurates a radical challenge of mattering.⁵⁰

In resonance with M n l’s theme of a historical dialectics of public-making and transvaluation, Gordon invokes Nietzsche’s analysis in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* and reminds us that such schema is not absolute. “People at the periphery or the margins of what he [Nietzsche, sees or] considers the life-affirming ‘healthy-stage’ suffer from *structured* non-appearance.” meaning that blacks and natives, for instance, face problems of illicit appearance “whereby to appear at all carries the weight of violence or violating the system.”⁵¹

We can draw out a second implication from Gordon’s analysis of the structuring, juristic effects of framing systems in resonance with M n l’s account of transvaluation through music. Namely, that the structures in question are invented ones, by both humans and non-humans acting as nature’s agents. These structures may have not existed before in history - modern slavery, coloniality, capitalism- but once they come to be, from that point on become stable and acquire objective properties. This point matters insofar as it is indicative of the reality of time as the objective reality of the moment. But it is also suggestive of a conception of mathematical truth and the mathematical imagination (governance by numbers, the language of economics, so-called STEM disciplines, forms of demonstrative reasoning, as well as the matter of digital technologies) as evoking the content of such structures, which can be very useful to the critique of the functions of trope and investment that structure the subject, its imaginaries and discourses.

⁵⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, “Rockin’ It: A Black Existential Essay on Hendrix” in *Discourse* 39.2, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 227.

Therefore, this matters to the theory of the public we are attempting here. Because the separation between critique and mathematics (as equivalent with instrumental reason), maintained by at least two generations of Western Critical Theory (as in the cases of Adorno himself, Jürgen Habermas and others) seems crippling in a time such as ours in which mathematics, computation, and global network technologies are a crucial site of cultural, institutional, and political economic struggle. In this respect, we invoke the same reasons why it was so important for critics like Ménil to invent rhetorical forms, techniques, technologies, and investigative approaches to negativity able to reveal the erasures, silences, and invisibilities that structured the colonial era. Many of which persist in our supposedly post-colonial, late capitalist, digital age.

Consider, for example, the debates around the racist bias of algorithms and AI recognition. But also, in the case of past and current histories of creolized native and black music (which is to say nearly all popular music in the networked society of today), consider the challenge of mattering through artistic practices when you're framed as that which doesn't matter. In a world in which music, like most other performative practices, tend to be framed within a classicist, coercive system (such as that described in Gordon's Nietzschean schema) that privileges the protagonist, the soloist, ego, and masculinity, to the detriment of dance, chorus, and that is degrading to women. A framing that is both pacifying (of publics) and functional to the interests of expansionist capital in its late, digital stage.

11. Jazz It, Rockin' It.

Lewis Gordon notices that jazz "began as dance music that was then transitioned into a form dominated by the solo and complex performances. It eventually shifted in the emergence of rhythm and blues as the esoteric forms became more cerebral... Rhythm and blues then

reinvigorated the dance element into early rock' n' roll, which, we should remember, was marked by dancing and a solid role for the chorus."⁵²

Noticeably, his description resonates almost musically M  nil's own description of jazz, written in the early 40s: "No rhythm is set before beginning. No meaning is conceived beforehand. No rhythm, no meaning except a passion for being – a being dedicated to a desire that demands its realization – or its substitution in the sublimation of song."⁵³

In both cases the absence of precedent as a condition of novelty in time, in music and in newer choreographies is emphasized. And in both cases freedom is associated with that which moves across and beyond system and precedent for the sake of reality. "As the fundamental element of existence in black/blue," Gordon says. "Before us the future, yet unformed," M  nil says. Gordon is also fantastically precise in pointing out how jazz, rhythm and blues, rock' n' roll, and hip-hop focus first on the crowd dancing and the solid role of the chorus. A moment followed by the emergence of the ego-centered lead, long solos, a decline on dance and the function of the chorus. And then, a collapse of performance into hypersexuality. Spectacle, and the voyeuristic view of the bearer of voice and image.

Gordon is using the Nietzschean schema of *The Origin of Tragedy in the Spirit of Music*, and he warns us not to read it as absolute for it is itself compromised by the voyeuristic view- Eurocentric and tending to the essentialization of its eternal look *ad pessimum*. Yet, what is so enticing about this description is how well it maps onto the trajectory of what other students of theatre and performance like the Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal termed, in their own histories of the form, "Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy." He explains how in

⁵² Lewis R. Gordon, *A Black Existential Essay on Hendrix*, 226.

⁵³ Ren  n M  nil, "Poetry, Jazz, and Freedom," in *Black, Brown & Beige. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 84.

the ancient Middle East and Greece dramatic performance also originated in dance, went through the solo phase, and ended up captured by the Producer's money, divorced from the Chorus and married to the overpowered Spectator who must get his emotional satisfaction and jouissance fascination. Boal tells us:

After their arduous teamwork was over, workers liked to celebrate the suspension of order [...] At the 'topping-off party', when the house is finished, the builders have a beer, sing and dance. Mission accomplished, so the rules can be broken. The songs and dances came from the soul. Free, the body could dance in space and time. It was creative anarchy. The choreographer turned up and chartered the movement. The dramatic poet came and wrote his verses. No more freed thought or creative chaos. Premeditated order had arrived... [Then] Thespis wrote poems and, blending into the Chorus, sang himself [...] One day Solo, the lawmaker, came to see the play. Thespis couldn't contain himself [...] He jumped out of the Chorus and answered them [...] Without realizing it, Thespis had created the Protagonist, the Proto, the First [...] The audience at this memorable day, loved the idea. They wanted more. Improvisation is life. Now what? In the next season Thespis returned to look for his private Maecenas... [who said] 'Look here, my dear Thespis, I can't put my money into a play if I'm only going to know the contents on the first night. [From then on] the censor was there in the front row [...] Aristotle went on to explain [...] He used the word *Empathia*, meaning that the audience so identified with the protagonist that they momentarily interrupted their own thoughts and thought with the Protagonist's mind, that they dulled their emotions and felt his in place of theirs. In other words, it was the Prosthesis of Desire. The Protagonist, who had divorced himself from the actor [and the Chorus] now married the overpowered Spectator [...] Let them enjoy the mistake, sin as much as they like... but only in fiction [...] After a dazzling opening, everything falls apart in the middle of the tragedy. We'll call this reversal of fortune *Peripeteia*. So tragedy will have two parts, before and after *Peripeteia*. First the pleasure, then the pain. the Protagonist gets a well-earned *Catastrophe*. But what about the audience? What do they get? [...] They get *Catharsis*. The audience are going to come out of the theatre PURGED! Aristotle explained his plan: 'Listen, the audience is empathetically identified with the Protagonist. They think with his head, they feel with his heart. You only need the Protagonist to repent, to do a bit of *mea culpa*, and it'll be sorted. And I'm calling this confession, *Anagnorisis*. Like it?' They all liked it.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, (London: Pluto Press, 2008) x-xix. Also, Frantz Fanon, "Conducts of Confession in North Africa (2)", in *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by J. Khalifa & R. J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) 413-417.

The tale ends with Aristotle being so amazed with his own reasoning, he runs home and writes *The Poetics*. Which has since become a sort of official or mainstream (read whitestream) history of tragedy and performance. Centuries later came Brecht. “Down with Empathia. Up with some Distance Effect!”, he said. Then came M  nil. Down with the eternal look *ad pessimum*, he said. In *La tragedie du roi Christophe* he saw things, men, and institutions “appearing as processes, transitions, passages; they do not solidify as eternal realities.” As in jazz improvisation, or in the kind of theatre, writing, and performance he advocated in which “time, which gives place to life’s changes, is present.” Then came Hendrix. He “played through the movements from dance blues to reflective and lead singer-guitarist mode. Striking, however, was his embodiment throughout. Hendrix was always androgynous... His cover of Billy Roberts’s ‘Hey Joe’ is full of irony. Each performance goes back and forth in call-and-response through a single singer conveying the absurdity of norms through which dignity is accrued through violence... Hendrix achieves irony in his music through manifesting, in lyrics and performance, stages of double consciousness,” Gordon says.⁵⁵

To decolonize, jazz it, rock it, potentiate it. As in music, so in mathematics and critique. If double consciousness was also, according to Du Bois, a kind of “second sight” that might be transformed from a curse into a gift, from within, which can offer a lightning-like illumination on race relations, sociability and even existence itself, imagine its potentiated version! Think Jimi Hendrix. Think Bob Marley. In music, we see-hear, this means performing forms of music beyond music.

⁵⁵ Lewis R. Gordon, *A Black Existential Essay on Hendrix*, 226. Also, Ren   M  nil, “Lo novelesco y el realismo en *La trag  die du roi Christophe*” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 234 for actual quotes.

An apotropaic gesture.

12. Evidence of the Velocity of the Spirit (À fonds perdu).

A ruthless gesture. A movement without reservation or precedent. The musician, the poet, and the critic, possessed by potentiated second sight throws himself heedlessly to the objects *à fonds perdu*, as the French and T. W. Adorno would say. “The vertigo that this induces is *index veri*,” the German critic says in a memorable passage that is his most surrealistic. What he means is “the shock of the open, the negativity” as it appears in the framed and never-changing realm. Covered over. Structured by nonappearance as “untruth for the untrue.” The dismantling of such a system, falsely eternal and a feigned unity, is not a question of epistemology but of a thought and action (including its own means of sensing and sense-making forms) that drastically affects their contents. Formerly, the system in question would procure a place for such subjects and objective contents and order them to stay in place. Now, “details no longer fall into place” and what is qualitatively other must be found “in the details themselves.” That kind of thought and action is explosive, outward-going and “cannot guarantee in advance what the extra quality is or whether it is present.”⁵⁶

Before us the future, yet unformed. This is freedom. Only the making present of such envisioned freedom in the present would make the much misused saying according to which “the truth is concrete” would properly come into its own. This requires thought, action, and forms of address as well as techniques of liberation. We must write, sing, dance, perform, philosophize not about the concrete but from within it. By turning towards the concrete, freedom and future, here and now, out of the fragments of the historical trajectories coming

⁵⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008)145.

from the past which musicians, poets and critical essayists both affirm and negate, and assembling such fragments as concepts around the concrete realities.

We should give this fantastic critique its due. Its experimental, essayistic, poetic and musical form responds to the unprecedented challenges of content. It turns us toward the future in the sense that there is no model or precedent for what has not yet come into existence. If so, the task before us is *inventio*, neither *peitho* or persuasion nor *disputatio*. But a poetics of prophetic vision and a see-hearing rhetoric of tropes and symbolic forms able to turn our efforts toward the realization of such insight and vision in the present, one with the force to be carried into the future. In short, we must invent other principles and reinvent our institutions or create new ones. The criterion is the reality of time and the invocation in our (mathematical and aesthetic) imagination of objective, transformed and transformative structures.

Sure, when we attempt to undertake such efforts “the bleating herd will accuse us of failing to adopt an unambiguous standpoint. The herd regards as witchcraft anything that differs from the prevailing reality,” which functions as a veil or puts us under its spell as Adorno says. For “whatever is under a spell has the advantage that all the things that mean familiarity, home and security in the false world are themselves aspects of the spell.”⁵⁷

If so, our best move can also be described as a spell. But this time in the sense of the 1956 blues song by shock rock performer Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, famously covered by Creedence Clearwater Revival and Nina Simone, among many others: “You better stop the things you do/I tell you, I ain’t lying/I ain’t lying/You know I can’t stand it... I put a spell on you”. That is,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

as a spell against the spell of the familiar and tradition, absolute property, and security. Or magic against magic. Apotropaic magic.

“People fear that in escaping from the spell they will lose everything because they know no happiness, not even the happiness of thought apart from the ability to hold onto something -unfreedom in perpetuity.” The very serious Adorno, who couldn’t dig jazz but got off on Schoenberg’s spellbinding *Moses und Aron*, advises a hot-headed move of magic against magic, and urges the youth to rock it, to turn towards the enjoyment and happiness of thought and performance that is joyful and happy not because it gives us something to hold onto but because it is joyful in and of itself. The move is forward, hot-headed, in the direction of other climates, the torrid zones of the world, if you like, not paying too much attention to the risks involved. And, once more, without precedent. Thus, glancing forwards to what remains unforeseeable from the viewpoint of the spellbound present and move backwards in our intensifying investigations of the interrupted past.⁵⁸

In that respect at least, Ménil’s dialecticism is (despite his frequent references to the German nineteenth-century thinker) arguably less Hegelian and closer to the spirit of Elisabeth Lenk and T. W. Adorno’s. Too bad the latter couldn’t dig jazz, or Surrealism for that matter despite all the efforts of his brilliant student, Lenk, to educate the educator. For Ménil, as for the latter, the question of the movement of history is less dependent on a spatialized model and has more to do with principles of precedence and with the realist conception of moment and time that the Latin American philosopher conceptualized as “the velocity of the Spirit.”

The concept systematizes the ways in which in his essays and poetics, trope, image, and metaphor break apart and break free “in the Spirit the solitude of ideas and things (solitude

⁵⁸ Ibid.

which we call rationality) and, thus, explode all the corrupt fixities of idealism... These flights and shocking returns of lightning manifest a new coordinate in the plane of thought: the velocity of the Spirit.” Like electricity, light and sound travelling through, breaking apart, and reassembling elements in some sort of becoming-alliance. As in cinema, the point is the acceleration of something captured in image or metaphor that at first seems trivial or stable to the point of its changing transposition. For in the Spirit, as in nature, “all quantitative changes become qualitative changes beyond a certain point.” And to be more precise, Ménéil says there “is no model for what has not yet come into existence,” thereby putting Hegel through the grinding speed of free jazz, bebop (or with Gordon, the lightning speed of Hendrix’s guitar digitation).

In other words, the technical, realist velocity of the Spirit, and the magic of the marvelous. Here, it becomes clearer that when it comes to Ménéil’s dialecticism we are dealing less with a mode of being and more with a mode of appearance. On this aspect he is at one with the sociological uptake of W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness,” which as we have seen Ménéil uses in his essay on the *Psychoanalysis of History*.⁵⁹

This sense of the dialectic means it is the opposite of dogma. That is, a means of taking position in negotiations, or what critical theorist Drucilla Cornell calls “techniques of liberation.” To commit the self and give the self to time and the other, or to the very idea and an ethical- political practice of trans-motion towards social alterity.

Ménéil and his co-editors defined in similar terms their journal-manifesto *Légitime Défense* as “a temporary instrument” and a “collection of texts [that] is particularly devoted to the West

⁵⁹ René Ménéil, “Evidencias relacionadas con el espíritu y su velocidad,” in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 167-175 at 169 and “Poetry, Jazz & Freedom” in *Black, Beige & Brown. Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 84 for quotations.

Indian question as it appears to us.” If it breaks down, “we shall find other instruments.” The matter and content of Ménil’s investigation, carried through essayistic, critical means from the 1932 manifesto through his work on the journal *Tropiques* collected in *Tracées* (1941-1981) up to *Antilles déjà jadis* (1999 in French, 2005 in Spanish) is the individual phenomenon, temporal and transforming as well as transformative of real relations: the West Indian question, including by the 1980s and 1990s the Greater Caribbean and Latin America.⁶⁰

Such content, in excess of the given forms, finds its most appropriate form in the manifesto and the essay. These forms feed from the languages and experience of historical communities, as well as on community practices of interpretation and judgment that express contingent agreements. It is crucial to take stock of the emphasis made in paragraphs such as those we’ve quoted above and throughout the previous sections on the importance of incorporating temporal parameters into the investigation.

To clear or illuminate what Frantz Fanon read about and underlined as “the most obscure metaphysical enigma” which “resides at the intersection of spatial properties and temporal properties.” This enigma is difficult to present precisely because our language and the habits of sensing and common-sense that come *before* it, left behind by traditional thought and conventional perspective after its demise as a philosophy, lead us to place historical events and relations as if they were hard substances, and to root their time-bound nature in a “placid matter, indifferent to duration,” or within a timeless frame of reference (i. e. the point of perspectival reference that emerged with Jesuit and Cartesian analytic geometry during the colonial era) in which everything would supposedly have its resting place.⁶¹

⁶⁰ René Ménil et al., “Légitime Défense Manifesto,” 36-38.

⁶¹ Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, 178n25 citing Gaston Bachelard, *Nouvel esprit scientifique* (Paris: PUF, 1949) available in English as *The New Spirit of Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 63.

Within which everything would be captured, contained, and managed.

13. Conclusions (i): Against the Frame.

The quotes in the paragraph above come from Gaston Bachelard's observations on the non-essentialist anti-substantialism of the new scientific spirit. In time he would call it rationalist materialism. Frantz Fanon read and underlined Bachelard's observation in this and other texts, which also inspired the first essay in Ménéil's *Tracées* collection titled "Elements of Identity," originally published in *Tropiques* in 1941. In it, Ménéil proposes that "the contemporary interest in psychoanalysis and ethnography resides in the fact that they show in luminous manner that neither individuals nor peoples or communities act [historically] based on the reasons and motivations that they tend to attribute and place behind their actions."⁶²

We can identify in this paragraph an illuminating renewal of the Marxian formula according to which people make history but not under conditions of our own choosing. This existential and materialist approach, opposed to the substantialist essentialism left behind by the conventions of perspective that had informed the geography and defensive mentality of European empires, became extremely important for thinkers like Ménéil and Fanon.

In Ménéil's case, it came to inform his investigations of the conditions that come before shocking, lightning, illuminating and transformative action (such is the subtitle of his 1941 essay on the elements of identity). Which is why the essay-form for Ménéil is not just a form of expression capturing and subsuming the content, as if it were a frame of (spatial) reference, or a technique of capture and persuasion.

⁶² René Ménéil, *Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 19. Also, Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, 177-178n25.

Instead, as has been argued in this piece, informed by existential materialism and temporal realism, the essay-form and the collection, which constitute the characteristic mode in which critical, psychoanalytic, and ethnographic investigation is carried through, its path or *tracée*, becomes the primordial mode of investigation or insight in the sense of coming before or in advance of the specific visual-writing practices that we usually treat under the banner of art, rhetoric, poetry, and so on.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from our explorations in the previous sections is that, with Ménil, we are speaking of primordial means of investigation or insight not in the sense of an a priori model of onto-logical being or an ultimate frame of sensing and logical reference. But rather, in the sense of performing access to a mode of appearance that plays with the dynamic between the displayed and the hidden (which may come to exist as a veil separating the visible and the invisible).

In other words, Ménil's words: "these logical reasons, when compared with real, material causes, [can] constitute a hallucinatory or dissimulating phantasmagory. It then becomes apparent how all the Socratic speculations and discussions about the conduct of peoples and individuals [i. e. dialectics] have miserably drowned in the stagnated waters of 'clear and distinct ideas' and can only constitute, at best, the plaything of a game to exercise in tempered or amicable manner our logical faculties. Hence, the purely ornamental, antiquated, and academic character of most ethical systems until today."⁶³

A third conclusion, made clear in the paragraph quoted above, is the target of Ménil's criticism: Cartesian ocular-centrism. With its focus on the epistemology of 'clear and distinct ideas' containing quantification (of what is spatially perceptible), abstraction (according to

⁶³ René Ménil, "Elementos de Identidad. Condición previa de la acción fulminante" in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 19.

unchanging premises), and methodical demonstrative (algorithmic, grounding) reasoning. Ménil sees such ocular-centrism as the latest refined variation in a line of games and exercises in logical disputations among friends, taking place in supposedly tempered climates, aiming to ground and fix truth with quasi-geometric or juristic certainty -as in Graeco-Roman, medieval, and early modern forms of *disputatio*.

This view of the mind and its faculties -perception, persuasion, judgment and (transcendent or inter-subjective) constant belief (or will) after *disputatio*- as systematic or architectonic, placing sensible phenomena within referential frameworks of arbitrary classification, abstract calculation, and tempering, cathartic or pacifying debate has, according to Ménil, fatally reduced the imaginative investigations of performative (dance-focused) ritual drama and Socratic dialectics into the domains of reasonable thought and action, focused on the creative agency of peoples and individuals, or *inventio*, to a simple game of dualities and oppositions, merely ornamental and academic.

Only that it would be a purely ornamental game if not for the fact that reducing the space of reasoning to a game of amicable disputations between friends would also mean unleashing aggression, violence, and war on the historical trajectories of strangers declared enemies as well as on their etho-poetic cores. Wars justified, with pedantic precision and the clear distinctiveness of ultimate judgment, on the pretension of being in possession of an unchanging framework of forceful arguments and incontrovertible evidentiary power, affixed to the perspective of an absolute subject as if to a sticking viewpoint.

Ménil rails against the “mathematical waffle of Cartesian psychologists” that cover over the impulses and forces that spring into action our creative capacities (i. e. the affordance of material and environmental circumstances) dissimulating them behind the mask of social limitations, psychological constraints and physical liminal prohibitions that are “only offered

to the view of the spirit in the guise of an imaginary drama.”⁶⁴ Importantly, the repression of such impulses and desires works in the service of the ends and outcomes of power and wealth accumulation in colonial and capitalist societies alike, where they “create an equally shared emotional misery” related but different from the widespread economic poverty that such societies create, as suggested by Ménil’s co-signatory in the *Légitime Défense* manifesto, Pierre Yoyotte.

Both Yoyotte and Ménil, together with others in the internationalist surrealist circles of the early twentieth century, viewed such emotional misery and widespread psychological repression as the cause of the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the majoritarian middle classes of Europe and their assimilated equivalents in the colonies and settler nations of the Americas. Which, they concluded, paved the way for the emotional, mystical, and mythological satisfactions that, in the absence of material satisfactions, would be provided by fascism and newer forms of expansionism sold to pacified publics. No less important is the fact that Ménil associated such dramatic dissimulations “setting in motion human behaviour through a secure art” of management, with the “crude techniques of propaganda” and public advertisement. In fact, he saw “the negro” essentialized in the passage from poetry to philosophical Négritude in terms “better understood as the result of the imagery of publicity.”⁶⁵

According to Ménil, however, the crude character of publicity and propaganda and its efficacy rested on the correct idea that crude conditions are naïve paintings, as it were in the Dutch manner, of true conditions. Which means that because the impulses, desire, and responses to material affordance that drive our actions are hidden and dissimulated by the emotional

⁶⁴ René Ménil, “Elementos de identidad,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 20

⁶⁵ René Ménil, “El paso de la poesía a la filosofía,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 118.

dramas of colonial and capitalist society they can only be known to us through their masked form: “their transposition into symbols and metaphors, and their play and interplay sets the stage of the dreams, fantasies, daydreaming, stories, and myths, etc. It is, therefore, through poetry, and not in the mathematical waffle of Cartesian psychologists, that we can read and interpret what really matters to us, that is, the true conditions by which we live and die.”⁶⁶

As we have made clear before, this isn’t only a matter of theory but in practice. At the intersection or in the passage between experimental poetry and philosophy or ethics and politics. While old-line Marxists may have objected to such transitions and “persisted in the belief that ‘the revolution’ somehow involved a choice between poetry or politics, social or cultural change, *Légitime Défense* rejected the dreary dichotomy and dialectically demanded poetry and politics, social and cultural revolution.”⁶⁷

14. Conclusions (ii): From Poetry to Philosophy.

These are very nuanced observations, the importance of which in our times of publicity and populism cannot be overstated. Speaking apropos of the passage between poetry and philosophy in general, and critically reading the philosophical prose derived by Senghor from Aimé Césaire’s poetic *Cahier d’un retour au pays nata*, in particular, René Ménénil explains that “historically speaking, black poetry has preceded the philosophy commonly known as *Négritude*”. This is a fact to be remarked and reflected upon, he says. For “arguably, black philosophy constitutes itself, in essence, from a first matter that is poetic matter. The maxims, proverbs, metaphors and images, hyperbolic amplifications, lyrical chants and ironic

⁶⁶ René Ménénil, “Elementos de identidad,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 20-21.

⁶⁷ Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, “The First Black Surrealists”, in *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 24.

antiphrasis, [tropes that] would be transferred as such from the domain of poetry to the domain of philosophical expression.”⁶⁸

Ménil refers to this as *the method of ambiguity*. And we can see and hear strong resonances between such a “method” and what we have described throughout this piece as apotropaic writing. To exemplify this method, Ménil offers a contrasting reading of Césaire’s *Cahier* and the ways in which Jean Paul Sartre and Léopold Sédar Senghor attempted an initial theorisation of Négritude. As in Sartre’s 1948 *Orphée Noir*, theorizing together with *L’anthologie de la nouvelle poésie noire et malgache*, while Senghor “practiced the same method, taking up and reworking the conceptions with which such a method would lead and be identified logically” during his 1950s interventions at the Congress of Black Writers and Artists as well as the Francophonie encounters.⁶⁹

Comparing Césaire’s *Cahier*’s poetry and Senghor’s philosophy, Ménil notices a difference in modes of address, climates or atmosphere, languages, and spirit. The humor, prankishness, and irony constitutive of poetic orders of sense and signification in the first instance appear somewhat flattened in the second, philosophical, order. The statements and denunciations made in the colorful mode of the poetic text, using tragic irony and antiphrasis, tend to be covered over and to become grey or black and white, literally. And negative statements tend to be generalized, made indeterminate and taken too seriously, as if they were the letter of the law, in the philosophical text.

It is important to notice, however, that Ménil is not engaging in some kind of anti-philosophy.

On the contrary, his point is philosophical and socio-political through and through: “the *négre*

⁶⁸ René Ménil, *Tracées: Identité, Négritude, Esthétique aux Antilles* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont) 78, our rendition.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of Senghor must be read, analyzed, and understood not so much in terms of verbal discourse, but, rather, in the visual register of publicity and advertisement metaphors.”⁷⁰

In other words, the crucial insight of the methodical approach of the poetic traditions salvaged, rekindled, and experimented upon in the collective work of such domains as *Légitime Défense*, *Négritude* and others consists in this: not confusing sense as meaning (the essentialist bent of verbal discourses taken as modes of circulation from a center of intentionality or authority to its purported peripheries) with sense as direction (the visual negotiations at stake in modes of public production that involve ethical orientation, as exemplified in the concrete case of resistance to the production of identity and subjectivities in imperial-capitalist publicity).

Thus, Ménil writes:

From the outset, *Négritude* was a response and denunciation of the kind of racism that victimized black peoples during the expansionist movement of a Western civilization based upon colonization.

But the response to a mythology based on a practice (colonial oppression) was, in turn, mythological.

Indeed, *Négritude* did not attempt to break up with the mythology based on race but to constitute, against a white racist ideology that already existed another mythology, contrary and black, installed in the same space, under the same coordinates and conservative of the same frame of reference or foundation. The ruling principle common to both mythologies, their common assumption, is that the truth and value of Man are founded and projected upon their skin, as a color-line or as race. In both mythologies, biology is said to drive culture and determine history, with the latter becoming mere décor rather than a human practical activity.⁷¹

⁷⁰ René Ménil, “El paso de la poesía a la filosofía,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 118.

⁷¹ René Ménil, “El espectro de Gobineau,” *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy/Senderos*, 119-20. Our rendition.

Consider, for example, the motif of inconstancy. It was alleged by European jurist-theologians, early ethnographers, and inquiring explorers to be an attribute of native and black character and, thus, elevated to the status of an ontological lack in metaphysical discourses. But it actually emerged in the historical, concrete context of discussions and negotiations. Which were both physical and metaphysical. They concerned such questions as the force of willpower, belief, and trust in the interplay between secrecy and the displayed, which are better understood as taking place in the intersection between colonial and capitalist frameworks of value and extraction as well as the use of ethnographic, geographic, and biological “truths.” The latter were debated in legal courts, authoritative juntas such as the famous 1550s juntas at Valladolid, convened by Emperor Charles V), inquisitorial fact-finding commissions operating under strict protocols “tantamount to psycho-sociological inquiry,” and at fledgling anthropological and geographical societies in the metropolises of empires between at least the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the Americas and elsewhere, to monetize largely tropical speculative ventures.⁷²

This remains hidden history. Humor, color, and satire, which are integral to apotropaic modes of writing and pictographic storytelling such as manifestoes and visionary prophecy (but also constitutions) work to make visible what has been covered over and deified or made to appear natural and quintessential. Especially in the metaphysical orders of presence that tend to confuse precedence, intentionality, or conventionality with timeless normativity, or the word (of an alleged creator/legislator) with the ultimate point of reference. Such

⁷² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, [1995] 2011) 75 for quotes. Also, Marc Flandreau, *Anthropologists in the Stock Exchange. A Financial History of Victorian Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Ambrosio Velasco Gómez, “Racionalidad, Diversidad Cultural y Controversias Políticas en el Mundo Iberoamericano. . Racionalidad y Justicia en las disputas sobre la Conquista y Dominación de América” in R. V. Orden Jiménez (coord.) *Humanismo Republicano Iberoamericano. Un Debate* (Barcelona: Biblioteca Nueva/Minerva, 2019) 36-49.

metaphysics, which attempt to explain time-bound phenomena by the timeless, are unsurprisingly almost always in the spirit of deadly seriousness. If so, ignoring the color and humor of the poetic order of sense, means, in the passage to philosophical prose, running the risk of essentialism.

According to Ménénil, this is the problem that both Sartre and Senghor ran into. That the allegation of *nègre* inconstancy which is denounced in Césaire's *Cahier* via the rhetorical device of saying the opposite of what is actually meant ("Attendez ... tout est dans l'ordre/Wait ... Everything's in order") becomes in Sartre and also, at times, in Senghor, the very (metaphysical) attribute "of the nègre of négritude". Ménénil is critical here of a certain mode of theorization that believing itself to be anti-Cartesian and punching in the direction of "l'Europe-de-la-colonisation-et-du-racisme," says: "Je sense, je danse, donc je suis!" Without giving itself pause to think the extent to which it is white racism itself that has framed this devalued image of black and other indigenous peoples as anti-technical and without consciousness. Or as dedicating their energies solely to decorative joy and entertainment, groundless and value-less, and thus entirely void of conscious thought and technology.⁷³

Racism is an anxious framework, behind which lies fear and aggression: fear of being without ground and having nothing to hold on to. Fear of Black (and native) consciousness.⁷⁴

Ménénil's critical reading of the *Cahier* (and Négritude philosophy) helps us see how antiphrasis and ellipsis are put to the service of poetic condensation. The poet creates a distance between what he says and where he is (his position) thereby producing a literary effect of derision or frisson. The target is the poet himself. The constant return of Césaire upon himself aims to

⁷³ René Ménénil, *Tracées: Identité, Négritude, Esthétique aux Antilles* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont) 80.

⁷⁴ See on this Lewis R. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness* (London & New York: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2021).

question the colonized (or the stranger, the colonizer) in himself, to make present Césaire-as-other, or rather, to make visible the dividuality and essentialism operated by the order of colonization upon him, in him. This is “duality”, Ménéil says.⁷⁵

The real target of this form of address (colored by apotropaic satire) is colonialism and white racism’s publicity. The question becomes: How to make appear what is invisible, in the flesh, as a relation present here and now? At this point, the order of sense in the *Cahier* is no longer simple, no longer a simple duality, insofar as a third voice appears. It can be heard incarnating both a real relation and a visual-discursive continuity without any explicit designation of the identity of the speaker. The procedure here consists of collecting or introducing in the phrasing of the poem the voice of this third other without appealing to the conventions of citation, with no quotation marks, and without announcing the other’s entry on the stage. Césaire is using here, as Ménéil observes, the literary equivalent of the collage or visual montage techniques.

This rhetorical register, which makes the statement ambiguous, polyvalent, floating or in timely and untimely *dérive*, in a “total fix-explosion” as Ménéil says, shifts our perspective towards the concreteness of the Caribbean context that in from the 1930s onwards made these artists and thinkers producers of newer modes of sensing and making sense or sense-thinking, refusing, notably in the case of *Légitime Défense*, any romanticizing of folklore, authenticity, or the past as an object of loss.

In other words, the thought and rhetoric of Césaire’s *Cahier*, as read philosophically by Ménéil, can only be properly illuminated in reference to Caribbean history, including its intellectual history, and by emphasizing in that history the creolizing tension that since at least the

⁷⁵ René Ménéil, *Tracées*, 80-1.

reformulation of scholastic dialectics and its chief framing companions, speculative geography, ethnography, and the technical arts of martial architectonics and defensive governmentality, has tried to bring dialectics closer to the orientation of humanist rhetoric (during and after the Renaissance) in contact with the real relations brought about by the encounters and mis-encounters between Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans in the Americas. Especially in the context of debates concerning the justification of war, conquest, empire, dominion, new imperialisms, and the co-existence of slavery with other forms of labor-extraction in the timespace between Europe, Africa and the Americas during and after the 1500s.

Paying attention to the humanist (poetic and rhetorical) reformulation of dialectics would probably be less controversial to mainstream historians of ideas and philosophical anthropologists. It is far more controversial to investigate, after Ménil and others, the proposition of a deeper relationship between the problematization of demonstrative dualisms and completeness in poetry, rhetoric, or dialectics (out of supposedly universal philosophical premises, or an unchanging framework affixed to identity) and the defense of the absolute centrist positions that justified conquest, empire, and settler colonialism, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, the intertwinement between the critique of imperial conquest or the settler colonial project and a style of argumentation that uses topic, trope, and humoristic derision or defacement as part and parcel of experimental, fallibilist modes of argumentation and negotiation seeking other moves and directions: to re-orient conflict and contradiction.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ See Drucilla Cornell, “Derrida’s negotiations as techniques of Liberation” in *Discourse. Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, 39.2, Special Issue: Photoelectric Techniques of Liberation, guest-edited by O. Guardiola-Rivera (Detroit: Wayne University Press, Spring 2017) 195-215 for our understanding of negotiations.

To conclude, the argument here is that the poetic order of sense which Ménéil identifies as central to *Légitime Défense* and Césaire's or Breá's *negrismo* has as its precursor the longer history of creolizations between, on the one hand, the critique of conquest, modern empire and colonialism in the Americas, and the critical spirit leading to the European age of enlightenment, "with the ironic, revolutionary, dissident and frondeur movement" between France and Haiti, "impregnated laicism." And, on the other hand, dialectical, apotropaic, rhetorical modes of imaginative and utopian vision. This creolization of philosophical forms (responsive to an excess of content, or an intensified reality) would resonate with the approach of the critique of political economy as well as the literary modernist and neo-baroque movements "that would immediately find an echo among the Caribbean intelligentsia" -such as symbolism, surrealism, and creolization-as -method- to this very day.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ Ibid.

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