Wifredo Lam’s Infiltration

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INSTRUCTOR FOREWORD

Quyen Nguyen’s paper “Wifredo Lam’s Infiltration” is an insightful consideration of Wifredo Lam’s fraught position between France and Cuba and draws upon Nguyen’s intensive study of his painting Annunciation on view at the Cantor Art Center’s Conjured Life exhibition.

Nguyen skillfully incorporates postcolonial theory, poetry, history, and thick description into a paper of remarkable clarity and argumentative force. There is an urgency to the writing, as well as a genuine love of language. The paper is driven by a frustration with the prevailing scholarly treatment of Lam, which frames him either as a belated modernist or an “authentic” purveyor of Caribbean culture. Departing from these problematic stances, Nguyen relies on close readings of two paintings, proximate in chronology but divergent in style, to reveal Lam’s nuanced and often conflicted hybridity. In doing so, the paper avoids the trap of an easy “good object/bad object” dichotomy and instead lays bare the complexity and intelligence of Lam’s work. Her paper is representative of art history at its best: historically rigorous, attentive to its objects of study, and propelled by the ethical convictions of its author.

—Marci Kwon and Joseph Larnerd
Wifredo Lam’s reputation as a Caribbean Surrealist painter dwells in the liminal space between his Afro-Cuban political consciousness and European artistic tradition. Despite his fluid transgression across national borders and artistic heritages, scholarly discussions on Lam frequently cage him within a certain Caribbean “essence,” a gesture of control that Otherizes his versatile oeuvre from the canon of European modernism. In 1987, John Yau published a scathing critique of the Museum of Modern Art’s choice to hang Wifredo Lam’s *The Jungle* (fig. 1) in a peripheral hallway.¹ By relegating the Antillean artist to the coatroom area, the museum implicitly deemed the “island painter” unworthy of residing in the same hallowed halls with twentieth-century “giants” such

as Cézanne or Picasso. The institution’s condescending placement of The Jungle was compounded by the six-line catalogue entry on the artist in the 1958 MoMA exhibition Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage. William S. Rubin, Painting and Sculpture Department director at the MoMA, commended Lam exclusively for his magical use of “Haitian voodoo figures,” “African masks” and “palm frond forests” which echoed primitivist predecessors, namely Picasso and Cézanne. Rubin’s blatantly Eurocentric reading, Yau points out, mistook Lam for a benign “delivery boy” waiting on the doorstep. Taking Lam’s marginalization at the MoMA as a point of departure, this paper examines the nuanced manner in which Lam merged, twisted and expanded his Afro-Cuban postcolonial sensibility and European artistic training, a hybrid tactic that resisted being categorized and fossilized as either “European” or “Afro-Cuban.” How did postcoloniality motivate the painter to appropriate indigenous roots vis-à-vis European techniques? Might the geographic nodes of the Caribbean and Europe be complicated and blurred by the cosmopolitan artist’s embodiment of disparate traditions? Lam’s alchemical insertion of ambiguous indigeneity into European-style paintings complicates the notion of authenticity with regards to artists of hybrid origins.

The Subversion of The Jungle

Despite its delightful colors and docile placement in the New York museum, The Jungle is not as decorative or tame as it might seem. Soaked in a damply humid and tropical atmosphere, the painting invokes the governing motif of a sugar cane grove, a reference to colonial plantations in Lam’s Cuban homeland. Until slavery was abolished in Cuba in 1886, sugar cane plantations were sites of backbreaking labor for African slaves as well as Chinese contract workers. Born and raised in the sugar-farming province of Villa Clara, Lam viscerally understood the violent history behind the guileless appearance of sugar cane trees. His father was a Chinese immigrant, and his mother was born to a Congolese former slave mother and a Cuban mixed-race father.² Despite his middle-

class background, Lam inherited the triad of bloodlines that underwent subjugation as colonial subjects under the Spanish Empire. *The Jungle*’s vibrant colors and pulsating rhythm therefore shield a somber history of colonial aggression. In the upper right corner, a bulbous white hand holds up an erect pair of scissors, ready to cut down entire forests of sugar cane trees and liberate the toiling slaves who were, to quote Lam’s own words, repeatedly “crushed and humiliated.”

The power relations between Afro-Cuban laborers and imperialist masters underlying *The Jungle* were not merely grounded in the dark period of colonialism but ongoing in decolonized Cuba. After Spain transferred Cuba’s sovereignty to the United States in 1898, Cuban production of high-demand commodities such as sugar and coffee became heavily dependent on American corporate investors. The sugar farm landscape that Lam invoked in *The Jungle*, therefore, carries both the trauma of colonial slavery and the mass displacement of Cuban peasants due to the rapid expansion of twentieth-century sugar mills enabled by the U.S. capital influx. In addition to its reputation as the “world’s sugar bowl,” Cuba also attracted foreign tourists hungry to consume the Antillean exotic culture. With the abolishment of slavery came new forms of economic and cultural imperialism. The continuity of exploitation stirred tremendous anguish in Wifredo Lam when he returned to his native land in the early 1940s after years of painting and traveling in Europe.

The bizarre, indecipherable and synthetic bodies in *The Jungle* voiced the artist’s outcry against the ruthless economic exploitation of his homeland. What William S. Rubin took to be a vaguely “primal landscape” made up of “the penumbra of bamboo and palm frond forests”


5 Ibid.

in fact sheltered redemptive meaning for Lam as well as his Negritude confrère, Aimé Césaire. The fusion of man and tree, as Césaire put it, was a metaphorical odyssey for the exiled Black man to return to his native land:

I feel very deeply the uprooting of my people... I am in fact obsessed by vegetation, by the flower, by the root...
The tree, profoundly rooted in the soil, is for me the symbol of a man who is self-rooted – the nostalgia of a lost paradise.

Similarly, the plant-men-and-women of The Jungle were vegetal vessels through which Lam traced his way back to the history of his homeland. The presence of humans entwined with sugar canes had special significance for the Negritude painter as it evokes the groundedness of his birthplace as well as the longevity of trans-generational exploitation. Situated in the post- and neo-colonial context, The Jungle was not simply an artist of color’s light-hearted riff on Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (fig. 2) but, as Robert Linsley argued, Lam’s deliberate “blackening” of his mentor’s proto-Cubism. Lam deploys the figure of the female prostitute as an erotic tease to the viewer, who might be looking for a tropical version of Picasso’s primitive demoiselles only to realize Lam’s harrowing jungle carries a different gravitas than the Spanish Cubist’s flattened brothel. While Les Demoiselles d’Avignon is saturated with anxiety and fascination with the mask-donning women’s sexualized power, The Jungle suggests the pain of the sexualized subjects themselves. Lam’s ravishing plant-humans are totem poles of a perpetually “prostituted” culture, where tribal masks and primal landscapes are industrialized, packaged and sold. Though immersed in pulsating colors as if illuminated by a disco ball, the outward-gazing figures in The Jungle

9 Ibid., 533.
stubbornly refuse to become palatable to the Western gaze. Lam was up front about his artistic and political intransigence:

No, I decided that my painting would never be the equivalent of that pseudo Cuban music for nightclubs. I refused to paint cha-cha-cha. I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the Blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters.\(^\text{10}\)

**The Blurred Borders of Annunciation**

To examine Lam’s refusal to “cha cha,” and move past William S. Rubin’s survey of Lam’s works as merely derivative of Picasso’s flat space, it is important to expand our purview beyond *The Jungle* and trace the dispersion of Lam’s hallucinatory figures throughout his oeuvre. *Annunciation* (fig. 3), a painting finished only a year after *The Jungle*, exemplifies Lam’s complicated amalgamation of European techniques and postcolonial narratives. With *Annunciation*, Lam did not reuse the eye-catching colors and flourishing vegetative motifs from *The Jungle* to invoke his often-exoticized Antillean roots. The title instead suggests the felicitous celebration of Gabriel’s announcement to Virgin Mary. The cryptic absence of Christian figures on the canvas, however, immediately signals Lam’s subversion of the salvation narrative. *Annunciation*’s muted color palette produces an aloof and uninviting façade, which destabilizes the mythology of the Antilles as “a distant paradise where European dreams came true,” an Eden of “perpetual summer and indefinite riches” to be collected.\(^\text{11}\) Lam consciously eliminated lusciousness, a quality conventionally expected of oil paint, and instead worked with a more austere and subdued surface. This unexpected washed-out exterior defies our pre-

\(^{10}\) Linsley, “Wifredo Lam: Painter of Negritude,” 531.

sumptions about what an oil painting from a land of so-called paradisiac vegetation should look like.

Suffused in soft stains of mostly white, grey and black, which echo fluid blots of watercolor on paper, the figures in Annunciation appear to emerge from behind a layer of mist. To compound the nebulous enigma, Lam’s brushstrokes are purposefully fine and inconspicuous, conjuring a sense of disappearance rather than delineation. The lower left corner, for instance, resembles a quick sketch of semi-erased traces rather than full-fledged body parts. Art historian Kobena Mercer compares Lam’s grisaille style to Leonardo da Vinci’s sfumato technique whereby paint is applied like smoke, lending Lam’s flickering figures a weightless quality. But perhaps more importantly than referencing the Quattrocento master, this smoke-like quality produces an intriguing sense of unfinishedness, an infinite intermingling of disparate traces. Seen from afar, a large portion of the painting resembles translucent veils of blinding light. Mercer connects Lam’s deliberate incompletion to a “spatiality that can no longer be mapped in dualistic separations of near/far, surface/depth or outside/inside.” Lam’s beastly angels and blurred lines embody the non-binary selfhood of an artist who travels, physically and existentially, between Europe and the Caribbean islands. As the postcolonial painter gracefully blends his variegated lineages, he also obscures the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, inextricably connected by the sordid transatlantic slave trade. Like a continuously morphing cloud, Lam floats across disparate places and histories, a complex itinerary evidenced by the confluence of past and present apparitions hovering in his paintings.

Annunciation’s indistinct figures subvert our expectation of a clear-cut narrative. Unlike conventional illustrations of the biblical episode, no human-like figuration of Mary or the archangel is visible. Rather,

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13 Ibid.
the viewer is presented with a proliferation of winged creatures with wide-eyed masks and crescent-shaped accessories. Their circular eyes, flat faces and alert horns are reminiscent of the “limbs, swords and circle” derived from a Haitian Voodoo diagram yet cannot be concretely attributed to a particular deity or symbolism.\(^\text{14}\) In fact, Lam admitted to taking a radically open approach to his appropriation of folk culture and religion, noting, “I do not usually employ a specific symbology. I have never created my pictures in terms of a symbolic tradition, but always on the basis of a poetic excitation.”\(^\text{15}\) Lam’s aversion to affixed meanings allowed his viewers to exercise their own interpretive imagination. The Cuban essayist Fernando Ortiz articulates this fluid quality in Lam’s open-ended allegory:

> A painting of Lam’s could be titled *Ogun*, the warrior god of the Yorubas… Nevertheless, in the paintings there was no image of a warrior… Lam simplifies his allegorism… there is only the trace of a sharp knife, sign of war, between schematic lines of an undefined preternatural being, spots of bright red, that hint at the idea of blood.\(^\text{16}\)

With this suggestive and liberal approach to symbolism, Lam’s almost cartoon-like combination of funny faces and pointed blades in *Annunciation* calls to mind an idea of Afro-Cuban occultism but remains divorced from a specific source of local spirituality. And yet, Lam’s loose approach to symbolism does not necessarily divest the impenetrable scene of paradise of its political power. The Christian reference in the title recalls the civilizing mission of European colonizers, which was locally translated into the practice of Santeria, a hybrid amalgamation of Yoruba religious practices and Roman Catholicism. Considering the syncretism between European Catholicism and Yoruba spirituality in the Antillean context, it is perhaps apt that Lam, whose godmother was a Santeria priestess, decided to bring these different strands of influences onto his canvas without attempting to parse out their origins.\(^\text{17}\)


\(^{15}\) Mercer, “Wifredo Lam’s Afro-Atlantic Routes,” 30.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Anne Walmsley et al., *Art in the Caribbean: An Introduction*. (Boston: New Beacon, 2010), 4.
Due to the cultural mutations brought about by global colonialism, it would indeed be a futile exercise to pin down the origin of Afro-Cuban culture to either the Caribbean natives or the European civilizers or the slaves shipped over from Africa. Lam’s work therefore reflects the foggy history of his country’s tumultuous past. As Ortiz put it, Lam would conjure “spots of bright red, that hint at the idea of blood.” In *Annunciation*, the pink dapples along the spine of a figure on the right, which doubles as the familiar vertical trunk of Cuba’s traumatic sugar-cane tree (fig. 4), conjure the raw bruises of the disenfranchised. Aimé Césaire also invoked blood in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the influential book-length poem on which Lam collaborated as an illustrator. Images of “a blood-spattered road” and “skies of love cut with blood clots” frequently figured in Césaire’s heartbreaking and resounding work, which began with a note of solidarity: “to Wifredo Lam/ in token of friendship/ and admiration/ this poem of our revolts,/ our hopes,/ our fervor.”

**Encountering and Appropriating European Surrealism**

Despite his feverish commitment to anti-colonial revolt, which Lam shared with Césaire, we should not neglect the influence of Western art training on Lam’s practice. Lam studied at “venerable institutions such as the San Alejandro Academy in Havana and the Prado Museum in Madrid” and spent years honing his craft in Madrid and Paris. His time in Paris also gave him access to fellow avant-garde artists and thinkers, including André Breton, the authoritative pater of French Surrealism, with whom Lam later collaborated and travelled to Haiti.

Despite their primitivist obsession with exotic objects, exemplified by Breton, Aragon and Eluard “knocking on doors all over Paris” in


search of Oceanic curios in the 1930s, the Surrealists significantly contributed to Lam’s liberation from painterly niceties and immersion in the ferocity of images untethered from rationality. The Surrealist impulse to radically reframe and reconfigure fragments is present in *Annunciation*, in which tusks, wings, masks and feet are stacked on top of each other to form fantastical half-human, half-beast figures. The *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse) motif, which involves assembling disparate entities to form a hybrid whole, is aligned with Lam’s seductive appropriation of Afro-Cuban folk aesthetics on his enigmatic canvas. Instead of assigning a single interpretation or affixing a streamlined narrative, the artist opens the vast potential of his invented symbols.

The feet at the bottom of *Annunciation* (fig. 5) embody this pluralistic alchemy. Rendered in faint yet suggestive lines, they combine human toes, birds’ feet and high-heeled shoes, an uncanny mélange that recurs more sharply in Lam’s 1944 *Eternal Presence* (fig. 6). The feet’s palmation is what Georges Bataille would characterize as base-ness, a quality associated with sacred animality and monstrosity. The high heels, on the other hand, recall Meret Oppenheim’s trussed-up shoes in *My Governess* (fig. 7). Lam’s blurry mixture of the palmate feet and high-heels intimate the commodified and banal seduction of his Antillean culture, often fetishized as backward, fecund or fashionably exotic. The party of obscene monsters in *The Jungle* is sublimated in the dancing feet beneath tattered wings in *Annunciation*. Lam’s lost paradise of frayed wings, along with his menacing grove of bleeding sugar canes, gave us what the Surrealist poet Alain Jouffroy described as a “convulsive beauty” that “emerged from a convulsive island at the time of the convulsions of war.”

The convulsion of turbulence and elegance embedded in Lam’s flourishing plant-gods mirrored the grotesque beauty that Breton believed

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Europe needed to counteract the rise of totalitarianism in the early 1940s. Lam’s agitated aesthetics, therefore, did not just reflect a strictly postcolonial subversion, but harmonized with his European fellow-Surrealists’ resistance to the alarming rise of fascism. To appreciate Lam’s significance, one must read between the hazy lines and track the undercurrent of violence coursing around *The Jungle*’s beguiling plant-humans and *Annunciation*’s fetishized feet. The seductive show of crescent masks and elevated swords ought not to be confused with an advertisement of indigenous cultures. Lam eloquently adapted his ancestral aesthetics with Surrealist painting techniques to combat the dominant Western canon from within.

**Conclusion**

With his clever interpenetration of European and Afro-Cuban influences, Wifredo Lam’s paintings handled “the sordidness of history” with such nuance and charisma that Césaire christened him “a great disturber” who gave “the boot to academies and conformities.” Lam’s cultic symbols were either pushed to the fore with provocative allure, as shown in *The Jungle*, or shielded with elusive ambiguity behind a smoky surface, like that of *Annunciation*.

To those who are taken in exclusively by his “voodoo figures” and “primal landscape,” Lam might seem like a “Third World” talent who was complacent with being the Museum of Modern Art’s “delivery boy.” But the viewer who looks closely at Lam’s treacherous “primitness” would see that Lam’s priority was not catchy representations of primordial rituals. Lam claimed no authority or authenticity over his Afro-Cuban spiritual references as he openly disavowed the Santeria and Voodoo quotations from their religious contexts. More importantly, authenticity was not at all what Lam was attempting to embody. He did not seek to recuperate an imagined “authentic” Antillean experience but

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instead, re-examined and exposed Cuba’s Otherization as a commercialized resort of “pleasure, of sugary music, rumbas, mambos and so forth.”25 Whether through luscious oils, bold gouache or misty grisaille, Lam blended European painting techniques with the scattered ashes of historical turmoil to finely blacken the Western medium of easel painting.

Similar to Aimé Césaire, who mastered the French language to speak back to his oppressors, Lam fluently appropriated European modernist styles to infiltrate the Western museum with his exquisite monstrosity. Lowery Stokes Sims has credited Lam with being “ahead of his time”26 for his capacity to cross borders between the universal and the individual, the ancestral and the avant-garde, the old world and the new world, the “Western” and the “primitive,” and other dualistic distinctions which seem to melt under his paintbrush. Merging postcolonial revolt with Surrealist seduction, Lam fearlessly rejected the Western art world’s obsession with pure authenticity, and instead conjured a different “new world” where hybrid beasts elevated the weight of historical trauma in a mischievous manner. Lam’s human-trees and winged monsters disturbed the European canon’s fixation on monolithic authenticity and called out its exclusion of unstable identities. Looking back on William S. Rubin’s reduction of Lam to the “primitive and ethnic” in 1968, it is critical for us today to revisit John Yau’s protest against the relegation of Lam to the decorative margins and mindfully take up Stoke Sims’ invitation to see Lam and emerging artists of color on their own terms, from their own pluralistic and ever protean centers.


Appendix

Figure 1. Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1943, Gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 239.4 x 229.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon Paris*, 1907, Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 3. Wifredo Lam, *Annunciation*, 1944, Oil on canvas, 154.3 × 127.6 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.
Figure 4. Wifredo Lam, *Annunciation*, 1944 (detail).
Figure 5. Wifredo Lam, *Annunciation*, 1944 (detail).

Figure 6. Wifredo Lam, *The Eternal Presence*, 1944 (detail), Oil and pastel over papier maché and chalk ground on bast fiber fabric, 216.5 x 195.9 cm, RISD Museum.
Figure 7. Meret Oppenheim, *Ma Gouvernante (My Governess)*, 1936, Shoes, paper, string and metal, 14 × 33 × 21 cm.
Works Cited


