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Poetic Oils: Meaning Making in Caribbean Poetry

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Abstract
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Poetic Oils: Meaning Making in Caribbean Poetry recovers the poetic response to the emergence of the petroleum industry throughout the Caribbean. Over the course of the twentieth century, as the world grew increasingly dependent upon oil and gasoline, Caribbean poets, overexposed to oil as both a substance and a commodity when compared with their European and American counterparts, incorporated figures of petrochemicals and their byproducts into their poems. At the same time, these ubiquitous substances shaped society and politics, fundamentally altering the trajectory of literary production. Moreover, petrochemicals transformed the surrounding environment, offering up unfamiliar and startling sights and sounds.

Poetic Oils confronts the legacy of petro-modernity, reactivating oil's provocative potentials. Participating in current discussions within the energy humanities, ecocriticism, poetics, and postcolonial studies, I argue that poetry—with its endless rhetorical and textual effects—unsticks oil in our imagination, defamiliarizing it so that we may see it anew. By using literary analysis and studying publication history, I develop a poetics of oil, creating critical terminology and a framework for reading texts as materials participating in the same globalized networks as petrochemicals.

Chapter 1, "Saint John-Perse and the Petrochemical Sublime," reevaluates Nobelist and diplomat Saint-John Perse—a poet who Édouard Glissant claimed, "emerg[ed] from the universe of plantations." I argue that Perse emerged into petrochemical modernity. Chapter 2, "Drumming Up Oil: Kamau Brathwaite, Grace Nichols, and Victor D. Questel," explores the history and application of an analytic term, associated with petrochemical phenomena, *noise*. Chapter 3, "Poetic Statecraft and The Production of Cuban Poetry," analyzes the role that petrochemicals played in Cuban independence and subsequent trade deals with the USSR, into the so-called "Special Period." I argue that Cuban poets, including José Martí, Nancy Morejón, and Reina María Rodríguez, investigated and reworked the political relationship between poetry and oil. In Chapter 4, "'High-Powered Intellectual Labours': *Tapia* Journal and Poetic Production: Lloyd Best, Eric Roach, and Derek Walcott," I argue that Trinidadian economist and social critic Lloyd Best's *Tapia* journal provides an alternative site for imagining resource autonomy. These chapters demonstrate that Caribbean poetry constitutes an invaluable archive of imaginative resource-oriented thinking.

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Introduction: Figuring Oil

I take petrochemicals to be a problem for the imagination. One is hard-pressed to imagine a world without oil. Of course, that assumes that one would stop to consider petrochemicals in the first place. These chemicals and their multiform byproducts are so commonplace as to scarcely attract our attention, let alone prod our imagination. And yet, they shape human lives in profound ways. How does one conceive of a set of objects that proliferate within discourses ranging from the global market to global climate change? I contend that poetry, with its strategies for forging metaphorical associations and revealing abiding ambiguities, is suited for investigating petrochemicals' aesthetic identities and murky legacies.¹

Twentieth-century Caribbean poetry teems with the protean figures of petrochemicals. In part, this is a direct consequence of the presences of robust oil and shipping industries throughout the Caribbean. Postcolonial studies provides valuable articulations for discussing pressing questions raised by the figure of Caribbean petrochemicals, such as the dynamics between the local and global as instantiated by the oil trade; the question of modernity relative to industrialization; the particular history of the Caribbean, its peoples, resources, and economics;

¹ In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh calls into question narrative's ability to portray petrochemicals' impact on our lives. For Ghosh, modern, realist novels develop concurrently alongside climate crisis and "are actually a concealment of the real" (23). So too, in Rob Nixon's critique of Benedict Anderson, narratives of modern national development exclude those "unimagined communities" of "developmental refugees" whose conditions give the lie to national progress (*Slow Violence* 150-152). In his recent *Forms of a World*, Walt Hunter considers how poetic forms intersect with subjectivities formed under globalized regimes of labor, suggesting that "poetry uncovers the global dimension of something that has not earned enough attention" (13).

and the various reading practices required for understanding texts written during this tumultuous period. While resurgent anticolonial thought divests itself of colonialism and its conditions, many of the poets I discuss wielded their colonial educations to great effect even as they critiqued the socioeconomic arrangements of their nations and region. Postcolonial studies, rather than the more ideologically committed categories of de- or anticolonial thought, provides theorizations for acknowledging poets' often ambivalent attitudes toward European history and those literatures they used to create their own forms of aesthetic resistance during periods of colonization, decolonization, and globalization. Moreover, Laurence Breiner argues, "Models of decolonization lead us to expect the process to include celebration of the pristine precolonial past...In the absence of much concrete information about Amerindian societies, West Indian poets tend to depict them in poetry only *after* they have encountered colonization" ("Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry" 20). Therefore, taking colonization as a starting point, a postcolonial lens reveals correspondence and divergence between poets from different Caribbean nations and historical periods wherein colonial occupation and its afterlives were differentially dispersed.

"Poetic Oils" privileges the Caribbean as a region disproportionately affected by the forces of globalization and the petrochemical trade with a robust literary archive to study. By looking at oil, this work provides a different historical lineage of the economic structure of the Caribbean as a region from the one offered by Antonio Benítez-Rojo and Eric Williams who have both written about the plantation's role in creating the Caribbean's identity. "Poetic Oils" relies upon these theorizations in order to claim that the petroleum industry is something different, unique, and in tension with this model. Conscious of Glissant's dictum, "generalization is totalitarian," I submit that the oil industry is differentially distributed across the Caribbean and that an oil-producing island will have a different social, political, aesthetic, and economic

organization than does an island with a refinery (*Poetics of Relation* 20). Compare, for instance, the political significance of oil in Cuban poetry with that of oil in Trinidadian poetry. In the specific terms of my project, poets provide us with an esemplastic model to read between nations so that we may understand the transnational connections between a Soviet oil tanker in Nancy Morejón's Cuba and the oil derricks in Derek Walcott's Trinidad.

While oil's global character has been studied, the further political implications of Caribbean oil are conspicuously absent from Timothy Mitchell's oft-cited *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. As Mitchell notes, as late as 1945 "Latin America and the Caribbean" was the second largest oil producer after the United States (111). Because the book's focus is ultimately the barriers to revolutionary democracy created by the development of the global oil economy, *Carbon Democracy* affords the bulk of its attention to the historical shift in the center of oil production from the U.S. to the Middle East. Consequently, it does not investigate the particular history and exact bounds of the market region designated as "Latin America and the Caribbean." However, when one reads in Mitchell's book that during the 1958 Venezuelan coup, "a revolution had overthrown the military government and brought an elected government to power," one wonders what other political potentials might be discovered by investigating the unique flow of oil in this part of the world (167).

Timothy Morton's conception of *hyperobjects*, as developed in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, proves useful for understanding the imaginary condition of petrochemicals that "Poetic Oils" seeks to disturb. According to Morton, all hyperobjects share at least four common properties, being:

...viscous, which means that they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any 'local manifestation' of a hyper object is not directly the

hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to...And they exhibit their effects interobjectively; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects. (1)

Morton himself applies the label *hyperobject* to objects ranging from oil to nuclear bombs to black holes. I find the very terms of the above definition to resemble an extended metaphor for oil. Morton's creative use of "viscosity" (1), the metonymic process by which we may observe "local manifestations" (1) of hyperobjects, along with his attention to the "aesthetic" (1), evince a literary imagination at work. Moreover, Morton frequently draws from literature to interrogate and explain hyperobjects, citing poems by Brenda Hillman, Sheryl St. Germain, and Wordsworth. In one bold turn, Morton, reading Freud on the ego, writes, "we are poems about hyperobject earth" (51).

Ontologically and aesthetically, hyperobjects often register for Morton as crises for the imagination. The Everglades are described as "massively distributed in time and space in ways that baffle humans and make interacting with them fascinating, disturbing, problematic, and wondrous" (58). Each of these adjectives, "fascinating, disturbing, problematic, and wondrous," represents a cognitive extreme, but Morton seemingly reserves hope for an imaginary solution (58). When speaking of oil and its organic and geologic timescales, Morton suggests, "hyperobjects are time-stretched to such a vast extent that they become almost impossible to hold in the mind" (58). In "Poetic Oils," I seek to establish a surer footing in the imaginary space of the "almost impossible" through attending to the inventive language practiced by poets that often exceeds conventional definitions and ordinary syntax, the very materials for thinking through problems (58). I hold with Morton that, because of their volume and their dispersal within

modernity, petrochemicals disproportionately affect human lives, but I also suspect that studying the “local manifestations” of petrochemicals can inform a more nuanced investigation into their nature (1).

Poetry scholars and casual readers alike attest to the medium’s inherent complexity. “Poetic Oils” contends that this complexity is not vain artifice, but an inevitability emerging from the dialogic interaction between object and language. Therefore, rather than thinking of poetry as an already-difficult art form further convoluted by the Gordian knots of colonialism and modernity, we might instead imagine it as the clearest portrayal of the very threads we would otherwise need to cut. In Jahan Ramazani’s assessment, postcolonial poets “have found new ways of aesthetically embodying, probing, and dramatizing the divisions and complexities of postcolonial worlds” (“Introduction” 1). This poetic reordering allows for a greater conscious engagement with what might otherwise prove overwhelming, such as the problems posed by hyperobjects. While these poets are indeed creating new discursive possibilities for oil, they often draw from a larger poetics of oil to develop their representations.

In this example from *Another Life* (1973), Derek Walcott blends paranomasiacally petrochemicals and oil paint on a canvas, “[w]hen the oil green water glows but doesn’t catch, / only its burnish, something wakes me early / draws me out” (87). This passage registers *Another Life*’s thematic preoccupation with confounding the distinction between the visual and textual arts. An unnamed “something...draws [the poet] out,” in both a graphic and a literal sense. In the suggestive act of waking, the poet’s presence is constituted and confused with the sea. The graphic sense invoked by the act of drawing anaphorically inflects the meaning of “oil green” (87). Because *Another Life* is a narrative poem, diagetically, the point of reference may be a canvas whose sea is painted with oils. Like the poet, the painter’s imagination colors the sea with

the sheen of petrochemical green. In this sense, the “oil green water” is green precisely because it “doesn’t catch” the light fully, which would make it appear white instead of green (87). There is an additional sense in which petrochemical implications remain active within the word “catch” (87). In this instance, the water “doesn’t catch” (87), but earlier in the poem, we are shown the combustible properties of oil when “[t]he whole sky caught. The thick sea heaved like petrol. / The past hissed in a cinder. / They heard the century breaking in half” (79). These lines break history, both at the midpoint of a century and formally as, through hysteron proteron, the sky ignites prior to the sea being brought into proximity with gasoline by way of the simile. The aesthetic issues arising in these lines, which produce the ambiguity, are unique to the properties of oil. How does one represent iridescence? As much as a painter working in oils is bound to an admixture of pigments, a poet struggles with the sequentiality of language or the absolute terms of color to represent the shifting reflections on the surface of oil. Whatever stability the painter’s green provides, the idea of imminent combustion works to undermine.

At various points, “Poetic Oils” regards petrochemical commodities in Caribbean poetry as reflecting their historical status as colonial exports with an enduring neocolonial present; however, these market designations do not exhaust the figurative potentials developed by the poets in this study. When treating a history as violent as colonialism, it is crucial to develop a reading practice that allows for brutalities and injustices to be registered when appropriate without subjugating alternative discourses that emerge beyond the coercive colonial purview. In terms of reading through colonialism, Jahan Ramazani acknowledges that some postcolonial poets “seek to give voice to a past that colonialism has degraded, garbled, even gagged” (*Hybrid Muse* 11). A poem’s ability to record and resurrect the past—even apparently a past for which there is no language, as “gagged” implies—demonstrates poetry’s ambiguous connection to the

immanent world (11). Even the terra firma of location becomes suspect to the postcolonial poet. Ramazani accounts for poets who “self-consciously probe the multiplicity and constructedness of the home they dislocate in the moment of reinhabiting” (*Hybrid Muse* 16). Accepting the poet’s ability to “probe” without reduction allows for an efficacious inquiry into the elaborate, often colonially-inflected, mechanisms by which poems incorporate petrochemicals (*Hybrid Muse* 11).

Methodologically, “Poetic Oils” foregrounds poetry’s formal characteristics. As Ramazani notes, poetry “demands specifically literary modes of response and recognition—of figurative devices, generic codes, stanzaic patterns, prosodic twists, and allusive turns” (*Hybrid Muse* 4). Ramazani identifies formal terms specifically useful for exegetical work in postcolonial poetry that acknowledges the imbalance of power at the foundation of postcolonial hybridity. *Modernist bricolage* refers to the “synthetic use...of diverse cultural materials ready to hand” (*Transnational* 99). The *postcolonial metaleptic* is the re-reading of canonical Modernism through postcolonial poets’ own interpretations and readings (*Transnational* 114). *Polymythic syncretism* identifies poets’ construction of “transreligious” and, consequently, “intercultural” pantheons (*Transnational* 103). Finally, *translocal* describes poems wherein postcolonial poets “dislocate the local into translocation” (*Transnational* 165). While some of the poetry I analyze readily evinces the above devices, “Poetic Oils” will develop specific terminology for the innovations I take to be particular to petrochemical poetry.

Combining theory from both Timothy Morton and Jahan Ramazani enables some flexibility between scales and objects of study. Morton does not consider the sociopolitical implications of oil as a hyperobject, opting for an object-oriented ontological critique. Ramazani’s primary concern is poetry, but he nevertheless recognizes the particular aesthetic and historical exigencies that cohere within poetic discourse. Ramazani and Morton are useful

thinkers in imagining the world in which these poems circulate; however, a commitment to the regional scale emphasizes nuances within these poems. As I have started to note, throughout the twentieth century, Caribbean poets lived in close proximity to oil and its infrastructure. This meant that poets engaged local oil in the news, heard lyrics recited to rhythms played on repurposed oil drums, and witnessed the effects of oil interacting with the environment. Without a critical frame that addresses these emergent contexts, these poems cannot translate, even as poets formalize ways to encode the petrochemical into their poems. One cannot appreciate formal inventiveness if one ignores the historical impossibility of repetition in the first place. In my analysis, the daily challenges faced by certain Caribbean poets who represented petrochemicals is reason enough for poetic invention. In this sense, a more focused lens is required than either Ramazani or Morton provide.

Two edited volumes, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (2017) and *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* (2017), illustrate the need for continued engagement with both oil and postcolonial poetry. *Petrocultures* offers a wide range of interdisciplinary essays focused on oil and its effects. The editors correctly contend that “the twentieth century was transformed by oil,” but note the surprising dearth of humanities scholarship along these lines (5). So too, the essays contained within *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, represent the tremendous breadth of potential avenues for investigations within postcolonial poetry, even as Ramazani, the volume’s editor, notes how rarely poetry is studied even by postcolonial literary scholars (“Introduction” 8). Laurence Breiner’s chapter, “Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry,” emphasizes the importance of a postcolonial framework for reading Caribbean poetry but does not take up the regional impact of the oil industry. Harry Garuba’s chapter, “Landscape, the Environment, and Postcolonial Poetry,” clears additional space by

foregrounding postcolonial poetry's imaginative function asking, "how do postcolonial poets simultaneously use and subvert [a European language's] schema, in light of the difference of their natural environment and the resistance it poses" (212). Methodologically, close reading practices can attend to Garuba's question, while revealing the dynamics of environments newly changed by oil. Taken together, both these collections expose openings within the critical discourse while also providing useful case studies, methodologies and theoretical frames. "Poetic Oils" attends to a specific region's poetry in order to demonstrate oil's presence in the archive.

In what follows, I will explain the individual studies comprising "Poetic Oils." Each chapter represents an engagement with a particular intersection between Caribbean poetry and petrochemicals. "Poetic Oils" is organized around the ways that the poetic imagination represents and is influenced by petrochemicals (most notably oil and gasoline). The work focuses on poetry from the Caribbean written between the early twentieth century and the present. I argue that oil and its signifiers circulate through Caribbean poetry in manifold ways that require extended, individualized attention. "Poetic Oils" adapts theoretical work by scholars within the fields of energy humanities, ecocriticism, poetics, and postcolonial studies.

Chapter 1, "Saint-John Perse and the Petrochemical Imagination," reads Guadeloupean poet Saint-John Perse's 1911 poetry collection *Éloges*, or *Praises*, demonstrating that petrochemicals lend their aesthetic properties to Caribbean poets' imaginations from the twentieth century's earliest days. As a visionary poem, *Praises* oscillates between the destructive, horrific potentials of petrochemicals and their transformative, awesome grandeur. Alternatingly, Perse observes "things that are dead; and others that are make-believe"—rotting trees by a black river and spectacularly iridescent fish (43). Because these extremes are dialogically connected within the poem, they establish what I refer to as the *petro-sublime*.

In Perse's poetry, oil's physical descriptors—unctuous, polluting, and polychromatic, to name a few—attach themselves to the natural and urban surroundings. Beyond this, however, Perse's poetry also demonstrates oil's diachronic ambivalence. Oil, born of long-dead organisms, falters when tasked with projecting human progress and futurity, becoming an uncanny substance. This is the earliest significant engagement with oil in twentieth-century poetry that I have found in my reading.

In his chapter, "Where is the Oil in Modernism?," Joshua Schuster notes the metaleptic indexing of oil by signs of industrialization within canonical modernist poetic projects. Pound's turbines, Sandburg's trade goods, and the engines of both Oppen and Williams all display a poetic imaginary predicated on oil, but curiously resist going to the source of these machines' power. Turning to Ramazani's *postcolonial metaleptic*, we might tentatively answer Schuster's astute question: Patently, oil was in the Caribbean. The modernist machine picks up and incorporates Saint-John Perse's original poetry by way of T.S. Eliot's later translation of Perse's *Anabase* (1924). Following Schuster's claim, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* we read the tale of cosmopolitan consumption without an explicit engagement with oil. This chapter explores and theorizes the complicated and interrelated trajectories of these exilic poets.

Eliot and Perse were moved into an unlikely relation to one another by oil as an invisible agent in their trans-oceanic journeys. As both these poets were Nobelists, neither wanted for access to the major channels of twentieth-century poetry. However, Perse's omission from Schuster's essay bespeaks a problem that runs throughout the current conversation around petrochemicals and energy humanities, which is that the voices and visions of those people with

direct exposure to the oil industry remain under-acknowledged. This chapter emphasizes and contrasts the ambivalent sublimity in Perse's poetry to Eliot's characteristic, if affected, dread. In both cases, industrial oil transforms the world around these poets, a transformation that in retrospect lends a certain legitimacy to these self-styled seers' claims.

This chapter also revisits correspondences between Perse and those figures who interceded in his transnational poetry career. Writing by American poet Archibald MacLeish helps us understand Perse's wartime career and how an international mechanism of publishers and tastemakers positioned the poet as a foreign commodity. So too, Perse's later patron, Calouste Gulbenkian, a Turkish oil magnate, inspires the poet to write about the special place petrochemicals occupied in his imagination. In this chapter, I seek to reimagine Perse's biographical and professional legacies, as an emergence from the plantation into a universe of oil.

At the beginning of *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o observes the relationship between postcolonial artistic innovation and the rejectamenta of modernity. In discussing artistic practices that emerge from necessity, he remarks, "The Caribbean steel drum orchestra originates with the poor literally rescuing discarded oil drums...to create the pans...[t]he working poor of Trinidad and Tobago wrested beauty from the waste of the big oil corporations" (4). Ngũgĩ follows this brief account with what I am taking to be a sincere exclamation and an incitement to further study: "Imagine making music from oil!" (4).

Chapter 2, "Drumming Up Oil: Kamau Brathwaite, Grace Nichols, and Victor D. Questel," considers the figure of the steel drum in work by the three poets indicated in the title. Two scholarly trends within postcolonial studies inform this inquiry. On the one hand, both Ramazani's term *modernist bricolage* and Homi Bhabha's chapter "Of Mimicry and Man" assist

in understanding the strategic significance in the act of repurposing, for example, oil drums. On the other hand, Janet Neigh's work on performance and poetry, including her book *Recalling Recitation in the Americas: Borderless Curriculum, Performance Poetry, and Reading* and her chapter "Orality, Creoles, and Postcolonial Poetry in Performance," help me work through the complexity of writing about the distinction between oral and written forms of poetry. To extend her concept, in the same way that the performance haunts the text, so too might the oil drum haunt the figure of the steel drum.

I read Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy. Masks* and "Calypso" both demonstrate a preoccupation with the drum and negotiate the problem of bringing it into the poem. While much has been written about *The Arrivants*, I maintain that it is a necessary starting point for the poetic genealogy I am suggesting. Grace Nichols depicts a transformative Carnival performance and the active creation of a persona in her long poem "Sunris." The poem begins with an introduction that foregrounds the perceptions "of the upper and middle classes who frowned on folk-culture as common" (89). The irony is that oil drums simultaneously index the sheer economic dominance of modernity and the "low class" (89). In this introduction, Nichols also expresses her lineage in terms of poets and performers including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Walcott, and Drupatee. In Nichols's "Sunris," the poem's many attendant deities are most comprehensible through Ramazani's *polymythic syncretism*, but these gods add to the sense of an immense, inhuman presence. After reflecting on the history of racialized violence under slavery, Nichols acknowledges history's endurance by claiming, "[e]ven in the heart of all this bacchanal / The Sea returns to haunt this carnival" (103). The steel drum is tasked to "wake dih ear / of the middle passage / drown" (105), demonstrating an uncanny ability to communicate between worlds. There is thus an ambiguity in the nature of the "sweet oil drum mystery" (104). Victor

Questel's work is extensively underwritten by calypso rhythms and the steel drum. His six-part poem, "Voices," gives specific instructions for performance and includes explicit critiques of the exploitation of oil in the Caribbean. Of the transition from a plantation-based economy to a petro-economy, he writes "when she sugar done / man drill for oil / Then break all ties" (102). Long form poems such as "Voices" encode a complicated relationship to the figure of the steel drum, exaggerating the aporia between text and performance.

All three of these poets transform actual drums and rhythms into poetic language. It requires attentive reading to explain how this imaginative process is negotiated, but in Questel and Nichols, there is more to be investigated as to how and why oil should appear at all within these poems.

Chapter 3, "Poetic Statecraft and The Production of Cuban Poetry," identifies and analyzes two modes of poetry that correspond largely, though not exclusively, to two periods in Cuban history. Beginning with revolutionary poet José Martí, I sketch a poetic history of Cuba in which subsequent revolutions negotiated poetry as a political medium. At the same time, I sketch an interpretation of Cuban history that emphasizes the national need for oil, which accelerated economic growth and precipitated sociopolitical and economic transformations.

The first mode, which I call accelerated poetry, corresponds to the Cuban Revolution. Heavy with metaphor, this poetry is characterized by explicit claims to futurity and progress, partaking in the semantic field of globalized petro-modernity and recapitulating its logics. Writings about poetry and art by Fidel Castro and poems by state-sponsored poet Nicolás Guillén emblemize this mode of poetry. I use issues of *El Corno Emplumado*, American expatriate Margaret Randall and her partner Sergio Mondragón's Mexico City-based journal, as a case

study for the production of this type of poetry, while acknowledging the important contributions this journal made to the international spread of Cuban poetry.

The second mode of Cuban poetry that I analyze, slow poetry, corresponds to the “Special Period” in Cuba. This era of Cuban history, I argue, is exceptional for its lack of access to petrochemicals even as it retained its modern political and social structures. Poems by Nancy Morejón and Reina María Rodríguez inform this consideration. I place these poems in conversation with philosopher Héctor Hoyos’s concept of *transcultural materialism*, that is “the noninstrumental use of stories and literary language to upset the nature-culture divide, affect our rapport with things, and reassess our place in human-nonhuman history” (13). I argue that slow poetry provides invaluable insight into modes of being without oil and creates alternative representational strategies to those that dominate popular modern literature and discourse.

In total, this chapter argues that both poetry and oil were instrumental to a developing Cuba, but the ideology surrounding these national products was fraught with shortcomings. Slow poets responded to conditions of austerity brought on by the Cuban lack of oil, but they also departed from earlier poets who were conditioned by a nationalistic optimism tied to oil.

Chapter 4, “‘High-Powered Intellectual Labours’: *Tapia* Journal and Poetic Production: Lloyd Best, Eric Roach, and Derek Walcott,” adopts a postcolonial print studies methodology to discuss the literary ambitions, publishing efforts, and political aspirations of Trinidadian economist Lloyd Best. By theorizing a postcolonial periodical, I demonstrate the ways poets re-imagined economic and quotidian discourses regarding oil, poetry, and globalism. I argue that the newspaper *Tapia* acts as a site to stage and challenge resource dependency through creative and intellectual labors.

In the mid-sixties, economist and political aspirant Lloyd Best formed the Tapia House group, a Trinidadian arts and community organization. In 1969, a staunchly political newspaper, *Tapia*, spun out of this community space with Best at the helm. The journal and the group took their name from a traditional form of Trinidadian dwelling space, the tapia. In addition to these local undertakings, by the mid-sixties, Lloyd Best was working internationally with Canadian economist Kari Levitt on the pure plantation model of economy to explain the economic difficulties facing Trinidad following independence. As a possible solution to the unequal and unsustainable economic organization of the Caribbean, Best advocated Trinidadian economic independence within the international market. As Kari Levitt clarifies, “[t]he petroleum sector, at the time the [Trinidad and Tobago System of National Accounts] was constructed, was also controlled largely by foreign companies” (“A System” 181). Reclaiming this natural resource had real economic implications for the two economists. This chapter puts Bestian political and economic theory in conversation with two poets.

Tobagonian poet Eric Merton Roach (1915-1974) wrote voluminously without publishing a single poetry collection in his lifetime. Under Best’s direction, *Tapia* was one venue bold enough to publish his caustic, condemnatory poems, which expressed his disdain for what he saw as a generation of complacent and misguided citizens, duped by corrupt politicians. Roach’s poetry represents a sustained effort to correct the course of Caribbean political and moral life, while also demonstrating Lloyd Best’s commitment to radically open discourse as part of cultural development. Roach’s poems often take up the themes of industrialization’s environmental damage in the Caribbean, and in his poem “Hard Drought” he writes about Tubal Uriah Butler (1897-1977), who led a series of oilfield riots. Roach also condemned the aloof

attitudes of fellow Caribbean authors including Nobelists V.S. Naipaul (1932-2018) and Derek Walcott (1930-2017).

In 1973, *Tapia* published four poems by Derek Walcott including “The Volcano,” which would later appear in Walcott’s collection *Sea Grapes*. “The Volcano” invokes the expatriate modernist novelists James Joyce and Joseph Conrad and sets itself within the “two glares from the miles-out /at sea derricks” (9). By alluding to these authors and imagining the oil trade, the poem portrays an international imaginary wherein literature and oil move beyond the shores, making possible unlikely crossings between authors, landscapes, and commodities. Oil holds an ambivalent political promise in Derek Walcott’s poems. Ironically, in other poems, oil becomes associated with corruption, prompting a radical authorial transparency that addresses political malfeasance. In “The Spoiler’s Return,” the resurrected, irreverent persona of Mighty Spoiler deftly critiques “each independent, oil forsaken island” (436). So too, the poem “The Silent Woman” from *Sea Grapes* bears an epigraph “for Jean Miles” (23). Miles, a political activist, exposed the shady dealings of Trinidadian oil companies in regard to selling gas station licenses.

In addition to Walcott, *Tapia* contains poems, literary essays, and book reviews by other Caribbean authors. This chapter chronicles the newspaper’s history while also noticing the profound tensions that occur across the pages, as when two pages after “The Volcano,” a “statement by the Managing Director of Shell Trinidad Limited” appears in which he addresses the “concern being expressed by people worried by possible adverse consequences” of Shell’s regional activity (Bates 11). I argue that one advantage studying the newspaper offers postcolonial studies is the polyvocality operating within even a single issue. When studying an object as multifaceted and powerful as oil, a plurality of voices may contain particular truths that elude a single author’s imagination.

Together, these chapters recover a tradition and develop a vocabulary from Caribbean poetry's treatment of oil. *Poetic Oils* reminds the reader that the environments and the resources upon which populations depend remain contested as both artistic and political materials, despite the global, regional, and national hegemonic structures that otherwise control them. In the face of such institutions, poets reorder the world through language and evocative objects, figuring the actual and pronouncing the unspoken. Historically, the state and the transnational corporation were quick and decisive in instrumentalizing Caribbean oil. Poetry's vitally imaginative alternatives to dominant discourses stand as an archive through which we may continue to build a platform to reconceptualize oil and oil dependency. This task's urgency cannot be overstated.

In 2021, at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, Prime Minister of Barbados Mia Mottley spoke to a world audience with rhetorical force and urgency on the environmental crisis throughout the Caribbean, and indeed, throughout the formerly colonized world. Frustrated by global political leaders' unresponsiveness to the unheard pleas of those humans on the "frontline" of climate crisis, she admonishes, "Today, we need the correct mix of voices, ambition, and action" ("Speech"). Mottley's is one such voice, and a fuller account of the broader environmental struggles of the Caribbean will involve studying the discourses of climate activists and politicians from the region.

In concert with these voices, contemporary Caribbean poets continue in the tradition bequeathed to them by the poets who people *Poetic Oils*. In his 2019 poem, "Sometimes I Consider the Nameless Space," with an environmental imagination, Jamaican poet Kei Miller asks, "isn't place always a violence—the decimation of trees, the genocide of bees, the dislocation of birds, the cutting, the clearing, the paving, the smoothing, the raising up of cement like giant tombstones over the grave of all that was there before" (37). Miller, who I have written

about in an article for *Public Books*, makes climate catastrophe urgent by insisting we see historical violence as the environment. Here, his historical vision is not dissimilar to Roach's. In her poem "Cities in Step," Trinidadian poet Vahni Capildeo's associative, metonymic images recall Perse when she writes, "what happened / the colour of / black happened, rainbow / which is black / happened, changed texture / happened, propulsive odour / happened to invade / hope of building / we were playing / on the beach / and found oil" (54). Capildeo shows us poetry's special force. She uses her senses, the figure of paronomasia in *propulsive*, and the forceful plosives of assonance to disrupt building a sandcastle and to give her readers the experience of oil washing ashore before she explicitly announces its presence. Although *Poetic Oils* accounts for a century of poetry, more remains.

So too, energy humanities scholarship keeps pace. Recent books, including *White Skin, Black Fuel* (2021) by Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective and *History 4° Celsius 2020* by Ian Baucom. In the January 2022 issue of *PMLA*, Shouhei Tanaka analyzes three novels "as fossil fuel fictions that illuminate the conjuncture of energy and racial capitalism" (37). It is my observation that these texts evidence a sustained interest in problematizing our relationship to the entangled problems of environmental crises in a world where resources are unequally distributed. As I have argued throughout *Poetic Oils*, poetry makes an invaluable contribution to our collective ability to reimagine our discourses and our ideas of freedom.

As makers, poets decline to surrender to oil's destructivity, so often guised in the imagination as limitless production. Poems stand as material refutations of the pessimism that our overreliance on petrochemicals may otherwise inspire. As seen in Chapter 2, poets show us that we can make beauty from the wreckage. Poets risk new words for new phenomena, which will be an ongoing necessity in a world upturned by climate crises and the new environmental

challenges that emerge. Despite the obsessive regimes of containment enacted by imperialism, slavery and the plantation, colonization, and resource extraction, poetry presents itself as transgressive. At its best, poetry exceeds national, generational, and imaginative boundaries to form traditions all its own. *Poetic Oils* attends to one such tradition made by those poets at the beginning of something new.

Chapter 1: Saint-John Perse and the Petrochemical Imagination

Saint-John Perse (1887-1975) is the penname for poet and diplomat Alexis Léger. Born in Guadeloupe, Perse spent his life travelling the globe as a political exile and a diplomat while his poetry circulated no less energetically, eventually earning him the 1960 Nobel Prize in literature. The life and career of poet Saint-John Perse attests to the globalization of the modern world as it happened during the twentieth century. Perse traveled between continents, corresponded with poets the world over, and witnessed firsthand the effects of political and economic instability in a variety of cultural contexts. And yet, while scholars of modernism and world literature remain concerned with the ways in which poets conceive of the world and operate within it, Perse receives little critical attention. Simultaneously, the burgeoning field of Energy Humanities attempts to locate texts that represent the historical flows of energy and energy resources as a lens to view modernity, a task for which Perse's poetry is well-suited.

This chapter reevaluates Perse in order to see how his poetry engages the modern world and how the modern world conditions our reception of his texts. To do this, I develop a method of reading that treats his texts—primarily *Éloges and Other Poems* for its overt references to the Caribbean landscape and its publication history—as evidence for identifying global processes of modernity, while attending to his broader poetics in order to refine our critical engagement with petrochemicals. In this way, I try to negotiate between a representation of his poetry as a commodity and his poetry's representation of commodities. Recalling Sarah Brouillette's admonishment, "if we are concerned about the dominance of literary products over literary projects, we cannot begin to understand and contest this dominance without outlining and critiquing the political economy of literary production," (98) I argue that a materialist critique of

Perse's poetic texts along with a reading of his formal poetics illuminates modern literature's articulation with global capital. Perse allows us to improve our ability to read commodities and recognize their sociopolitical and historical dominance.

Despite his global career, with poems appearing in French and English, and undeniable reputation among an international group of modernist poets and writers, Perse seldom appears in accounts of world literature. Yet, world literature provides meaningful methods to understand Perse's poetry. Of world literature in translation, Helana Buescu remarks "world literature is not solely a mode of reading, but a mode that deals with the constant *invention of reading*—by reshaping the centre and the peripheries of literary systems, and by thus proposing ever-changing forms of actually reading texts that seemed to have been already read" (53). Clearly, for a poet who won "the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of literary art itself" (Casanova 147) to be relatively unknown in the current moment attests to the unfixed relationship between "the centre and the peripheries of literary systems" (Buescu 52). The characteristic openness of a translated text that Buescu identifies further suggests that Perse's already-translated, already-read poems lend themselves particularly well to contemporary reassessment. To this end, I ask, why is Perse not invoked as an exemplar for the twentieth-century poet? And moreover, what do our conceptions of modernism and global poetic production lose when they fail to account for Perse's unique case?

Perse's connections to the global modernist literary establishment run more deeply than contemporaneity. Through direct correspondence and general patterning, Perse's poetic career concurs with that of the earthly avatar of Anglo-modernism, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). Beginning in the 1920s, Eliot champions Perse's poetry, taking on a translation of his second book *Anabasis*. In the introduction to his translation of *Anabasis*, Eliot simultaneously frames the book

as “already well known, not only in France, but in other countries of Europe” (9), while acknowledging the difficulties of reading the text. Eliot suggests that obscurities arise directly from the nature of the poem’s design as “a series of images of migration, of conquest of vast spaces in Asiatic wastes, of destruction and foundation of cities and civilizations of any races or epochs of the ancient East” (10). Eliot’s introductory mystification-as-explication accords with Günter Leypoldt’s commentary on the singularization, or, consecration, of literary texts. Eliot acts as a cultural arbitrator and his endorsement, singularizing the text from the normal patterns of consumption, “does not distort, it constitutes the work by shaping its equilibrium of ‘higher’ and ‘lower materialities” (Leypoldt 82). In Eliot’s worldview, there is a civilized, literary Europe that can appreciate this book and “the ancient East” that serves as inspiration for *Anabasis*.

In such a reading as Eliot’s, the poem is ultimately mimetic and its objective correlative is evident in that “the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization” (10). Eliot vouches for Perse’s experiential knowledge, claiming “[t]he author of this poem is, even in the most practical sense, an authority on the Far East; he has lived there as well as in the tropics” (12). Here, the “Far East” and “the tropics” serve as two non-European regions that conspire to inform the poem’s imagery and redound upon the author’s expertise to render “barbaric civilization.” Eliot does not propose that the reader will understand China, much less Guadeloupe, any better for having read *Anabasis*. Eliot’s formation of the literary world to which Perse belongs aligns with Homi Bhabha’s estimation that “cultural globality is figured in the in-between spaces of double frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred ‘subject’ signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the ‘present’” (216). As Perse comes to the reader via Eliot’s translation, Eliot repositions Perse within an arbitrary and ill-defined, global space

marked by evaluations, implicit and explicit. Through the stacking of referential frames, *Anabasis* is presented as a text destined for unbelonging. As translator, Eliot ironically dislocates the text in search of its inspirations and origins. Buescu explains such an act as a necessary part of a translated text's life: "the sense of *literary estrangement* is part of the reading process, and the project of its *non-domestication*...is very much at the centre of the hermeneutical process" (53).

In one last boundary-defying leap, Eliot compares Perse to another modernist author, writing, "I believe that this is a piece of writing of the same importance as the later work of James Joyce, as valuable as *Anna Livia Plurabelle*" (12). Through his comparison of Perse to Joyce, Eliot transcends genres to connect two fellow writers-at-large—one, a poet from the French Caribbean and the other, a novelist from Ireland. Following *Anabasis*'s 1930 translation, Eliot and Perse maintain a minor correspondence. In his later "Note to Revised Edition," Eliot remarks that he bases his revisions to *Anabasis* "upon the recommendations of the author, whose increasing mastery of English has enabled him to detect faults previously unobserved" (14). Perhaps a greater sign of professional respect, Eliot forfeits his share of royalties from the publication of the 1949 edition of *Anabasis*.² While Perse exchanges missives with numerous major authors that demonstrate his connection to the literary world, his decades-long relationship with Eliot is particularly illustrative in demonstrating how Perse's poetry contributes to the modernist corpus.³ *Anabasis* also demonstrates how a world literary frame, like Eliot's, emerges through international exchange in order to reimagine a text's location and relevant points of reference. The critic becomes not only an authoritative reader but impedes the potentials for a

² "Letter 321" (*Letters* 609)

³ Among them, W.H. Auden, Archibald Macleish, Allen Tate, Andre Gide, and Joseph Conrad.

poem's symbolic discourse to reference its real-world analogs. The undifferentiated vastness of the "Far East" connects through a subterranean operation to "the tropics" and the reader is given leave to replace historical and local exigencies with a simpler formula. The translation and American publication of Perse's *Éloges and Other Poems* is beholden to this legacy and iterates on these patterns.

"Éloges" originally appears in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1911 at the encouragement of editor André Gide. The text's next appearance, in 1913, is a Spanish language edition translated and produced by Argentinian writer Ricardo Güiraldes. Later, in 1938, comes a partial translation into German for the Swiss literary review, *Corona*.⁴ In 1944, fourteen years after Eliot's translation of *Anabasis*, W.W. Norton and Co. publishes a translation into English under the title *Éloges and Other Poems* with an introduction by Librarian of Congress and Office of Strategic Services cooperator during World War II, Archibald MacLeish.⁵ This incomplete snapshot suggests yet another way of understanding Perse's internationality, as the circumstances surrounding the American edition represent the book's mid-century political dimensions.

In the summer of 1940, Saint-John Perse (Alexis Léger), fearing reprisal for the resistance to Nazism that he openly advised while serving as a French diplomat, leaves France to enter exile in the United States.⁶ In October 1940, Perse responds to a letter from then-Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, who previously expressed "friendly concern" over Perse's

⁴ "Letter 225" (*Letters* 453)

⁵ MacLeish worked with William Donovan, Director of the OSS, to coordinate historical documents and capable translators in order to form an index of information regarding Axis military strategies. ("COI Came First")

⁶ In one recorded instance, in 1939, anticipating the Nazi invasion of Romania Perse advised the General Secretary of the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, Alexandru Cretzianu, to ready the Romanian oil fields for destruction in order to deny the Nazis access to the vast supplies of oil (Buzatu 108-9). See Meltz 622-3.

predicament.⁷ In September 1941, Perse sends MacLeish his poem “Exil,” instructing MacLeish to “[d]o whatever you want with it.”⁸ The poem appears in French, without translation, in the March 1942 issue of *Poetry* accompanied by MacLeish’s essay, “A Note on Alexis Saint Léger Léger.” MacLeish’s abbreviated biography on Perse emphasizes the poet’s strong stance against fascism. Appealing to readers’ affection for poetry, “A Note on Alex Saint Léger Léger” relates the Nazis’ hostility toward literature itself as, upon Perse’s departure from France, they “looted his apartment,” and immolated “his unpublished poems, of which there were about five volumes in manuscript” (332). Of Perse’s own sympathies, “A Note” anaphorically declares, “[Perse] opposed always to appeasement, opposed also the appeasers” (332). The article ends on a triumphant note as the author writes “I am proud for myself and for my country that one of the greatest living poets is a Fellow of the Library of Congress” (332).

MacLeish’s strategic positioning of Perse vis-à-vis the US literary institutions *Poetry* and the Library of Congress represents the inverse of his general critique of the politics of other modernist poets as found in his 1940 tract, *The Irresponsibles*. Gisèle Sapiro accurately characterizes MacLeish’s sensibilities such as they are articulated in that text. For MacLeish and his fellow critics, “it was in the name of democratic values against Nazi or Communist barbarism that modernist writers were accused of irresponsibility” (Sapiro 75). Thus, *The Irresponsibles* proposes two groups of poets. On the one hand, MacLeish establishes a time-honored tradition of men of letters to whom fall the likes of another one of MacLeish’s appointments to the Library of Congress, Thomas Mann, as well as historical figures like priest and New World commentator Bartolomé de Las Casas, “gentling cruel priests and brutal captains with the dreadful strokes of

⁷ “Letter 221” (*Letters* 444)

⁸ “Letter 223” (*Letters* 447)

truth” (23). On the other hand, MacLeish counterposes to the men of letters those who turn against Western culture and the pursuit of truth, those for whom “Caliban in the miserable and besotted swamp is the symbol” (17). The irony here is twofold. Advancing Western culture hardly safeguards against a range of atrocities, but may, in fact, motivate incredible violence. Irony also persists in the detail that MacLeish’s argument, while lionizing Las Casas’s scholastic humanism as it pertains to Indigenous populations in the Americas, commits itself to the racialized condemnation of Caliban. Perse does not factor into *The Irresponsibles* explicitly. However, this ambivalent blend of an historical and a literary figure arising from a Caribbean context demonstrates MacLeish’s own world literary framework and qualifies Perse’s participation within the American wartime literary landscape.

As explicit as “A Note on Alexis Saint Léger Léger” and *The Irresponsibles* are in their interest in a U.S. nationalist poetry, MacLeish’s introduction to the 1944 *Éloges and Other Poems* demonstrates his commitment to Americanizing Perse via negativa. This introduction covers almost no new ground, endlessly conflating Perse and Léger, the Caribbean and Asia, *Éloges* and *Anabase*. The lack of clarity produces confused and factitious proclamations. A paragraph half-devoted to a muddled history of the Léger family in the French Caribbean and half-devoted to Perse’s time East Asia begins with the overwritten statement “[w]hoever else was born on a small coral island in the Antilles in 1889, the author of these poems was born there” (9). Elsewhere, MacLeish dissolves into obscurity when trying to address this poem’s provenance, writing “the Antilles...that world where the cyclones dropped ships in the middle of islands to become baskets of flowers and the France of Louis XIV lingered in the cool rooms and the indolent wind like an odor of camphor in the heat of the island sun” (10). The passage grasps at references. In the first case, a literary scene of meteorological impossibility seems more

befitting *The Tempest* or *Robinson Crusoe* than a geographical locale. So too, Louis XIV, nearly two centuries dead by the time of the poem's composition, misrepresents turn-of-the-century Guadeloupe as a politically exsanguinated region, alienated from its own present. Finally, "the odor of camphor" and the tree from which it presumably came are a peculiar pair of choices for this passage's simile (10). Of the endless trees and scents permeating the poem, camphor does not appear. In fact, the camphor tree, native to Asia, once again suggests MacLeish's general confusion, or outright disinterest, regarding this poem's original contexts and points of reference.

By the end of his introduction, MacLeish fully abdicates his position as critic. To close, he reproduces a letter Perse wrote for *Poetry* that ends with his disavowal of "literary doctrine" (14). In a statement scarcely imaginable by the author of *The Irresponsibles*, MacLeish concurs, "[o]n this subject I also have nothing to say," before he concludes that Perse's poetry resides "outside literature and all doctrine, in the desert sunlight where the stone survives" (14). In yet another confusion, the desert conjures the image of the Gobi Perse travelled across, which inspired *Anabasis*. Situating Perse's entire literary output within the deserts of *Anabase* betrays MacLeish's disinterest in the poem's text or its geographical and political referents. The insistence running throughout MacLeish's characterizations is that Perse should be regarded as a poet of tragic political exile, one who the Library of Congress could beneficently employ, rather than a poet of complicated geopolitical crossings, whose presence in the U.S. can hardly be attributed to MacLeish's largess. Later printings, the 1956 Bolingen edition of *Éloges and Other Poems*, as well as the 1983 *Collected Poems: Complete Edition*, do not include MacLeish's introduction, much to the benefit of readers.

MacLeish never names those writers whom he denounces in *The Irresponsibles*. Unlike the American expatriate poets of his generation—Eliot, Pound, Stein—Perse is an exile fleeing

Europe. Of the roll of modernists, Ezra Pound is perhaps the easiest figure to contrast politically to Perse. Pound's avowed fascism only too readily demonstrates the exigency with which MacLeish writes and serves as a helpful counterpart. Reading these three texts—"A Note on Alexis Saint Léger Léger," *The Irresponsibles*, and the introduction to the 1944 *Éloges and Other Poems*—allows us to understand Perse's mid-century English translations as political texts that leverage a particular, U.S.-centric world literary imagination, not merely unaligned, but advanced to oppose a segment of the international political and literary factions of World War II.

MacLeish's interests, operating as he was as both a government official and a member of the literary establishment, should not surprise us. David Damrosch reminds us "world literature is thus always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture" (514). As much as MacLeish's positioning of Perse within the American literary landscape reflects political and self-interest, Perse finds within this an opportunity. Perse, disheartened by the ongoing political situation in France, consents. After the publication of "Exil" and "A Note on Alexis Saint Léger Léger," in 1943, Perse agrees to MacLeish's request to produce *Éloges and Other Poems*, going as far as to declare, "since I long ago strictly forbade all reprinting of my work in France, the bilingual American editions will for a very long time remain the only definitive ones, even for France" (*Letters* 458). The suggestion here is that this new edition is not only a reprinting, but a chance to rectify the text against the author's present sensibilities.

The circumstances surrounding the American publication of *Éloges and Other Poems* present a compelling lens with which to rethink the poem's original contexts. Perse leaves Guadeloupe in the first place because of his father's prejudicial fears regarding the family's political and economic futurity within the context of an emerging socialist political order with

Black Guadeloupean representation.⁹ The threat of violence at the hands of the growing Nazi influence in Paris catalyzes Perse's migration from France. I read within Perse's affirmation of the "definitive" edition of *Éloges and Other Poems* the opportunity to recuperate the text from its initial, bigoted limitations, not for the sake of Perse or Perse's father, but to better understand the complex ways in which global economic and political orders emerge in tandem with discursive practices. The social and political estrangement inherent in the poem's production and reproduction, along with its openness to the literary world and marketplace, provides the grounds for a framework with which to discuss the poem's formal and figurative particularities, such as they signify the changing world of the twentieth century.

The Plantation and Petroleum

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova helpfully generalizes the problem of describing the modern. She writes, "the modern by definition is always new, and therefore open to challenge, the only way in literary space to be truly modern is to contest the present as outmoded—to appeal to a still more present present, as yet unknown, which thus becomes the newest certified present" (91). As in the case of a translated text coming into new and unforeseeable relations and revisions, *Éloges and Other Poems* contains poems that are committed to turning the world over and invigorating each recollected image with new meanings through figurative and associative language. Moving at the speed of revelation, the many original presents within the titular poem, "Éloges," capture Casanova's understanding of a dynamic and spontaneous modernity.

⁹ Meltz 41-3.

In his reading of Saint-John Perse, Édouard Glissant writes that Perse is an author “emerging from the universe of plantations” (15). Plantations, for Glissant, are marked by “absolute separation” and “an irremediable break between forms of sensibility” (15). Defying the plantation’s hierarchical dialect, the “unpredictable” process of creolization, results in new, emergent ways of being (14). In this way, the creole text breaks filial ties, serving not as “the basis for tracking down a literary development where another text comes to perfect the previous one,” but rather as a discontinuity—a text best read “from and by traces” rather than in terms “of any imperative systems” (17-18). In Glissant’s account, it is Perse who “transformed the poetics of the French language by introducing the genius of creole even if he tried to hide this” (16).

Creolization serves as the mechanism by which Perse, apparently despite himself, “emerg[es] from the universe of plantations” (15). Following this observation, I ask, into what did Perse emerge? Twentieth-century literary modernism certainly intercepts Perse’s poetry, but if the answer to my question is simply modernism, then the critical literature does not recognize Perse’s emergence as such. Perse’s book *Éloges and Other Poems* (1944) represents a particularly complex engagement with both the collapse of the plantation system and the development of literary modernism. The titular poem, “Éloges,” comprises eighteen sections and connects imagistically, thematically, and conceptually to other poems within the collection. In “Éloges,” the poem’s young persona is poised at a century’s end within a society still struggling against the plantation’s inertia. Corresponding to this massive historical shift in economic and social relations, in the era after the plantation, the poet employs emotionally charged affects, such as wonder and nostalgia, to achieve the unfamiliarity that defines the poem.

In Valérie Loichot’s reading of *Éloges*, displacements operate to estrange Perse from the historical Caribbean. In the first case, the poet departs the region, “finding refuge in other

geographic or symbolic places” (83). Loichot tracks Perse’s global movement, and his subsequent inability to address those objects proper to the Caribbean. Perse does not render the living Caribbean in a manner consistent with reality, as Loichot writes, “[a]nimals, humans, and everything vegetal oozes away” (84). Perse’s nostalgic imposition of the past upon the present persists throughout *Éloges*, and the poem’s “failed atavism is ultimately undermined by the characteristic compositeness of Caribbean genealogies” (79). This reading emphasizes the psychological, biographical, and discursive discontinuities within the poem.

The collapse of the plantation, its aspirations for racialized economic and social orders and “the failure of genealogy and linear continuity” form a major discourse within *Éloges* (Loichot 114). However, signs of the new present, beyond the plantation’s organizational forces, appear at significant moments within the text. Loichot’s observations move us towards an understanding of a burgeoning poetics that is highly mobile and temporally complex. The word “oozes” aptly describes the means by which biological objects exit the poem’s ambit (84). In my reading, Saint-John Perse relies upon signifiers and mechanical processes associated with petrochemicals to represent the Guadeloupe of his childhood. Investigating these moments within the poem reveals the concurrence between the poem’s conceptual complexity and the aesthetic challenge of rendering oil into poetry.

In his chapter, “Where is the Oil in Modernism?,” Joshua Schuster turns our attention the conspicuous absence of oil from modernist texts. For Schuster, the stakes in reading modernism with an eye for oil are high: “[o]il, however, may not be just a keyword into modernity but is arguably one of its primary enabling events and what has helped it to keep running hot up to today. Oil is a global substance that frames globalization itself and transforms what it means to search for modernist content in the first place” (198). Oil, then, involves both modernity as well

as globalization. Each of these convoluted systems demands intense investigation, but if literary modernism allows only a sidelong look at oil, it may prove unequal to the task. For this reason, Schuster, in league with Patricia Yaeger, concludes that “[t]o read oil in modernism then is to read obliquely” (199). Unable to locate a significant literary corpus that concerns oil directly, Schuster turns toward the broader “modernist commodity poem”—a subgenre that “situates a resource...from the earth into a meditation on labour, literary craft, and the facticity and aesthetic impact of elemental materials”—as it exposes the material conditions of a globalized world (205). But, to recall Glissant, what if the demonstrable world system available within the modernist commodity poem is discontinuous with a creole text like “Éloges?” Glissant describes the *détour* a movement characterized by evasion and uncertainty: “It is as though this text worked hard for a disguise behind the symbol to tell without telling” (17). How might we access the untold realities behind this disguise? What if Perse’s *détours* and displacements commingle in significant ways with the figurative modes of oil? I argue that Perse’s confused, oozing signifiers constitute an early poetic engagement with petromodernity, one that distinctly manifests in the recollected, Guadeloupean context. Oil fills and overflows the vacuum left by plantation and seeps into Perse’s increasingly globalized imagination appearing as the physical basis for the figures of his memory that determine his outward, exilic trajectory within the text.

At the beginning of *Éloges*, in the section “Written on the Door, the poet asserts “I have a skin the color of mules or of red tobacco” (19). Here, ambiguous ownership of “a skin” defines the plantation poet, and his skin becomes the site for metonymic transformation.¹⁰ The range of colors that the animal and plant represent allow for a nonliteral understanding of the initial claim.

¹⁰ Valérie Loichot reads in these lines the voice of the father, “where the individual becomes collective,” (103) further dislocating the poem from its individualized author.

Here, the skin is depersonalized, coming into a closer relation with those substances that coat the skin as a result of labor. The poet comes home “covered with mud” and describes his hands as “oily / from testing the cacao seed and the coffee bean” (19). The hands, a poet’s chief compositional appendages, are oily from the outset. The effects from working the land further obscure the skin color. Yet, telluric mud and vegetal oil are not intrinsic to this poet’s skin and are washed away after the workday. The threat of this temporary identity confusion is mediated by oil’s immiscibility with water and with the agricultural scene.

Oil’s hydrophobia allows the poet to use the sea as a space to stretch and isolate its physical characteristics. A later poem within *Éloges and Other Poems*, “Images for Crusoe,” contains an execration upon urban spaces in the section titled “The City” that helps illustrate the mechanisms by which oil makes its way into water. “Grease,” another lipid that often serves as a homonym for oil, becomes the apostrophized object of “The City.” It operates as a resistant pollutant, and it becomes a malady coursing through and between people and along the streets. In this way, repetition of the word “grease” at the start of several lines foregrounds its prevalence and its resistance to easy removal or cleansing. Even though “every city encompasses filth,” Perse acknowledges that pollution’s nature is to spread (157). The poet likens the city and its metonymic runoff to a malady, in that the “[t]he city like an abscess flows through the river to the sea...” (159). Here, the ellipsis continues the pollution’s work by resisting the sentence’s grammatical confinement.

This interminable continuum, where oil comes into the city and flows back out along the waterways, captures the reality of petrochemicals in the environment. Destroying categorical stability, the signs of the natural world become coated in oil. The pollution from the city, extends outward and at once “everything is viscous and heavy” upon the island (159). The modern city

troubles the boundary between the urban and the rural. In a deceptively pleasant formulation, the poet observes that “the bird rocks itself in its feathers, in an oily dream,” a description that in different contexts would describe only the bird’s biological characteristics (159). The double enclosure of feathers and an oily dream insists upon a layered distinction. The oily dream communicates oil’s uncanniness, more dreamlike than real, and confuses the bird’s actual feathers with something apart from its biology. Through hendiadys the bird transforms into feathers and an oily dream. While similar to the oil on the poet’s aforementioned hands from “cacao seed and the coffee bean,” the dream, being externalized as an oily coating, swerves toward figurative possibilities, perhaps at the cost of material implications (“Éloges” 19). The bird dreams of oil, its dreams move thick and oily, but it resides apart from the world of physical labor.

An early section in “Images for Crusoe,” “The Wall,” also demonstrates the disruptive effects that oil poses to spatial and historical boundaries. The poem, set in Pau during the family’s exile, attempts to delineate the city space from the islands. In the second person, the poet observes somebody asleep in a chair with “[y]our head against the wing of the greasy armchair...the taste of grease and sauces taints your gums. And you dream of the pure clouds above your island, when green dawn grows lucid in the womb of mysterious waters” (153). The dreamer, enthroned in grease, reenters the island through the “taste of grease and sauces.” Despite the purity of clouds and the lucid dawn, the island, mnemonically linked by grease to the city, does not stand in isolation, enveloped “in the womb of mysterious waters.” These mysterious waters increasingly resemble petrochemicals when the poet realizes “[i]t is the sweat of saps in exile, the bitter ooziings of plants with long pods, the acrid insinuations of fleshy mangroves and the acid delight of a black substance within the pods” (153). The black, acrid

viscosity connects sensorially the signifiers of the Caribbean to the taste of urban greases. The poet gives dimensionality to the dream, limning it “the circle of your dream,” and “The Wall” is arranged concentrically (153). From grease to dreams of seedpods filled with “a black substance,” there is no outside to the influence of oil.

The island becoming polluted by the city serves as a parallel for the rearrangement of the agrarian lifestyle and livelihood that necessitates an imaginative recalibration when reading these poems together. Reminiscent of the image of the aforementioned oily bird, in “Images for Crusoe,” the island itself finally resides within “sumptuous slime” (159). The oil coated bird stands in metonymic relation to the poem’s island. Rather than being enclosed by oil, it is directly incorporated by the substance that extends ever outward. The oily dream and the sumptuous slime contrast with the sickly city as an abscess. If, in the opening of “Éloges,” the plants, animals, and people hemmed in by the plantation, stand apart from corporeality, in a place where oil may be ritualistically washed away without much trouble, then I suggest we read in these paradoxically mollifying figures of uncontrollable pollution a vaster understanding of how resources and commodities move through various spaces toward globality. In this way, the unstated “search for purity that would exclude *métissage*” finds a suitable antithesis in petrochemical modernity (Loichot 92). Consequences that follow from oil’s dominance, writes Timothy Mitchell, include “ways of living and thinking that treat nature as an infinite resource” (230). The proliferation of urban runoff in “Images for Crusoe” demonstrates this imaginary leap. This shift in paradigms augurs a new sociopolitical arrangement, where evidence of urban labor dominates the position plantation-based agrarianism once occupied. By substitution and reading for the traces, these images and the mechanics represented by the flow of grease in the

passage from “Pictures for Crusoe” aid in identifying oil in “Éloges” in ways not readily apparent.

Following the poem’s opening section, oil emerges into “Éloges” from the universe of the plantations, the cacao seed and the coffee bean no longer serving as its primary sources. It comes to resemble the grease in “Images for Crusoe.” When oil appears in the poem, it is often mediated by interaction with another medium: floating atop water, changing the landscape, coating an organism. Comparing Perse’s treatment of this modern substance to, say, the yellow effluvium of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” reveals a fundamental difference in how these two correspondents approach chemical pollution. In “Prufrock,” it makes no difference whether the substance in question is fog or smoke, as Eliot mediates this ambiguity with the vehicle of an alley cat—it “rubs,” it “licked,” it lingered,” and it “made a sudden leap” (12). Superficially, the metaphor works, fog or smoke can move in these ways, but the comparison obscures more than it reveals. Biomechanics are not fluid dynamics and a roving cat who lies down for a nap does not represent smoke’s dispersal. Despite interacting with nature, Perse’s pollution is not naturalized through metaphor. It maintains a metonymic relationship to the rest of the island, even while its scales shift. Significantly, Perse’s poetic oil preserves the aesthetic characteristics of oil.

Toward the Petrosublime

The poetic world in “Éloges” transforms through its encounter with the figurative and discursive possibilities contained by petrochemicals. However, these possibilities are not limited to portraying a polluted world. They involve other traces of capital and commodities, as seen in

the tension between modernity and the plantation system, and they work in a recognizable pattern that challenges particular mereological assumption about the order of the physical world—metonymy more regularly features than metaphor. One way to interpret this figurative tendency is to assume that the poet operates with a global awareness in which objects participate in a totality differentiated phenomenologically, but not ontologically. Reading “Éloges,” alongside aesthetic theory gives rise to a literary world formed by the intervention of petrochemicals. A critical apparatus that helps express the aesthetic problems of petrochemicals is Timothy Morton’s concept of *hyperobjects*.

In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, scholar Timothy Morton establishes his theory of hyperobjects. These are objects that exceed perception and, consequently, knowability and accurate representation. Instead, the hyperobject for Morton subsumes the human universe and necessitates novel forms of aesthetic engagement, that do not posit an immanently knowable world. For Perse to emerge from the universe of the plantation, escaping its centripetal force, requires a space or ontological category that exceeds that universe. Morton suggests four criteria by which an object may come to be considered a hyperobject. Hyperobjects are:

...viscous, which means that they ‘stick’ to beings that are involved with them. They are nonlocal; in other words, any ‘local manifestation’ of a hyper object is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to...And they exhibit their effects interobjectively; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects. (Morton 1)

This framework supports an analysis of the petrochemicals found within the pages of “Éloges.” Certainly, the objects discussed above—the hand, the bird, and the island—demonstrate, interobjectively, oil’s viscosity. Oil sticks to each of these figures, subsuming them and replacing their physical characteristics for different durations. Morton’s theory of the hyperobject also proves a useful tool for understanding the poem’s local manifestations of oil. Particularly apt to a reading of poetry, I ask if metonymy suggests a divisibility between part and whole, and with hyperobjects, the whole is aesthetically inaccessible, how might a poem wherein the microcosmic plantation no longer holds its boundaries also take up these tensions? The poem’s densely figurative arrangements and involutions do not wholly belong to their environment but instantiate a temporary locality for hyperobject oil. The surpluses that seem consequential to the poetic discourse are formally also aligned with an aesthetic project that assumes a petrochemical as its object.

In “Éloges,” the lyric subject of the poem cannot quite capture his poetic objects. Everything becomes strange, pushing beyond its immediate context into territories where the poet cannot follow. The psychic barriers conspire with the ontological resistance posed by hyperobject oil to produce a text where the poetic subject stands outside, in the familiar location of the onlooker or the exile. This identity corresponds to Perse biographically, but it also follows from the political, epistemological, and ontological upheavals that frame the poem. If the idealization of the hermetic plantation is proven for the falsehood that it is, if the categories of nature and art blur, and if the poet can never fully comprehend his world, then one cannot assume the fixity of one’s position. In this way, poetry, which embraces the ambiguity of signifiers and shirks the determinism of narrative or treatise, becomes the genre most fit for engaging the complex world of fin-de-siècle Guadeloupe.

Perse blends local flora and fauna with literary and cultural references within the transitional temporality of the poem's unsettled dream space. It would be a mistake to suppose that Perse is overly concerned with representing the political territory and history of Guadeloupe with a historian's rigor. Instead, the experiential recollection subtending the poem veers oneirically from one specific location to the next by indirect routes and detours. The descriptive language belonging to one image complex in the setting detaches itself to affix to another, not unlike a single substance coating the landscape. Perse's circuitous meanderings and associations do not obey strict categories. The backdrop upon which the poem transpires presents the reader with a polylocal landscape, where the same structures and forms can recur across boundaries.

Within the poem, two sites in particular contribute to and extend conceptions of modernity as arrayed by oil. The sites in question are the poem's waterways and its quays. Intersecting in a variety of ways predictable and otherwise, the waterway and the quay are two distinct, but adjacent, areas that represent the nexus of travel and trade, terms I suggest are particularly relevant to the historical composition of "Éloges" and the poem's thematic and formal preoccupations with petrochemicals. As the means of entering and exiting the exiled poet's recollected Guadeloupe, they are predisposed to articulating the indeterminate movements of petromodernity.

Section eight in "Éloges" contains a vivid and particularly literary description of waterways, in this case, creeks. The poet distinguishes himself from a "merchant" and a "maker of almanacs," associating himself metaleptically to a sailor by way of a ship's sail (75). The distinction is not particularly elucidating, as each occupation relies in part on the effectiveness of the other two. Indeed, a merchant may just as easily be associated with a ship, rather than the merchant's "porch on the sea," as a sailor (75). This sailor, in turn, relies upon a nautical

almanac, although he does not take to “the roof” in order to write down the positions of the constellations (75). The poet attests to his ship’s communal character when he writes, “[t]his ship is ours and my childhood is not over” (75). At the time most reminiscent of the poet’s exile, when he is aboard a ship, he declares the event to belong to the prior period of his childhood. Broken off by an ellipsis and a caesura from the previous strophe that held the distinction between merchant, almanac writer, and sailor, we can read this line as a revision, wherein the poet, adopting the collective pronoun *our* recognizes the sailor’s cooperation with the other two actants in a mercantile network. This awareness intrudes within the recollection by displaying a sensitivity belonging to a more worldly author than the child. Taken together, the Guadeloupean child and the sailor connected via market, belonging to no singular national or regional configuration, but known to one another through mercantilism.

Upon first describing the ship, the poet places it “at the far end of creeks of black wine” (33). The poet associates with it an olfactory sensation in the form of “that avid smell of dead wood, making one think of Sun spots, astronomers, and death” (75). Here, *Sun spots* and *astronomers* reinforce the connection, rather than the original distinction, between the almanac writer watching the sky and the sailor. However, the poem also presents the reader with the challenge of representing the smell of dead wood by metaphoric association. Polyptotonically, the dead wood reminds one of death in a near tautology that suggests, despite the extravagance of the surreal comparison between dead wood and sunspots or astronomers, metaphor exhausts itself when confronting the rotting wood along the creeks of black wine. The object entifies against literary abstraction, folding in upon itself and reinforcing its objecthood.

As for the “creeks of black wine,” they run throughout the section. In the second stanza, the poet seemingly describes the marine life encountered during a boat trip. Death reappears

when the poet, claims “I have seen plenty of fishes...I have seen plenty of other things that can only be seen far out on the Water; and others that are dead; and others that are feigned” (75-7). As to one at sea, for the reader, the points of reference become ambiguous. We do not know where the poet stands in relation to the things he sees. One could presumably see something “far out on the Water” with a shoreward glance (77). If the things “only seen far out on the Water” are meant to be exclusive to “others that are dead,” a reading promoted by the semicolon’s boundary and the very term “others,” then we can understand this list as another set of false distinctions, since being far out on the water does not preclude the possibility of seeing something dead. Instead, if “others” operates paraphrastically to represent the “things” seen offshore, then both the “others” and the “things” could be dead, such that the clause would then read “and others that are [also] dead” (77). As before, the poet’s imagination, as represented by the domain of things feigned, becomes polluted by the death moving inexorably along the water.

The second stanza in the section eight also contains the most explicitly literary and historical moments within “Éloges.” When describing the color of a fish pulled aboard the boat, the poet relies upon a series of negations predicated upon complicated images from his reading. The poet claims “neither the peacocks of Solomon, nor the flower painted on the baldric of the Ras, nor the ocelot fed on human flesh before the bronze gods of Montezuma surpass in color this bushy fish” (77). Each of these images warrants further investigation and each is located within the larger discursive field containing the discursive problematic of petrochemicals.

In one of his few explicit allusions, Perse draws upon the Hebrew Bible to find Solomon’s peacocks. As part of a longer description of Solomon’s kingdom and his wealth we read, “[f]or the king at sea a nauie of Tharshish, with the nauie of Hiram: once in three yeeres came the nauie of Tharshish, bringing golde and siluer, yuorie, and apes, and peacocks. So king

Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth, for riches and for wisdom” (*King James Version* 1 Kings 10.22-23). This passage establishes the grammatical pattern for introducing the comparative excesses in section eight. Here, the sea primarily operates as a location for the circulation of wealth, garnered from across the globe. Solomon’s riches run in a list from the mineral to the animal with ivory being an intermediary object. Similar to Perse’s trans-taxonomical poetics, the language describing accumulated wealth creates provocative mixtures and unlikely assemblages, as seaborne gold and apes commingle, that resonate with the effects of economic surplus. In the context of the mercantile framing in section eight, the poet enlists enumeratio to create the aesthetic effect of globalized capital’s own intractable and overwhelming form. I read in Perse’s encomiastic mode equal parts transport of goods and transport of the spirit.

Among the exoticized forms of global wealth accumulated by Solomon, peacocks in particular perform a double role in Perse’s poem. In the first case, peacocks instantiate the vivid fauna that so fascinates the poet. The iridescent peacock feather, however, resembles the sheen of petrochemicals on water. In this case, the backdrop of the black creeks gives way to the petrochemical sheen of peacock feathers, anticipating the bird from “Pictures for Crusoe” rocking in its dual coats of feathers and oily dreams. In total, it is integral to the poem’s textual and visual vocabulary that the bird in this comparison is a peacock and the peacock belongs to King Solomon.

The figure of “the flower painted on the baldric of the Ras” may not evoke the literary and cultural significance of Solomon’s peacocks, but it nevertheless informs a discussion of the poetics of oil within “Éloges.” The subject of this clause, the flower, immediately resonates with the flora throughout the poem. In section eight, that flora includes the rotting trees. By contrast a

flower represents flora pushed to the decorative extreme. This point is made more saliently by the flower's artificiality. This flower is no botanical species, but a poetic representation of a painted flower, or, a flower twice removed. The poem specifies that the flower is painted upon the baldric of an Ethiopian ras.¹¹ A baldric, a sort of bandolier, serves the purpose of carrying a sword, an implement whose association with war contrasts to the flower's ornate fragility. A ras is a political as well as a militaristic designation in Ethiopia. This flower, then, blooms from grounds that are militaristic, international, and political. The poet presents the false flower, distinct from nature, emerging from human artifice, just as rotting trees are rendered into a new form by the introduction of modern pollution. The artificial botanical arrangements do not belong to the world of the plantation, either.

The final image in this sequence, Montezuma's ocelot, makes explicit the political undertones contained by the figures of Solomon's peacocks and the ras's baldric. Enhancing the violence suggested by the baldric, the poet describes an ocelot eating human flesh provided by the Aztec ruler Montezuma. Whereas the poem prompts the reader to recognize the textuality of Solomon's peacock by way of allusion and the artificiality of the ornamental flower, the ocelot behaves in a manner appropriate to its zoological referent. Grammatically, its action is limited by its position as an indirect object, fed human flesh by Montezuma. Comparatively, an ocelot is not as strikingly colored as peacocks or flowers, its coat is a kind of camouflage. Instead, human flesh, the direct object of the clause, stands as the more vividly colorful part of this image. Counterposing human flesh and the metallic bronze gods evokes a sense of the collapsed plantation system where flesh, color, and coin mixed within its racialized economy. The

¹¹ "An Ethiopian Leader or Prince; spec. the politico-military leader immediately below the Negus." "ras, n. 1. a." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2019, www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/158274.

impossibly colored fish, then, in its extreme unimaginability, becomes a way for the poet to mediate the change overtaking Guadeloupean society, without necessarily expressing it directly. The dismembered flesh also reminds the reader of the deathly smell of rot that prompted this historical deviation.

By picking up on slight associations and freely exchanging partial aspects of signifiers, the poem moves in devious, unpredictable ways reaching back to Solomon, travelling through Africa, to chart a global comparative framework, eventually giving the poet a grounding point in the Americas. The tale told by all three examples is one of pre-colonial or uncolonized rulers—Solomon, a ras, Montezuma—abusing or manipulating nature. By contrast, the framing text of section eight does not identify a single authority responsible for the corruption of the waterways. Ultimately, the comparative chain, by which a peacock, a painted flower, and an ocelot are enlisted into the description of a fish, relies upon an indirect, international exchange, inflected with the cultural forms of literature and the visual arts. That the fish, emerging as it does from the Caribbean waters of the poet's youth outstrips these spectacular comparisons evidences the paucity of helpful materials the pre-modern, historical and literary past. The poet does not give the fish a proper name or a description beyond the adjective bushy, further suggesting the figurative difficulties that motivate this section of the poem. Understanding the role of artifice in violence against the natural world, the poet's descriptions spread out upon the page and resonate with the chemical pollution overtaking the landscape.

This set of images, I suggest, is neither haphazard nor exhaustive of oil's figurative potentials. Referring back to Morton's suggestion, a hyperobject like oil appears through interobjective relations that, in turn, necessitate interobjective descriptions, analogies, and parallelisms. A nonlocal position extends within a vast timeframe, whereby a fish reflects and

remains distinct from a mosaic of references. As an early foray in rendering petromodernity under the diffuse regime of hyperobject oil into literary materials, “Éloges” performs these moves without forebears.

Coming in the first stanza and final line, the “creeks of black wine” enclose the section while gesturing beyond it. A suggestive ellipsis concludes the first stanza, only to be resumed when the poet states directly, “...Trees were rotting at the far end of creeks of black wine” (77). Because of this, the creeks flow through the entire section, adding their pollution to the images and memories already discussed. No longer can a tree grow along a waterway without inclusion in the new petrochemical landscape. Recalling the operations of pollution as described in “Images for Crusoe,” we encounter the confluence of water and runoff in a later section when the poet describes a coconut drained and tossed into the gutter, causing an overflow of “the metallic splendor of the purple waters fretted with grease and urine, where soap weaves like a spider’s web” (93). This causal relationship displays a curious, bidirectionality in the process of pollution when the coconut becomes an object from nature that unexpectedly produces this urban grime. It challenges a simple subordination of nature by modernity, as the waters deviate in response, without surrendering the incompatibility between these spheres. Reading grease as engine grease or another petrochemical byproduct explains the fantastic, psychologically complex, *fretted* color, here purple like a peacock feather. By following the runoff, the reader learns how creeks gain the ability to kill trees. Neither animal fat, nor urine, nor soap would be likely to accomplish this. In this poem, both the coconut in the gutter and the tree in the creek are accidentally brought into proximity with pollutants and the world transforms as a result. In fact, the transformation and the collapse of categorical and artificial boundaries constitute the poem’s world.

The second set of locations that register petrochemicals and deploys their logic and signifiers includes the quays of “Éloges.” The English text, approved by the author, deploys this word more frequently than the original French. This singular word choice creates a more consistent and readily identifiable setting, while also suggesting the importance of quays to the poem. Because quays jut into the water and serve as landings for boats, including merchant ships, they intersect with the discursive language patterns that *Éloges and Other Poems* arranges around waterways. However, the quays also provide a unique twist to the problem of modernity in that they are decidedly built, rather than naturally occurring.

The first mention of a quay comes in section five of the book’s preliminary poem entitled, “To Celebrate a Childhood.” The poet recalls “high music ships at the quay,” now anchored, but originating in “the sea of colors” (41). Remarkably, through *paralepsis*, the poet also recalls two other memories that he forgoes in favor of the ships at the quay. He mentions that “[t]here were / headlands of logwood trees; and wooden fruits that burst” before breaking off with an ellipsis. It is possible that the headlands of logwood trees might represent the same image as the trees rotting at the far end of creeks of black wine. Headlands place us in the same coastal area. At the same time, a burst wooden fruit anticipates the hard-shelled coconut that splits to unleash “the metallic splendor of the purple waters” (93). Perse does not provide the reader with a set of references to understand the interplay between these figures until much later in the poem. Here, the trees and the fruit are prohibited from mixing with the memory of the quay, an ironic contrast to the typical function of a port.

When the poet questions “what has become of the high music ships that were moored at the quay,” he does so with a nostalgic tone (43). In the next stanza, the poem deposits them in a “more credulous sea...haunted by invisible departures” (43). In point of fact, the poem

documents the coming and going of ships with a frequency that could preclude the poet's hypothetical pondering. The vanished high music ships are not so much born of the poet's nescience as they are objective correlatives for his own departure: from his childhood; from Guadeloupe, even from France. As a term, a high music ship itself becomes an apt metaphor for the poem and the poet's own literary emergence, haunting a location no longer accessible.

The poet attributes poetic production to the ship more extensively in Section IX. The sail "utters an abrupt word" and in an extended metaphor between the sail and a poet, Perse writes, "All the secret being of the water is silently dreamed again in the countries of the sail. Indeed, a fine story being composed there – O spondee of silence with the longs drawn out!" (79-81) The boat translates water's mysteries into geopolitically defined countries within its sail, as if it were parchment for a map. The caesura of the final line resembles the macrons of a spondee in scansion or the yards on a mast. Like this ship, the poet's recollection is ultimately made of the very material it bears. The poet places himself within the musical, poetic ship itself, deifying it by writing "I inhabit the throat of a god" (81). The poet's position freely changes, in and through the ship, constituting the mobility thematically linked to travel and the transport of goods.

With the ship thus transformed, the quay becomes a site for religious ritual. Immediately following the ship's apotheosis, the sailors in Section X disavow other gods. These idols are "cast in gold and polished with resin are given overboard to the water" (83). A group "on the quay" ambiguously awaits either the sailors, their cargo ("oxen and mules"), or the jettisoned gods. Identified as "a whole destitute throng," among which the poet counts himself, this group awaiting a ship adequately stands in for the dependence of this society upon marine trade and the mixture of cultures brought by ship to the quay (83). The gold gods, like Montezuma's bronze gods, no longer hold sway as the godly ship takes assumes the foreground. Destitution

hyperbolically portrays the crowd as utterly dependent upon the ship and its imported benefices, which is in tension with the loss of economic structure the exports from a plantation economy. By drawing boats into an comparison between poets and gods, the poem highlights the irreducible significance that the economic sector possesses for cultural, religious, and overall societal order.

While it stands to reason that the quays in the poem appear in proximity to figures of water, the pattern depends more specifically upon the petrochemically inflected waterways identified earlier. Rising out of “the metallic splendor of the purple waters” comes “the carnelian quay” and upon it “a girl dressed like a Lydian king” (93). As at their real counterparts, political geography collapses at the imaginary gemstone quay. Immediately following this quay’s intrusion into the global, economic waters comes the section most central to the extended network of quays, waterways, and petrochemicals. However, despite the explicitness of the reference, I argue that Section XIV is only legible once the reader understands the proposed model for how these foci and forces overlap.

Section XIV opens by bringing together the pollution thickened waters with the littoral space of the quay and the headlands where trees rot. It begins, “[s]ilently flows the sap and comes out on the slender shores of the leaf” (95). The botanical references mix with the poem’s other images. The sap moves heavily through the detached image complex of a rotted tree on a headland, as shores, rather than edges or borders, delimit the leaf. The inner liquids of trees find their way to the very edge of land and sea. Inverting the image of an ocean surrounding a landmass, the sap, coming from inside the tree that bears the leaf, dominates the landmass. Suddenly, the poet turns from the tree to acknowledge “a sky of straw” into which the poet exhorts one to throw a torch (95). The straw sky lit by a torch portrays the scenery as unnaturally

flammable and casts the human actor as violently destructive. The interstitial space of the harbor reflects the enflamed sky, “crackling” (95). The water once again shines metallicly becoming “splendid waters of soft copper where noon, crumbler of cymbals, pierces the ardor of its well” (95). The “metallic splendor” is metathesized into splendid copper and the piercing sun that illuminates the scene. The forceful language in which objects ignite and crumble culminates with a metaphoric well, a technology that semantically links oil and water, being pierced, which presents the possibility of leakage. While the burnished hues evoked by copper and cymbals appeal to a description of a sunset, the poet specified “noon” for the time of day (95). Noon is rife with associations for the poet: “it is the hour where, in the scorching cities, at the back of viscid courtyards water flows in the enclosed baths under chill trellises, violated by noon-green roses...and the naked water is like the pulp of a dream” (95-7). Knowing that it is noon and that pollutants in this poem issue out from cities, the scorching cities are anthimerically suggestive, in that they are hot, but also create the conditions for discursive and actual flammability within the harbors. The viscosity here mentioned, partakes in the figurative domains of polluted water and sap, and it becomes ambiguous what exactly—whether the hour, the cities, the courtyards, the water itself, or the ornamental trellises—is “violated / by noon-green roses,” a figure that blends signifiers of both nature and pollution (93). This syllepsis, whereby the roses’ violation might be variably attributable to each noun, captures a reality of pollution: it corrupts and that which it corrupts may in turn corrupt. It is, therefore, not exactly accurate to use the term metonymy to describe this operation. The distinguishability between parts, wholes, and even discreet bodies falters in the polluted world. The noon-green roses are compatible with a garden, affected by the polluted waters, but the roses also transform the understanding of the copper waters. Lit by the noon sun, the waters suggest copper’s verdigris patina more than the metal’s pristine coloration.

In this dense section comes the most intense figuration of the emergent, global and petrochemical order manifesting in Guadeloupe. A vivid scene of maritime mercantile activity takes shape:

And the kegs of sugar drip on the Quays of marcasite painted with great festoons in fuel oil, and Negroes, carriers of skinned animals, kneel at the tile counters of the Model Butcher Shops, discharging their burden of bones and groans. (97)

Like the surrounding waters, the quays, made like their carnelian counterparts from another implausible mineral, marcasite, become a surface on which the poet may construct an embellished tableau. Sugar, representing a chief Caribbean agricultural export, drips at an inconsiderable rate. By contrast fuel oil, here explicitly named for the first time, accomplishes its “great festoons” (97). Like the painted flower upon the ras’s baldric, these festoons employ naturalistic shapes and motifs, but are the consequence of artificial production. Like pollution, the chain by which an artistic representation finds its references proves difficult to found in reality.

The dockworkers, explicitly referenced by race rather, are brought into relation with animals deprived of their skin. The pathetic image of these workers kneeling before merchants, bearing “a burden of bones and groans” is a conflation between the animals they carry (bones) and their own laborious work. On the quays, workers and their commodities lose distinction. While this approaches an idealized view of other orders of racialized labor, such as the arrangement of a plantation where a man’s skin becomes an agricultural product, it also reinforces the social complexity visible upon the quay as there is not a clear hierarchy to this labor and activity. While most of the poem operates at a distance from its human figures, this section comes close to direct description.

Another “glabrous man in yellow cotton” proclaims his own divinity and is met with the scorn of the crowd (97). Recalling the poet’s readiness to deify a ship, this holy fool ironically testifies to the poet’s position within the social order of the quay. The quay’s wonders are literal and material, rather than exalted or spiritual. In this sense, a boat is a fitting god for the quay in that it enables international trade and travel, rather than disrupting it. Under the ships’ sails and the banners of fuel oil, the quay serves as the edifice for the modern economy in Guadeloupe.

Although Perse’s mode of composition is typically one that moves ambiguously through the sights and wonders of his childhood, the close of Section XIV allows us to read a disavowal of the quay, its peoples, and its modernity. Whatever fantastic colors and new configurations modernity enables, the results of these rampant pollutions configure stubbornly into a death sentence for the poet. In addition to the dockworkers and the “glaborous man,” the poet observes as “another assailed by a taste for killing starts to walk toward the Reservoir with three balls of poison: rose, green, indigo” (97). In a rare foray into another’s cognitive space, the poet attributes to this unnamed, lightly sketched figure a murderous intent. Understanding the way water travels throughout the poem and through aqueducts, the reader anticipates the disaster inherent in poisoning the reservoir. Unlike rotting trees, the human consequence of pollution is unambiguous. The three colors correspond to the images of polluted water found throughout the poem. Rose and green commingle in the image of noon-green roses earlier in this section. And indigo recalls the “the metallic splendor of the purple waters” from the previous section (97). Color, pollution, and poison extend in all possible directions throughout the poem, suggesting that, despite the would-be killer’s intent, the damage is already done. As if a commentary on the Anthropocene, the human is the culpable agent.

The poet, ever recognizant of his textuality paronomasiacally declares, “[a]s for me, I have withdrawn my feet” (97). Here, Perse’s translation of a Creole expression, *moin/mwen tire pié moin*, meaning, *I left*, represents a poetic and historical disembarkation. Unlike the unfurled spondees, the poetic feet are pulled in. The poet recuses himself from further participation in the phantasmagoric life of the quays. Unlike the literary aposiopesis accomplished through caesurae and ellipses, through this phrase the poet declares his refusal to participate. Of course, foreclosing upon this explicit scene of modernity elides with the Perse’s own emigration from Guadeloupe. In this way, this section’s apocalyptic end is as much a consequence of the limits of knowledge as it is a condemnation. The withdrawal of poetic responsibility and the bodily form of closure constitute a nervous sympathy with the plantation’s “absolute social separation” (Glissant 15). But it is too late. The reservoir is poisoned, and the text is out of the poet’s hands.

It goes without saying that Perse did not have the luxury of a term like hyperobject at his disposal, nor could he fully appreciate the extent to which oil would dominate the world throughout the twentieth century. In addition to the text’s publication history, its creole character, and its psychological indirectness, hyperobjects, comprising an ontological category of objects with real-world referents, help to explain some of the particularities of Perse’s poetics. His poetry intuits an aesthetic problem, present in the world of his youth and one that undoubtedly replicates itself in subsequent localities the author visited. Because petrochemicals present aesthetic problems for poets, and more generally, our own imaginations, it benefits readings beyond “Éloges” to further develop and schematize these problems. To this end, I develop the concept of the petrosublime.

Joshua Schuster remarks that oil’s manifold interrelations constitute “a vision of the sublime encrusted in geology and a tradeable commodity that can move as fast as finance

capital” (198). In his reading of Heidegger, he uses the phrase “oil sublime” to articulate another material precedent for the Heideggerian view of technology and nature in modernity as the “storing and releasing of energy,” famously emblemized by Heidegger in the image of a dam along a river (Schuster 201). While Shuster expands the relationship between nature and oil into an historically ambivalent one in which the rise of petromodernity both causes and assuages environmental harm (202), I would like to further consider the dynamics between petrochemicals and the category of nature such as they constitute a refiguration of more traditional accounts of the sublime.

In *Éloges and Other Poems*, the poet occasionally erupts in emotional extremes, particularly when addressing the inanimate world. The exclamation *O*, characteristically found in elegies, identifies and apostrophizes a range of nonhuman objects within the poem: “O radiance! o favors!” (29), “O Spondee” “O libations of the day!” “O gusts” (81). The poet explains his Adamic task, the identificatory function, as a form of praising, “[n]aming each thing, I declaimed that it was great, naming each beast, that it was beautiful and good” (29). These enthusiastic *O*s typically invoke their objects without further grammatical support or elaboration, functioning as exclamations rather than apostrophes. The succession of such outbursts appears spontaneous, with each object isolated from the next by the parallel grammatic scheme. The poet’s total preoccupation with naming his objects in accordance with their greatness, beauty and goodness takes precedence over the exact details present elsewhere. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful*, when writing about the characteristics of the sublime as it occurs in nature, Burke observes, “[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment...in which all [the soul’s] motions are suspended, with some degree of horror...the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it

cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (57). For Burke, the suspension of spiritual activity and mental reason are beneficial as they lead to spiritual and mental uplift. Praise and naming blend the great qualities of sublime object in nature with the poet’s own development. Within the poem, to name something, as with an astonished *O*, is tantamount to constituting its sublimity. Moments within the poem when the poet registers semantic exhaustion with objects become locations for identifying the sublime and tracking the poet’s formation or emergence.

Smells and distant visions trouble the poet’s recollection. The “[t]rees...rotting at the far end of creeks of black wine” in Section VII of *Éloges* accord with Burke’s formulations of the sublime in nature (75). Even though, for Burke, smells are a minor source for the sublime, the most powerful category of smells are “intolerable stenches” (Burke 85). The trees’ tautological “avid smell of death” that reminds one of death closes in on itself as a figure of speech (*Éloges* 75). The deathly trees not only cause within the poet the horror that Burke supposes necessary for the sublime experience, they also anchor themselves within the natural environment: in this case, water and trees. As explained, textually, the poet breaks off from this image. He does this by a historical and literary digression, but also through ellipses. Unlike the poet’s enunciated praises, this swerve fails to ascribe an exact name to a single object. The poet’s exhaustion, inability to continue his encounter with these trees, constitutes another textual representation of astonishment, while differentiating itself from praise.

Pollution, specifically derived from petrochemicals, presents significant problems for an understanding of nature and the sublime. In his account of the sublime arising in nature and its representation within poetry, M.H. Abrams suggests the following:

organic growth is an open-ended process, nurturing a sense of the promise of the incomplete, and the glory of the imperfect. Also, a plant assimilates the most diverse materials of earth and air, so the synthetic power of imagination “reveals itself,” in Coleridge’s famous phrase, “in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.”...what we find is a complex inter-relation of living, indeterminate, and endlessly changing components. (220)

Perse’s rotting trees illustrate that the assimilation of “the most diverse materials of earth and air” is exactly what prevents these trees from partaking in the open-ended process of the reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities. Petrochemicals, being telluric, are not only materials of the earth, but they are, in fact, derived from biomatter. Unlike, say, the oil festooned quays, which are manmade and resistant to degradation from chemical pollution, the trees take their first step to becoming oil. The ontological dominance of petrochemicals and the poetic dominance of their signifiers within the poem, reconfigure and threaten the natural world of the poet’s childhood into astonishment. As the trees rot from their exposure to their long-dead forebearers, so too the poet’s childhood is precluded from open-ended growth along the plantation’s trajectory. Read this way, oil constitutes a threat not only to societal order, but to the very categories between nature and society, as they blend within a rotting tree. The petrosublime is a post-nature phenomenon insofar as the tree assimilates the products of industrialization, even unto its ruination.

Burke explains the sublime in terms of emotional extremes, particularly that of terror. In a pithy formulation, he writes, “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible or, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is it is productive of the

strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (39). To revisit a moment at the conclusion of Section XIV, the poet recoils, as if in fear, from the scene of the quay, with its skinned animals, petrochemical pollution, and murderous, glabrous men. “I have withdrawn my feet,” writes the poet, moving away from the poisoned reservoir (97). The gesture is not just a physiological response and it is helpful to recall Mutlu Konuk Blasing to interpret its literary significance. Blasing writes, “poetry keeps intact the emotionally charged linguistic histories of the mind and the body,” but unlike an unruly, biological body, “the ‘body’ in poetry interferes formally” (102). As the concluding line, the withdrawal of poetic feet represents both the bodily, emotional terror resulting from the sublime sight of the quay as well as another instance in which language recedes from the sublime object.

The poem’s final three sections are written in the mode of an aubade, when “the day is begun and the world is not too old to have suddenly laughed” (105). The poet makes the world’s age and parameters ambiguous. In a poem that marks the decadence of a past social order, which world is this? The poem’s world is at its oldest in these closing sections. Into this undefined world, the poet is “going alone,” resuming his withdrawn bodily attitude (109). He entreats, “you will let me be, sitting, in the friendship of my knees” (109). With the reader’s abandonment, the poet recedes for the final time, involuting into the closed form of his poetic body, just as the day begins in a world he will never fully enter. The poet remains behind in his astonishment.

By refusing to move from his childhood, the poet of “Éloges” exhibits his formal incommensurability with the increasingly fluid and mobile forms of modernity heralded by petrochemicals. In Perse’s leadup to *Éloges and Other Poems*, he incorporates a naïve and disastrously nostalgic conception of Guadeloupean economics, demonstrating a longing for a simplicity and self-sufficiency that attempts to find a basis in nature. In an early poem,

“Cohort,” Perse develops a catalog of New World birds. Set in their ethereal domain, Perse distinguishes the economics of the sky from that of the terrestrial and the human, and more specifically the Caribbean. For birds,

...there is no traffic in spices nor fabrics, no cowries on the trading-counters, no Senegambian gums; but instead, commerce in living things and live currency. Birds! birds! currency forever valid, forever payable! (Letters 65)

This outpouring of economic signifiers demonstrates the historical economic interest in the Caribbean. The spice trade represents an early colonial interest in the region, while cowrie shells and Senegambian gum refer to African commodities, here brought into specious proximity with colonial trade. The poem then pivots, or, more accurately, attempts to pivot on a distinction between the violent history of colonial economies and the economy of birds for whom there is only “commerce in living things and live currency” (65). We can read the significant limitations of Perse’s idealized economy, by recalling the very real “commerce in living things and live currency” that defined the transatlantic slave trade (65). The poet’s longing for a time prior to the above-mentioned globalized trade patterns does not find a useful metaphor in figures of birds, who, even in this poem function as highly mobile beings that pay no allegiance to any single location.

Still, it is worthwhile to assess the associative connections that the poet draws. The first bird Perse names, the “Ethereal Phaeton” or Tropic Bird, is described favorably. Among its positive attributes, Perse specifically notes its “marvelous flesh, the lowest in oil-content” (66). The comparative lack of oil allows the bird to be “the most aerial of our sea-bird” (66). This poet hyperbolically claims the Tropic Bird could “weigh less only in a dream” (66). This bird gains its greatest significance for being the least oily and the least bound to the earth or sea. Its very flesh

contains a metaphor that at once resists the “traffic” of other economies and anticipates oil as a global commodity. Contrary to the participants in the burgeoning globalized market that is on display in “Éloges,” for this bird, oil content is inversely proportionate to mobility. These unexpected paradoxes harness the ambivalent potentials of petrochemicals: they have the power to change our world, and yet, we barely recognize them.

Perse in Exile

On January 1, 1950, Saint-John Perse, in exile in America for over a decade, writes to his friend and patron Calouste Gulbenkian to relate his plans for a road trip around the Southern United States:

J’essaierai, au retour de m’isoler quelques jours en Louisiane, pour revoir les ruines d’une ancienne plantation, occupée avant la Restauration Française par d’arrière-parents de ma Mère, et dont l’incomparable beauté de songe encadre aujourd’hui le siège d’une exploitation pétrolière! (*Correspondance* 101)

[Upon my return, I will try to isolate myself for a few days in Louisiana, to see again the ruins of an old plantation, inhabited before the French Restoration, by my mother’s forebears, and whose incomparable dreamlike beauty today houses the headquarters of an oil operation!]

Characteristically, the author of *Éloges* alights onto the oneiric and decadent beauty of the “universe of the plantation” tracing the property to his distant forebears (Glissant 15). In accordance with the succession of industries prophetically anticipated in *Éloges*, the petroleum

trade extends out from the ancestral plantation. As is so often the case in their correspondence, Perse seizes upon the opportunity to connect his private interests to Gulbenkian's. As a founding member of the Iraq Petroleum Company and one of the architects of France's national oil policy, Gulbenkian regularly receives news of American oil interests and politics along with Perse's thoughts regarding birds, plants, and the arts.

Perse comes frustratingly close to acknowledging his own disastrous admiration for plantations and their oppressive order. He follows his favorable musings with the acrimonious lament, “[c]'est du poison pour moi que tout ce que je vais respirer là de nostalgie et heurter d'impossible, mais c'est un luxe que je puis me payer à mon âge” (*Correspondance* 101) [“there, all that I will breathe in of nostalgia and walls of impossibility will be poison for me, but at my age, it's a luxury I can afford”].

Without interrogating his attachment to the plantation, he nevertheless represents it as detrimental. In a typical displacement, nostalgia, not the plantation itself, poisons him. In another stark contrast with reality, Perse, not the collapsed plantation, polluted by the Standard Oil company's refinery, absorbs the poisonous influence.

In May, following his visit, Perse once again writes to Gulbenkian. The industrial activity in Baton Rouge receives a vivid description:

Toute cette vallée du Mississippi semble aujourd'hui suractivée, galvanisée par la concurrence entre le pétrole et le coton. À Memphis, le marché du coton m'a passionné; mais plus encore à Baton-Rouge, la visite de la vaste raffinerie de la Standard Oil, toute une cité d'aluminium imposant au soleil son très grand luxe métallique auprès des vieilles eaux limoneuses du fleuve. (*Correspondance* 115)

[All of the Mississippi valley seems overactivated, galvanized by the competition between petroleum and cotton. In Memphis, the cotton market fascinated me. In Baton Rouge, I was even more fascinated by the visit to the vast Standard Oil refinery, a whole city of aluminum imposing on the sun its very great metallic luxury by the old silty waters of the river].

The plantation grounds disappear under the modern, metal city of the oil refinery. While agriculture is not in and of itself the plantation, Perse clearly states how much more impressive the oil industry is than the cotton industry. Recalling the audience for this letter, we may read perfunctory courtesy or congeniality in the comparative esteem with which Perse regards Standard Oil's Baton-Rouge refinery. An astonishment, familiar to readers of *Éloges and Other Poems*, overtakes the description.

By concluding with this belated quasi-epiphany, I mean to emphasize that, in very real ways, transformations brought on by petroleum and the petroleum industry affected the direction of Saint-John Perse's life. That an international oil tycoon underwrites a portion of Perse's life in exile, demonstrates the material stakes for the connection between petrochemicals and poetry. Perse's fascination with the Standard Oil refinery is relatively predictable, given his proclivity for the unfamiliar and the modern. As a poet of the world, the social, political and economic dimensions of Perse's poetry conform to general, international patterns of publication. At the beginning of this chapter, I asked: Why is Perse not invoked as an exemplar for the twentieth-century poet? And moreover, what do our conceptions of modernism and global poetic production lose when they fail to account for Perse's unique case? As I have shown, the two answers inform one another. Perse's critics often mistook references that drew from a local and historical frame of reference for either poetic obscurity or a kind of global *savoir faire*. At the

same time, modern habits of consumption were rendering mundane the figurative complexities of oil, making it an increasingly unrecognizable source for poetic inspiration. Ironically, the more Perse asserted his petrochemical imagination, derived from his transnational travels, the more he accrued a poetic corpus that seemed to extend from Eliot and others' oversimplified misreading. However, when one sits down with a single poem of Perse's without the diachronic critical impetus that impelled his career, one sees figured through the strife and debris an enthusiastic wonder uncharacteristic of modernist pretensions.

What is most remarkable, as I have argued throughout, is Perse's incorporation of the political and material elements that eluded so many other modernists into his writing. As we will see in subsequent chapters, poets from the Caribbean come to use the figurative and expressive potentials of oil and the oil industry to understand and remake the world far beyond Perse's initial engagement. For this, we will need to continue to spread our sensitivity for poetic figuration as we contemplate other methods for emergence from systems seemingly unamenable to this art.

Chapter 2: Drumming Up Oil: Kamau Brathwaite, Grace Nichols, and Victor D.

Questel

At the beginning of *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Kenyan author Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o observes the relationship between postcolonial artistic innovation and the rejectamenta of modernity. In discussing artistic practices that emerge from necessity, he remarks that "[t]he Caribbean steel drum orchestra originates with the poor literally rescuing discarded oil drums...to create the pans.... The working poor of Trinidad and Tobago wrested beauty from the waste of the big oil corporations" (4). Ngũgĩ follows this brief account with what I am taking to be a sincere exclamation and an incitement to further study: "Imagine making music from oil!" (4).

Ngũgĩ's surprise illuminates a common conceptual divide that places oil on one side and art on the other. The economic and environmental perdition caused by the global oil industry does not mix with the humanistic, ameliorative properties associated with art. This incompatibility, or resistance to mixture, registers as both the absence of the figure of oil in art, as discussed in the previous chapter, and a suspicion of the oil industry's interest in the material production and delivery of art. In her essay, "Painting with Oil," Mel Evans recalls the protests and demonstrations that followed The Metropolitan Museum of Art's decision to rename its iconic fountain area after oil magnate David H. Koch in honor of a \$65 million donation by the billionaire (10). Evans uses the term "artwash" to describe the phenomenon of oil companies trying to use art to improve their public image (12). In the case of literature, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma analyzes reactions to Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas's funding of the Nigeria Prize for literature. Suhr-Sytsma remarks that, for poet Ochia Ofeimun, who was critical of NLNG's involvement,

“[t]he danger, in this case, was not that the future of African literature would be decided in London or Oxford but that a corporation would make Nigerian literature part of its domain” (1109). In his essay “Petrofiction,” Amitav Ghosh argues that on the level of form the entire genre of the novel, “with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue” and its “sense of place,” cannot come to terms with the multilingual, multinational realities of oil which is experienced “within a space that is no place at all” (433).

In addition to the psychic barriers and cultural opinions that keep oil and artistic production separate, historical precedent amplifies Ngũgĩ’s astonishment. Carnival, the premier locus for steel bands and their pans, overcame considerable colonial opposition to persist as a space for creative expression. Jocelyne Guilbault argues that calypso was “the target of power of both the white colonial administration and the middle class,” before it gained “symbolic importance” (33). Guilbault lays out the discursive field in which white colonial authority situated Black people and their music: “blacks were judged barbarous, demonic, dangerous, or, at best, silly, irresponsible, uncontrolled, and unimaginative. In artistic terms, their music was described as noise—chaotic, disorganized, and disturbing—and their dances as lascivious and offensive” (41). In modern times, Carnival’s conspicuous commercial success also grates against those sensibilities that cast artistic expression as free from economic ties.

The poets in this chapter deploy the figure of the steel pan, also called the *pan* or *steel drum*, through inventive metaphors and associations that attest to oil’s complexity as a substance and a commodity. Often, these poets use the steel pan to subvert some of the very terms cited by Guilbault as bigoted, colonial mainstays.

I begin by considering the work of Ngũgĩ’s friend, Barbadian poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite (1930-2020). In fact, as Peter Kalliney records, during a trip to Kenya, “Ngũgĩ’s

family gave Brathwaite the name Kamau, which he later adopted legally” (111). In his essay *History of the Voice* (1979), Brathwaite explores the potentials of the term *noise* to arrive at his conception twentieth-century poetry from the Caribbean. After connecting Brathwaite’s noise to historical arguments from poetics, I demonstrate how his early poems, collected in *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973), anticipate and, in some ways, exceed his understanding of noise as articulated in his later essay. I show the steel pan’s centrality to his aspect of Brathwaite’s poetics.

Following the figure of the steel pan, I then read Guyanese poet Grace Nichols’s (b. 1950) long poem, “Sunris,” in order to further my argument that, whatever the limitations of the oil drum may be, poets can turn these limitations into advantages. For Nichols, perhaps the first woman poet to take up the steel pan in her poetry, the steel pan becomes a metaphor for her own resistance to historical and social forces that seek to control her expression as a woman and her status as a historical agent. Just as Brathwaite reclaims and liberates noise from colonial scorn, Nichols reclaims and liberates the Black woman poet’s body in “Sunris.”

Of course, the steel pan is a complicated object for considering poetic freedom and invention. Calypso is a genre that foregrounds the pan, often tuning its musical content to the ears of tourists. Guilbault reminds us of calypso’s complicated legacy when she writes that it has been “a target of disciplinary power, a source of empowerment, and a means to generate revenue” (21). Trinidadian poet Victor Questel (1949-1982) writes poems that relentlessly critique Carnival celebrations and consistently link the steel pan to the oil and tourist industries and then, through these, to historical violence, environmental ruin, and economic injustice. In my reading, Questel’s relentless negativity toward the state of the nation inflects his interpretation of petrochemical signifiers and prevents him from capturing their dynamic nature.

Taken together, all three poets use the figure of the steel pan and its complex cultural legacies to challenge expectations for what poetry looks and sounds like and how poetic production connects to other forms of material culture. That they arrive at such different conclusions and artistic expressions only further emphasizes the point that the tale is not yet told of how to approach oil in its many forms.

Noise and Petrochemical Aesthetics

In this section, I develop Kamau Brathwaite's undertheorized concept of *noise*, through the figure of the steelpan, as articulated in his familiar essay *History of the Voice* and evinced by his foundational poetry collection *The Arrivants*. To do this, I distinguish between *noise* and other terms from Brathwaite's poetic vocabulary that have received comparatively more attention; namely, *nation language*. I bring Brathwaite's noise to bear upon the historically convoluted discourse found within so-called mimetic theories of poetry. I argue that in the twentieth century, poetic noise constitutes an awareness in the mode of the lyric that develops alongside the proliferation of petrochemicals. If, as was argued in Chapter 1, petrochemicals and their signifiers present a challenge to the imagination of poets and readers alike, then *noise* is an invaluable term in developing aesthetic categories for the petrochemical imagination.

There is at once an opportunity and a pitfall in reading poets' prose alongside their poetry. On the one hand, poets can often use prose to give insight into their work that no reader could derive from the poem itself. On the other hand, a poem is not beholden to the language or form of an argument and, more often than not, exceeds the horizons of its author's designs. Moreover, the generic distinctions between prose and poetry that often determine our reading

practices will be further strained when music and its signifiers provide a steady stream of metaphors, analogies, and, in the case of the pan, instruments for thinking about either genre. With these caveats in place, Kamau Brathwaite's 1979 talk, later published as an essay in 1984, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, proves an irresistible companion to his poetry. In part, the essay represents the poet's own artistic preoccupations and concerns, but it also serves as a survey of twentieth-century Caribbean literature and the challenges facing a generation of poets who came to poetry through a colonial education. Rather than extending Brathwaite's observations in *History of the Voice* to his later poetry, I propose to apply this essay proleptically to his earlier poems in order to see how those poems informed his theory of poetry as expressed in his prose.

Kamau Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* presents a dynamic and dialogic account of language formation in the Caribbean as well as the political and artistic possibilities that Caribbean culture and language enable. Altogether, Brathwaite gathers the historical, political and aesthetic dimensions of Caribbean language and experience under the heading *nation language*, which is, in Brathwaite's phrasing, "the *submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English: but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave" (13). It is a powerful image, drawn with figures from the animal ("howl"), human ("shout"), technological ("machine-gun"), and environmental ("wind or a wave") imaginations. The range of descriptors captures nicely the heterodox character of nation language. As the essay develops, so does nation language's claim to conceptual territory.

In toto, Matthew Hart identifies five particular characteristics to nation language: "plurality, adaptation, submergence, domination, and emergence" (121). Acknowledging the

irreducible plurality inherent in the concept of nation is particularly important for understanding how the term constitutes a range of cultural phenomena. As Brathwaite states, nation language itself consists in a “plurality” of languages that intermix while these constituent languages also continue to evolve independently (*History* 5-7). For Hart, nation language tends toward linguistic and cultural openness. Just as nation language contains many languages, they are not subsumed by the figure or territorial boundaries of the nation. Hart clarifies that “[t]he ‘nation’ in ‘nation language’ is in this sense a proleptic and visionary term, not a simple marker of black nationalist essence” (138).

If Brathwaite’s vision for nation language in *History of the Voice* exceeds national boundaries as well as “black nationalist essence,” then Hart makes a similar claim for Brathwaite’s poetry. Specifically focusing on Brathwaite’s first collected volume, Hart writes

The nation language practice of *The Arrivants* involves multiple layers of ‘tidalectic’ doubleness: an awareness of historical catastrophe, cast into mythic patterns; the structural deployment of poetic sequences as a way of depicting and refashioning that duplicity; and the representation of both of these through a synthetic vernacular language that is itself doubled between local indiginity and transnational dispersal. (131)

The conflicting frames of “local indiginity and transnational dispersal” that Hart identifies cause some critics to think through nation language and Brathwaite’s poetry from a diasporic lens. Tsitsi Jaji charts a course for Brathwaite’s poetic trajectory, “around the entire Black Atlantic,” with generic excursions into “oral literary tradition, and then to jazz, as steps on the way to ‘nation language’” (176). Here, Jaji uses Paul Gilroy’s figure of the Black Atlantic and its methodology of thinking through diaspora and music as two processes of a “changing same” (Gilroy ix). Jaji demonstrates how a concept related to nation language, tidalectics, exemplifies

the commensurability of Brathwaite's poetic and diasporic imaginations insofar as the "metaphor of tidalectics" became "a model for the tactic of drawing from fluid waveforms (oceanic or sonic) to theorize repetition and difference in the Black Atlantic" (176).

In their collection *Global Circuits of Blackness*, editors Rahier, Hintzen and Smith recognize the historical and creative reworkings of the Jewish diaspora "as metaphor" for Black experience, so that ultimately "diaspora reveals (analytically) and contests (politically) the space of symbolic action as interpellation" (x). For the editors, who interrogate "the space of symbolic action" and its Althusserian role in claims of citizenship and national identity, it is particularly fruitful to explore diaspora's history and future as a metaphor. Such an understanding of diaspora as an ongoing metaphor provides a necessary link between Brathwaite's observations of the lived experience of the diaspora and the poetic potentials of nation language as both an aesthetic and political project. These two modes of diaspora frequently intersect within *History of the Voice* and Brathwaite's lyric poetry in *The Arrivants*. Appropriately, the scholarship on these texts have attended to each of the text's metaphorical layering and political motivations.

The sheer number of interpretive possibilities offered by nation language and the critical insistence on its plurality make any reading of nation language as any one type of project—political, linguistic, artistic—counterproductive. Nation language becomes most legible through its excesses. Metaphors reflect one another and metonymy brings in pieces of other discourses and cultural phenomena. One figure from *History of the Voice* that demonstrates the pluralizing effect of nation language is that of the hurricane.

Early in *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite establishes an imagined connection between the actual world and poetry founded on the figure of the hurricane, a meteorological event familiar to the Caribbean region. When discussing his colonial literary education, Brathwaite writes that

“British literature and literary forms, the models...had very little to do with the environment and the reality of non-Europe” (8). Describing the Caribbean environment, then, for Brathwaite, requires a new “syllabic intelligence” (8). The poet who, to use Brathwaite’s economic and technological metaphors, is in the “business of emergent language in the Caribbean” must attend to “the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very software...of the language” (9). Such a poet must rework the syllable, as one of the smallest phonemic units of language, to render Caribbean phenomena into poetry. Brathwaite, renouncing the dominance of the British-English iambic pentameter, famously states “[t]he hurricane does not roar in pentameters” (10).

The hurricane instantiates the complex integrative forces of nation language’s disparate imperatives. Sonya Posmentier reads the interconnection between Brathwaite’s imagination, the diaspora, and the hurricane as participating in “ecological experience,” that is, “the relationships between human and nonhuman organisms and the management and use of natural and agricultural resources” (3-4). For Posmentier, in *History of the Voice*, “the hurricane functions in part as a metaphor for a sought-after poetic break from the past” (193). In one sense, the past with which the hurricane breaks is a literary past, populated in Brathwaite’s essay by the devoted practitioners of the iamb. This break is, as Matthew Hart observes in agreement with Timothy J. Reiss, an act of declining “the prestige of European culture” (125). In another sense, Posmentier shows how the past challenges poetry’s own autonomy as an artform. She states that as a genre in *History of the Voice*, “poetry is haunted by its supplemental status in relationship to music,” as if poetry was necessarily subsequent to music (196). The rhythms of the hurricane obtain in both media. Writing of poetry as a secondary act, Posmentier concludes that “[d]iasporic lyric is catastrophic insofar as it is always bound up in the disjunctive poetics of transcription, but it is also generative insofar as the sonic, visual, textual and performative properties of the poem do

more than merely preserve nature” (183). The manner in which Posmentier figures Brathwaite’s “diasporic lyric,” as supplemental, transcriptive, and generative, accords with the earlier observation that nation language exceeds categories rather than reducing to them. However, it must be noted that there is a pattern in such writings that denies poetry its own history and generic independence. Rather than focusing on how poetry is second in order to music, I suggest we think of the signifiers and metaphors Brathwaite uses as the deliberately chosen materials with which to form a uniquely complex poetry. To extend the domain of Posmentier’s “diasporic lyric” and “ecological experience,” it is important to understand what constitutes the environment within Brathwaite’s poetics and how we might understand this category as meaningfully excessive to the lyric subject yet remaining squarely within the potentials of poetic invention.

As the term diasporic lyric suggests, Brathwaite’s lyric subject is plural. Matthew Hart suggests, “Brathwaite’s creole poetics requires a different attitude to the category of the individual” in contrast to a poet like T.S. Eliot’s lyric anxiety over “the desublimating effects of modernity” (141). Hart goes on to conclude that “Brathwaite does not, then, reject the sovereign individual so much as recognize the necessarily compromised nature of its sovereignty, which exists...between, other subjectivities” (141). In *History of the Voice* Brathwaite emphasizes the interdependence between subjectivities for making poetic meaning: “[t]he detonations within Caribbean sound-poetry have imploded us into new shapes and consciousness of ourselves...The hidden world and proverb and conundrum (drum) reconquer the curriculum and make once more neglected Gran an expert on the culture” (49-50). This passage offers a pluralistic vision of a community formed around a shared culture to include “neglected Gran” (50) as well as the sound poets themselves. Brathwaite elevates “the hidden world” along with certain speech genres;

namely, the “proverb and conundrum (drum)” (49). More than paronomasia, the parenthetical “drum” (49) echoes after the unresolvable *conundrum* reinforcing its meaning.

The drum within the conundrum opens up a facet of nation language and Brathwaite’s poetics that has received comparatively little critical attention compared to the political and linguistic concepts engendered within his work. That is, the role that objects play in Brathwaite’s poetic compositions and how these objects constitute a new mimetic formula specifically suited to represent the obscured presence of petrochemicals in the environment. The term Brathwaite gives to the aesthetic legacy of objects within Caribbean poetry is *noise*.

For all the liberatory, nation-exceeding potentials of nation language, we would do well to recall that in the twentieth century people and objects move into strange, often unethical, relationships to one another by dint of a global economy in whose past reside colonialism and the slave trade. This economic project assumes the nation as a logistical fact, easily managed by capitalism. Brathwaite’s poetics incorporate and chronicle this global condition, and it is therefore disingenuous to approach all his poetic figures of mobility and exchange with unreserved optimism. In this regard, Brathwaite, an acute social critic and student of literature, finds a literary ally in the form of T.S. Eliot. As Matthew Hart puts it, Brathwaite uses Eliot to “invoke a crisis of vernacular culture with geopolitical dimensions” (139).

Politically, Brathwaite and Eliot make an unlikely alliance. In *A Transnational Poetics* Jahan Ramazani states, “[t]hat a revolutionary Afrocentrist could hear the flat British monotone of an Anglo-Catholic royalist as subversive, could embrace Eliot as an anti-establishment poet for the 1950s and ‘60s might well seem bizarre” (97). Ramazani observes that, artistically, both Euromodernists and “so-called Third World poets,” including Brathwaite, write in and of a world that is inherently “intercultural” (99). Not wanting to deny poets access to the material they need

to create, Ramazani goes on to explain the phenomenon that connects, in this case, Eliot to Brathwaite, through his coinage, *modernist bricolage*; namely, “the synthetic use in early twentieth-century poetry of diverse cultural materials ready to hand” (99). For both Brathwaite and Eliot, “these diverse cultural materials,” include speech acts as well as material objects. Considering these two categories of material is necessary for understanding the aesthetic code behind Brathwaite’s poetics.

In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite clarifies that “one characteristic of nation language is its orality” (17). As he establishes the importance of orality to those poets who incorporate nation language into their writing, he finds precedence in Eliot’s poetry. “What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature,” writes Brathwaite, “was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone” (30). To avoid confusion, Brathwaite preemptively assures his audience that he does not exclusively mean Eliot’s poetic tone, perceptible through the text. Instead, Brathwaite insists that he refers to Eliot’s “actual voice” in recordings of his poems, including “‘Preludes’, ‘The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *The Waste Land*, and the *Four Quartets*” (30-31). Matthew Hart suggests, “[o]rature is of central importance but does not retain theoretical or compositional primacy,” in realizing “the ‘total expression’ of nation language” (126). Nevertheless, speech and its sonic particularities are instrumental in creating a poetry that exceeds linguistic, territorial, and political boundaries. A voice’s ability to travel, via recordings, performances, and conversations, is a powerful metaphor for both a diasporic lyric as well as a lyric cognizant of global capitalism. One of the affinities between these two poets, then, is “the synthetic use in early twentieth-century poetry of diverse cultural materials ready to hand” (*Transnational* 99) that involves a cultural material already primed for international consumption.

Unlike the page-bound iambs that Brathwaite rejects, Eliot's speaking voice affords prosodic possibility. Listening to Eliot furnishes Brathwaite's observation that "the *conversational mode* can have a corrosive effect on the tyranny of the pentameter" (*History* 32). With the pentameter beginning to dissolve, Brathwaite finds another foot in a different artform entirely; namely, music. He clarifies, "in order to break down the pentameter, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso....It does not employ the iambic pentameter. It employs dactyls" (17). In other words, through calypso—its forms and figures—Caribbean artists transcend the limitations of iambic pentameter and may well achieve the goal of successfully adapting the Caribbean environment into poetry. However, mimesis is a fraught enterprise. While it is true, as Brathwaite claims, that "[t]he hurricane does not roar in pentameters," neither does it roar in dactyls. Syllables are a phenomenon of human language.

There is historical precedent for Brathwaite to theorize how meter relates to the objects of poetic representation. For Aristotle, mimesis is hardly the ideal, but rather the price of admission for writing poetry. As for meter's specific role, in *Poetics*, Aristotle claims, "Iambic verse and trochaic tetrameter express movement" (40). In his *Lives of Poets*, Samuel Johnson derives from the poet Abraham Cowley his idea of *representative versification*, which is "to paint in the Number the Nature of the thing which it describes" (Cowley 331). While Johnson expresses doubt over Cowley's overall success, he nevertheless asserts, "Verse can imitate only sound and motion" (62). It is a claim that generally conforms to Aristotle's observation. The success of any act of representative versification may always fall to interpretation, but the concept opens up interesting territory for poets.

John Hollander addresses in a particularly suggestive way the topic of representative versification, or the "'so-called imitative sound' or, more technically, 'verbal mimesis'" (51).

Hollander considers its function more broadly than a single poetic act. For him, it is “a kind of myth-making at the smallest level and can be considered not so much a scheme or pattern, but a mode of trope itself: the myth is one of semantic presence in a place of nonreferential sound” (51). It is a myth espoused by Johann Herder in his adamic, object-oriented theory of language. Herder supposes, “The first vocabulary was thus collected from the sounds of the world. From every sounding being echoed its name: The human soul impressed upon it its image, thought of it as a distinguishing mark” (132). What each of these theories suggests is that sound rendered into language requires human intervention even though it has a basis in the non-human. In the representational give-and-take between humans and objects, the poet is uniquely fitted to interpret and translate sounds into morphemic arrangements that are neither coterminous with their initial sounding nor obedient to the limitations of established language systems. Brathwaite theorizes the result of this poetic process, a hybrid text-object involved in both the human and non-human, as *noise*.

Early on in *History of the Voice*, noise and sound are presented as nearly synonymous within the specific “tradition of the spoken word” (17). The spoken word, irreducible to poetry, explains Brathwaite’s attention to song, calypso, and T.S. Eliot’s voice. Noise is framed as a feature of orality. Brathwaite insists that the spoken word must be heard for comprehension because “the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning” (17). In this passage, the reader detects Brathwaite’s hesitation. Within the parentheses, Brathwaite evokes and undermines the colonial opinion that Black music is, to recall Guilbault’s description, “noise—chaotic, disorganized, and disturbing” (41). Later in the essay, Brathwaite continues to develop

his idea of noise in ways that differentiate it from the other sonic phenomena at first associated with it. Noise, as Brathwaite ultimately realizes, has little to do with the spoken word.

The richest passage in *History of the Voice* concerning noise occurs when Brathwaite attends to a song, “My cyaaan believe it,” by Jamaican dub poet Michael Smith (1954-1983). In discussing the sonic features of the song, the noise stands apart from orality:

nation-language...comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary song: using the same riddims, the same voice-spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinado, syncopation and pauses; with, in Smith’s case, a quite remarkable voice and breath control, accompanied by a decorative S90 *noise* (the S90 is an admired Japanese motorbike) which after a time becomes part of the sound-structure and meaning of the poem. On the page Smith’s Lawwwwwwwwd is the S90. (45-46)

Brathwaite again articulates his position that noise is something separate from the voice. He also emphasizes that it contributes to the meaning of the final poem. In these ways, the S90 assumes some of the authorial responsibility for the poem. As we learn in a footnote, the text of “Mi cyaaan believe it,” as it appears in *History of the Voice*, is itself a composite of Smith’s written drafts and Brathwaite’s transcriptions (47). In other words, the *lawwwwwws* that inform Brathwaite’s idea of noise are verbiovisual constructs already severed, as it were, from the sound-making object, the S90 motorcycle. Written with five, eight, nine, or thirteen *Ws*, these echoic *lawds* wreak havoc on the poem’s formal structure and showcase Brathwaite and Smith’s canny “syllabic intelligence” (*History* 8).

Unlike the more popular echoic for combustion engines, *vroom*, *lawd* does not have the benefit of convention to evoke, visually or semantically, the sonic phenomena of motors. While both *vroom* and *varoom* receive adequate sanction from the *Oxford English Dictionary* as verbs

and nouns meaning “the roaring noise of a motor vehicle accelerating or travelling at speed” (“vroom, n.”), *lawd*, whether as an interjection or a noun, is listed only as a variation on *lord*. A reader could understand *lawd* in other ways as well, as *laud* or *loud*, perhaps, or as a graphic representation of noise from another sort of engine. *Lawd*’s variations in spelling as well as its ambiguities in meaning reveal one of noise’s principles: it remains open, when represented on the page, to interpretation.

As a reader, how is one to understand the difference between a *lawd* with five *Ws* and a *lawd* with thirteen? Perhaps the longer word is expressed over a longer duration, but exactly how long that is cannot be ascertained. Earlier in the essay, Brathwaite proposed that calypso’s dactyls offer an alternative to the authoritative strictures of British English’s iambic pentameter. Certainly, strict dactyls will never result in iambic pentameter, but both the dactyl and the iamb partake in a system of accentual-syllabic verse forms. Beyond historical precedent, Brathwaite never relates what it is about the dactylic foot, as opposed to the trochee, for example, that undoes the iamb. Noise, as the *lawds* of various length typify, operates within a completely different syllabic system—one that is quantitative rather than accentual. Within the paradigm of noise, poets rework the boundaries of a syllable from the inside without setting forth a new precept. While the *lawds* distinguish themselves from one another at a glance, they do not dictate their exact sound to the reader.

As a mimetic project, because two S90s may accelerate at different speeds, noise admits the uncertainties within the world of sound into the poem’s code and improves upon the shortcomings of representative versification to account for a single object capable of multiple, changing sounds. As *lawd* demonstrates, the poet attends to a sound’s temporal dimension with noise. Noise challenges the stability of our signifiers and in doing so reminds us that the world

they represent is mutable and based in time. In some ways, the sophistication and syllabic intelligence that noise brings to a poem clashes with a branch of mimetic theories of poetry. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, under the heading “Primitive Language and Primitive Poetry,” M.H. Abrams collects a range of language theories that posit that both language and poetry “developed in part from the vocal mimicry of natural sounds” (80). The strongest version of this claim, perhaps, figures all early humans as poets, jointly committed to testing the relationships between language and environment. While Walter Benjamin does not display the ethnocentrism that accompanies many of these theories about early humanity and primitive peoples, in his essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” he holds that “imitative behavior in language formation was acknowledged under the name of onomatopoeia. Now if language, as is evident, is not an agreed system of signs, we shall be constantly obliged to have recourse to the kind of thoughts that appear in their most primitive form as the onomatopoeic mode of explanation” (334). Regardless of his favorable outlook, Benjamin underscores onomatopoeia’s connection to ancient forms of thought. In his thorough consideration of James Joyce’s use of onomatopoeia, Derek Attridge finally places this literary device not as an avant-garde triumph, but at the foundation of language itself, concluding, “Onomatopoeia therefore can be seen as a paradigm not just for all literary language...but for all languages, indeed, for all representation; its effectiveness lies in the fact that it necessarily displaces that to which it refers” (157).

Recognizant of the legacies of colonization and the slave trade and directed at contemporary artistic production, noise escapes the conceptual feedback loop that associates mimesis with a dubious and universalized ontogeny. Even though noise as a literary figure shares some similarities with onomatopoeia, its aesthetic and political potentials, arising from the S90’s own petrochemical consumption, afford unique opportunities for understanding the carbon

crises of the twentieth century. Neither the hurricane nor the nightingale, the S90's noise redefines the very assumptions of poetry's relationship to its environment.

In "On Lyric Poetry and Society," Theodore Adorno articulates the lyric's complicated relationship to real objects and the work that poets must do in order to negotiate subjectivity and objectivity within the domain of the text. He writes, "Classic philosophy once formulated a truth now disdained by scientific logic: subject and object are not rigid and isolated poles but can be defined only in the process in which they distinguish themselves from one another and change. The lyric is the aesthetic test of that dialectical philosophical proposition" (343). Re-reading Posmentier's "ecological experience" with this insight from Adorno in mind, we can imagine Brathwaite's lyrics as jointly constructed by the human and the non-human such that the poem's environment participates in lyric expression in the form of noise. In Brathwaite's case, the co-authored lyric reminds us of the necessity of environment for occasion—a circumstance that the poet's voice cannot obfuscate.

In *History of the Voice*, buried in a footnote, Brathwaite expands upon his conception of *noise*, mostly through examples.

Noise is that decorative energy that invests the nation performance. Unnecessary but without which not enough. Whistles, grater, scraper, shak-shak, shekesheke, wood block, gong gong, the cheng-cheng of the steel band, the buzz of the banjo or cymbal, the grill of the guitar, vibrato of voice, sax, sound-system, the long roll of the drum until it becomes thunder, Coltrane's sheets of sound, Pharoah Sanders' honks and cries, onomatopoeia, congregational kinesis... (46)

Brathwaite gives a lively, associative description that enacts the very examples it lists. As Brathwaite demonstrates, onomatopoeia is, in fact, a subset of noise. As a literary device

onomatopoeia can be helpful in defining noise, but the two terms are not synonymous. Choosing to call noise a “decorative energy” implies a certain sensuous dimension that sound does not capture, a “congregational kinesis” (46) as it were that requires bodily presence. This passage illustrates noise’s connection to the twentieth century. American musicians John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders provide contemporary examples of noise practitioners. Twentieth century instruments, such as the sound-system and those played by the steel band, stand apart from timeless instruments like the wood block and the drum. In the case of the “decorative S90 noise” (46), the text represents the noise of twentieth century energy itself, as liquid fuel transforms into a sonic phenomenon and a textual figure.

How much Brathwaite had T.S. Eliot’s 1946 Library of Congress audio recording of *The Waste Land* in mind when he writes about his voice, we cannot know. It is worth entertaining the question of what else besides Eliot’s conversational tone in such a recording may have impressed Brathwaite not only because this version was “the only one published,” but because a poem like “The Fire Sermon” comes into clearer focus when listening and reading for noise (Chambers 74). In “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot’s London is abuzz with urban sounds. The poet notices conversations, music from a gramophone, and recounts, “I can sometimes hear / Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street, / The pleasant whining of a mandoline / And a clatter and a chatter from within” (99). Descriptions of figures of sound verge upon the onomatopoeic in the “clatter and chatter.” Earlier in “The Fire Sermon” and in the preceding poem, “A Game of Chess,” the words “Twit twit twit / jug jug jug jug jug jug” (95) constitute the onomatopoeic presence of the nightingale outright, as we learn from Eliot’s own notes to *The Waste Land*. However, a more complex idea of sound akin to Brathwaite’s concept of noise occurs in the so-called “The Song of the (three) Thames-daughters” (“Notes” 115) passage.

The poem primes the reader with a line from *The Tempest* in which Ferdinand hears Ariel's song and recalls, "'[t]his music crept by me upon the waters'" (98). Through the reference, we can imagine Eliot, like Shakespeare before him, standing at the Thames imagining in the river's fluid dynamics the distant Caribbean sea. Since none of the diegetic and textually propinquitous sources of music or sound in Eliot's poem—the gramophone, the mandoline, the clatter and chatter—are situated upon the waters, the reader awaits the exact analog for Ariel. Visually, the Thames-daughters passage breaks from the preceding lines with an indent. The pentameter turns into short, irregular lines of iambs, amphimacers, anapests, and monosyllables. The uneven lines depict a sullied locale. The anthropomorphized Thames "sweats / Oil and tar" as a sailing barge moves along the water (99). From such an industrially polluted environment, noise erupts. We read, and indeed hear in the aforementioned recording an inexplicable, syllabic congeries: "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala" (99). While these syllables ostensibly lack semantic meaning, attempting to read them as onomatopoeia is not completely futile. The semivowel *Ws* and the lateral *Ls* produce a breathy, clicking rhythm not entirely unlike lapping waters, but it is hardly exemplary and scarcely reminiscent of the Thames. When the distich repeats neither "beating oars" nor "[t]he peal of bells" more readily fit the sound (100).

Eliot himself provides us with a textual origin for these syllables. They appear in the libretto of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and represent the singing of the Rhine-daughters. In Act II, scene i, the Rhine-daughters sing as they attempt to reclaim their Rhine gold from Siegfried and warn him of its associated curse. Whether or not Rhine-daughters sing like Thames-daughters, Eliot metaleptically transfers the syllables to the London of "The Fire Sermon." In doing so, the song transforms the poet into a Siegfried of sorts and presages his eventual immolation. In both cases, the national waterway becomes a debased site consequent the

extraction of natural resources, be they gold or oil. The song memorializes environmental catastrophe and, in Eliot's case, transforms the poem's environment into a confused and polluted space filled with threat. By the time the Thames-daughters' song diminishes to a deceptively carefree "la la" (110), its onomatopoeic, prosopopoeic, and allusive potentials blend into a figure for which the only fitting name is noise. "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala" (99) and its synecdochic reduction are, as Brathwaite writes, "part of the sound-structure and meaning of the poem" (*History* 46).

Noise figures petrochemical ambiguity. One of the many shortcomings of entrenched understandings of the mimetic purpose of both language and poetry is the implicit assumption that the world's languages have enough descriptors for the world's objects. In such a paradigm, there is nothing new under the sun and the imperative to let objects have a say in their naming corresponds to a primitive phase eradicated by reason. But noise reveals the permeability and codependence between signifiers and what they signify. Noise is metaphor and metonym, derived from an imagined lyric environment as it constitutes the same environment. It refuses to let language masquerade as a hermetically sealed space.

From Drum to Pan

Within the history of noise, the drum is a privileged object in both Brathwaite's prose and poetry, what Gordon Rohlehr describes as the "[m]ajor word/theme/symbol of the trilogy, it begins and ends each work, and is the Alpha and Omega of Brathwaite's new poetry" (64). It is almost inseparable from the poet himself. As Anthony Reed demonstrates, "'voice' is a metaphor for human signification that already includes print or the 'voice' of the drum" (61). But as I

argue, noise is something distinct from voice, especially the poet's voice. Recalling "the cheng-cheng of the steel band" and "the long roll of the drum until it becomes thunder," that inform Brathwaite's definition of noise, the drums in *The Arrivants* gain in significance when read through the poetics of noise (46).

Brathwaite's pursuit of a unique experience in a Caribbean register was not relegated to his historical and critical work. His poetry abounds with figures, diction, and rhythms tied to a Caribbean environment. In *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, the models and patterns of language and sound, in the mode of noise, detach from their original contexts and blend into Brathwaite's poetic project. Other scholars have noticed the unique ways in which figures of sound seem to reflect Brathwaite's conceptual preoccupations without seizing upon the category of noise explicitly. In her reading of the echoes in *Rights of Passage*, Tsitsi Jaji remarks, "[i]n a diasporic context, echo can also be seen as a sonic version of *Sankofa*, the bird in Akan lore" (179). In his exhaustive treatment of *The Arrivants*, Gordon Rohlehr uses the metaphor of the echo to describe nearly every element of Brathwaite's poetics: "Situation echoes situation, moment reflects moment...As with experience, so with music." (42). For Rohlehr, literary allusion is an echo (43), phonemes echo (45), and all forms of rhyme fall into the category of echoes as "[s]ound-echoes are sustained through internal-rhyming, near rhyming, and the weaving of inter-related skeins of sound" (59). In fact, Rohlehr coins a term, "verbal echoes" (77), to categorize all the ways in which sounds correspond to one another in *The Arrivants*. Building off these readings, while recalling the petrochemical associations with noise, I ask how it is that different utterances, human or otherwise, are made serviceable to and intelligible within Brathwaite's poetry. Noise's conceptual openness and its purchase over a world infused with petrochemicals permit it a wider berth for poetic meaning-making than propositional language, a

claim that the physical and social life of drums, specifically the steel pans, found within Brathwaite's poetry evidence.

The first book of *The Arrivants* trilogy is *Rights of Passage*. The first word in the first poem, "Prelude" is *drum* and the first five lines read "Drum skin whip / lash, master sun's / cutting edge of / heat, taut / surfaces of things" (4). This violent image recalls the history of slavery in the Americas. On the "surface of things," *skin* conjoins the drumskin and the skin of an enslaved human being whipped by a master. There is a sympathetic parallel between the drum and the person being whipped and an environmental awareness that casts the sun as a master. We see the drum-as-body metaphor deployed again in the poem, "Folkways," when the poet declares "I feel / like a drum with a hole / in its belly" (31). After previously claiming in the same poem, "I am a fuck- / in' negro, / man, hole / in my head, / brains in / my belly" (30), the poet reconsiders the drum to distance himself from the racist caricature he once parroted, ascending through the object into the sensate, human world of feelings.

Brathwaite also uses drums as a figure of African ancestry and racial belonging. "Libation," the first part of the collection *Masks*, contains the longest single consideration of the drum. The poem "Making of the Drum" is itself a poem in five parts: "The Skin," The Barrel of the Drum, "The Two Curved Sticks of the Drummer," "Gourds and Rattles," and finally "The Gong-Gong." Each section describes the object identified by the title. The poems include words identified in the glossary as "Afro-Caribbean religious references" (271) like *Odomankoma*, defined as "a name of the Sky-God-Creator" (274) from the West African Akan tradition. The prevalence of references to this tradition, which Brathwaite encountered in both the Caribbean and during his visit to Ghana, prompts Maureen Warner Lewis to claim, "*Masks* is both an African poem (at once modern and traditional) and a West Indian one" (86). Here, the threat of

violence disappears, and the drum becomes a symbol of craft, tradition, pride, and futurity. The poem's final lines "walk us through the humble / dead to meet / the dumb / blind drum / where Odomankoma speaks:" (97) lead directly to the next poem.

Immediately following "Making of the Drum," the poem "Atumpan," a word Brathwaite glosses as "talking drums" ("Notes" 272), demonstrates a range of poetic techniques for rendering noise. The poem begins with an onomatopoeic "kon kon kon kon / kun kun kun kun," (98) glossed as "imitative of the sound of the drum" ("Notes" 273). The poem seamlessly transitions into "Funtumi Akore / Tweneboa Akore / Teneboa Kodia / Kodia Tweneduru" (98), a combination of "praise-names used by the drums" ("Notes" 275) and other words and proclamations that could be spoken by anybody, or, apparently, anything within the poem, since the drums themselves speak. When the words repeat in English, they are not italicized, and the reader understands that the poet is speaking. The poem then switches to dialogic couplets, in which the poet and the prosopopoeic drum alternate, "we are addressing you / ye re kyere wo" (99). This sonically complex poem renders noise as a phenomenon arising from the intersection between a poet and a figural drum.

In considering noise, I have argued that it is a historical mode of the lyric based in relationships between poetic subjects and poetic objects. In these explorations of the drum, we witness Brathwaite alternatively imagining the drum as a metaphor, a historical agent, and as a participant in the lyric utterance. However, noise also develops within *The Arrivants* at moments not immediately associated with a figural drum.

In *Rights of Passage*, in the poem "Mammon," a biblical name for the personification of greed, noise connects more directly to the twentieth-century world than to the worlds of the bible or *Paradise Lost*. The poem depicts an anxious man in a "new dusty city" (74) resounding with

“stil- / etto heels, tipp- / ing staccato” (74) and “electric horns” (75). Twice we are told the source of the man’s discomfort: “Noise / worried him” (74). Noise is also figured as disruptive in the later book *Islands*. In the poem “The Stone Sermon,” we see a parodic, conservative religious renunciation of noise as an imagined pastor declares, “We is goin’ to leave / this rum an’ fancy dancin’, / brown-skin wuk-a-wukkin’, / an’ hinvolve we self in Jee- / sus Christ sweet flame” (254). The pastor speaks of Carnival celebrations and recreates them through the noise of “wuk-a-wukkin’” (254). How likely it is that the congregation followed the instruction is another matter. Well before *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite could be seen exploring the liberatory potentials of noise as a uniquely contemporary mode of disruption.

Like twentieth-century cityscapes and their noisy hustle and bustle, another noisemaker emerges from the world of *The Arrivants* alongside the drum. First identified in the poem “Calypso,” Brathwaite also attends to the “steel drum” (49), an instrument whose very name captures its composite tonal and percussive nature. Originating in the Caribbean with the advent of the oil industry, the steel pan is not strictly a drum, but an idiophone. The quatrain that introduces it forges a connection between the steel drum and the raucous revelry fretted over in “The Stone Sermon.” In an alternating rhyme, the poet of “Calypso” asks, “Steel drum steel drum / hit the hot calypso dancing / hot rum hot rum / who goin’ stop this bacchanalling?” (49) Across *The Arrivants*’s 270 pages, the answer seems to be *nobody*.

The poem “Caliban” derives its name from the unfortunate victim of Prospero’s art in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He is the only native of the island that Prospero comes to inhabit. Gordon Rohlehr reminds us that he was a “stock figure” for a generation of Caribbean authors including Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, George Lamming, Sylvia Wynter, and Roberto Retamar for whom the “new masters in the post-independence period are the CIA, State Department and

the multi-national corporations” (221). Following this premise, Rohlehr approaches “Caliban” with negativity, calling it “a downbeat satire” featuring “the mas’-playing Trinidadian who is the result and victim of crippled mimic man politics” (224). Certainly, this is one aspect of Brathwaite’s poetic consciousness.

The first section of the poem laments the present. It begins on a hopeless note, “Ninety-five percent of my people poor / ninety-five per cent of my people black / ninety-five percent of my people dead” (191). The poem’s literary references are eclectic as biblical figures Leviticus and Jeremiah join up with French author Jean-Paul Sartre. The poet recounts the day’s facts learned from the newspaper as he condemns the new economic order that he observes: “I see that these modern palaces have grown / out of the soil, out of the bad habits of their crippled owners / the Chrysler stirs but does not produce cotton / the Jupiter purrs but does not produce bread” (191). Motor vehicles mark time’s progress, but the poet portrays them as useless luxuries. In doing so, the poet distinguishes these symbols of international oil consumption from agricultural commodities. After listing the dates for Castro’s invasion of Cuba, the abolition of slavery, and Columbus’s arrival in the New World, the discomfited poet asks at the conclusion of the first section “How many bangs how many revolutions?” (192)

Section two of the poem changes in tone considerably. No longer concerned with the news or the effects of history upon the present, the poet uses noise to represent the modern Caliban’s new preoccupation. Caliban, as it turns out, is a pannist, or, as the poet writes “Ban / Ban / Cal- / iban / like to play / pan / at the Car- / nival” (192). With his “eyes / shut tight,” Caliban appears blithely unaware of the sociopolitical exigencies described in the first section (192). However, the third section revises this interpretation. A submerged Caliban sinks into the waters of history. He partakes in a limbo, fueled by the powers of “the drummers” and “the

dumb gods” (195). Caliban, now speaking in the first person, states, “the music is saving me” (195). The new drums prevent him from drowning in history. He is not partaking in pan and Carnival to his detriment, but rather as salvation, however abbreviated that may be. The momentary displacement afforded by a persona gives a glimpse into an alternative reality. This poem enacts a rapprochement between the pannist and the old gods of the drum.

Caliban is not the only person saved by noise and pan in *The Arrivants*. In the poem “Tizzic,” the eponymous impoverished man suffers drunkenly in the quotidian world, but he transforms under the influence of pan and Carnival. Tizzic, whose name derives from a creolization of the lung disease *phthisic*, a word perhaps only appearing in poetry prior to this in T.S. Eliot’s outrageously anti-Semitic poem “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,” is described as “a slave / to drums, to flutes, brave / brass and rhythm” (261). Rather than the historical, injurious form of bondage, we learn that “the jump-up saved / him” (261). Here, the jump-up is a type of music as well as Jump-Up Day, the last day of Carnival on Montserrat, or “the Car-nival’s apotheosis” (261). Jump-Up Day commemorates emancipation. Unlike “Caliban,” this poem ends with the realization that this salvation, while legitimate, is temporary. Gordon Rohlehr doubts the momentary liberation in “Tizzic” connecting it to a longer history: “Liberation on one level does not guarantee liberation on another, and may even affirm slavery” (303). Bleakly, Rohlehr subordinates Carnival to the poet’s regular time: “If on the economic level he is allowed, and has to survive on only one half-acre plot out of the vast acreage of the plantation, on the cultural level he is officially granted only two days out of the 365” (303). In seeming affirmation, the poet recounts, “the good stilts splinter- / ed, wood legs broke, calypso steel pan / rhythm faltered” (262). Instead of deferring the poem’s conclusion to the 363 days that it does not represent, I will emphasize the coordination between noise and liberation. In the

closing couplet, Brathwaite invents a new noise word that represents the steel pan and the entire decorative energy of Carnival. He frames Tizzic's sad fate against Carnival time: "After the *bambalula bambulai* / he was a slave again" (262).

This noise word, the *bambalula bambulai*, not far from the dance *bambula*, repeats across poems, giving it a special, conventional status in Brathwaite's exploration of noise. Tsitsi Jaji finds the word *babalula bambulai* in the *Dictionary of Caribbean Usages of English* which "described the phrase as an example of 'echoic language,' and glosses it as evoking drumming" (180). Jaji calls it "material sound itself" opening its source up to "the striking of the drum and other percussion or in the stinging articulation of whip-hide against taut skin that renders present the spirits of human beings and gods" (181). In his sweeping survey of the history of the term diaspora, "The Uses of 'Diaspora,'" author Brent Hayes Edwards takes up a Marxist term found in Stuart Hall; that is, articulation. As Hayes reads it, for Hall, articulation "functions as a concept-metaphor that allows us to think of relations of 'difference within unity,' non-naturalizable relations of linkage between disparate societal elements" (24). We may, with Rohlehr, acknowledge the geopolitical, capitalistic interests latent in Carnival and nevertheless conclude with Hayes, "'societies structured in dominance' are also the ground of cultural resistance" (24). In this model, materialist critique rejoins structural dominance. Poetic noise, instantiated by the echoic, *bambalula bambulai*, "material sound itself (Jaji 181), does not reduce down to the steel pan performance nor round up to the petroleum trade that provided the oil drum. It is a site of resistance within the articulated structure of petroleum's economic dominance.

Bambalula bambulai appears twelve times over six couplets in the final poem of *The Arrivants*, "Jou'vert." Literally *dawn*, *Jou'vert* refers to the all-night celebration marking the

beginning of Carnival. Coming after “Tizzic” in the collection, a poem set on the last day of Carnival, “Jou’vert” bodes well for the future of the celebration. Tsitsi Jaji observes that the poem’s placement at the end of the book “preempts closure for this long cycle of poems,” reinforcing the collection’s diasporic theme (180). The poem begins with a familiar image from the start of the collection, the expanding skin of drum and human (“stretch the drum / tight hips will sway / stretch the back / tight whips will flay” (267)). But the noise word remains a steady presence until the poem emerges from night into dawn. The metaphor likens steel drums to flowers opening in the sunlight: “flowers bloom / their tom tom sun / heads raising / little steel pan / petals to the music’s doom / as the ping pong dawn comes” (269). The old familiar *tom tom* drum feeds the steel pan. Ping pong is both a steel drum and a noise word as Kela Nnarka Francis observes, “the ping pong is the oldest form of steel pan, neither commercialized nor comprehensible to the middle class and signals the older uncommercialized carnival” (146). In the familiar mode of noise the resultant rhythms are ultimately “some- / thing torn / and new” (270). Gordon Rohlehr finds hope in this conclusion as well, noting that the pannists are, “like the poet, . . . makers who have moved beyond bitterness and pain, even though the newness of what they create bears the evidence of past laceration” (315). As in “Tizzic,” noise is not an optimistic rejection of material conditions and history, but the irreducible presence of structured relations, contradictory though they may be, retained by the lyric in the form of its environment.

Brathwaite continued to invent poems and poetic strategies to escape the regulatory strictures that English verse and the written word imposed upon Caribbean poetry. Regarding Brathwaite’s later inventions, *Sycorax video style* (SVS), Anthony Reed writes “SVS draws out the processual nature of the poetic text in the service of the voice’s retreat—its withdrawal and retracing” (59-60). As I have shown, the steel pan afforded from the start a meaningful object

upon which to center a poetics founded in process and questioning the role of the poet's voice. Brathwaite approached the problem of the voice askance through noise. Unlike the later experiments in digital formatting with a word processor that constitute SVS, the pan's cultural and political significance informed the poetics of *The Arrivants*. The steel pan's unique properties required a poetic recalibration on Brathwaite's part before they became central to his conception of noise.

Turning now to Grace Nichols and her long poem "Sunris," we find another poet who expands upon the steel pan's social and artistic potential. In his gloss of Brathwaite's poetic scope, Matthew Hart notes, "rather than drawing attention to the body as the primary poetic organ, Brathwaite's experiments in meter and lineation rest upon his urge toward a highly complex—social, psychological, and topographical, as well as somatic—form of representation" (125). I will argue that Grace Nichols uses the poetic body in relation to Carnival and the steel pan to uncover new lyric grounds difficult, while acknowledging her nuanced imagination of the global legacies of petrochemicals.

Reading the Pan in Grace Nichols's "Sunris"

Noise captures the frenetic pace of the twentieth century in a figural blur objects and humans. It challenges origins. It abstracts sound from its source and makes meaning metonymically from partial materials and phenomena. For all the work noise does to help the reader parse unfamiliar experiences, it runs the risk of obscuring physical presence. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite emphasizes the influence exerted by Eliot's "actual voice" (30), heedless of the reality that he listened to him through a recording. "Caliban" registers the ritual limbo

through a disembodied voice intoning “limbo / limbo like me” (194), but the poet appears lost in limbo rather than in the world conjured by the poem’s first section. In some ways, this ambiguity is perfectly fitting to impart a sense of the Carnival festivities. Caliban, like Tizzic, is a persona Brathwaite uses to explore the complexities of identity. As we will see, Guyanese poet Grace Nichols also explores Carnival’s cultural dynamics and models her personae after those encountered in the masquerades of J’Ouvert.

Carnival is a syncretic festival, drawing influence from numerous distinct regional and international celebrations and constantly evolving. The Masquerade in which Caliban partakes has a distinct genesis from other Carnival activities. As Grenadian author Nellie Payne recalls, in her essay “Grenada Mas’ 1928-1988,” “[t]he word Carnival was seldom used. One spoke of Masquerade or simply Mas” (54). In the parlance of the Masquerade, Caliban, “a devil, a born devil” as Prospero dubs him in *The Tempest* (1551), most readily corresponds to the figure of the *jab jab*. Payne describes the *jab jab* and his retinue as they appeared in the traditional Mas’:

one adult male in crocus bag, tarred, cow chain around his waist and cow horns on his forehead. The cow chain was held by a little boy, tattered and blackened. Two other boys attended, tarred too, one beating a kerosene pan and the other a 5-lb butter pan. The *jab jab* had six-inch fingernails made of tin... (55).

The diabolic costumes of the *jab jab* and his associates comprise all manner of materials from agriculture and industry: cow parts, tar, two types of pans, including one that held the petrochemical byproduct kerosene, and tin. Such transformations were acts of resistance on the part of historical masqueraders, colonial subjects who would conceal their identities from colonial authorities. While “Caliban” reflects the liberatory potential of the transformation, it

does not capture the spectacular physicality ubiquitous in the Mas' that eventually became a staple of Carnival.

Carnival, like poetry, remains open to change. At no point is this more true than during the dawn-time celebrations of J'Ouvert. As Payne attests, "With the demise of the traditional Carnival, a new form emerged. The 50s and 60s and 70s saw a Mas' from where jour ouvert became more and more popular" (60). She bemoans the losses, "The true Jab Jab disappeared and it was now represented at Jour Ouvert by huge bands of blackened, greased men and women, their chief aim being to behave indecently and to blacken with their oil all those were not playing" (60). The celebrants' oil-flinging indecency effaces the boundary between participant and observer.

Ever useful, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, with its emphasis on universality, corporeality, and the inversion of social roles, helps illuminate the transformative potentials of the Mas'. For Bakhtin, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people...life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). The gravitational pull of the Mas' involves all those in proximity to it. One does not have the privilege of being a bystander. The perceived indecency and its accompanying, oily stain are hardly evidence of a moral lapse, but rather constitute the rites of initiation into the Carnival frame. Like the far-flung sound of the steel pan, the spreading oil is a shared phenomenon that contributes to the group's identity while serving as an apt visual metaphor for the smudged and blurry boundaries of the Carnival celebration.

As anyone who has attended New York's J'Ouvert celebration can confirm, oil still spreads indiscriminately from body to body in the throng. A *New York Times* article from 2018

testifies to the phenomenon while demonstrating the ambiguity of the rituals and very language of J'Ouvert:

J'Ouvert, the uninhibited early-hours parade and street party that occurs each Labor Day, has long been a celebration of freedom. And one of the purest expressions of that freedom is called *jab jab*—a drum-fueled frenzy in which masqueraders paint themselves black with old motor oil, put horns on their heads and dance for hours through the streets of Brooklyn. (Neuman)

The result is familiar enough, but herein *jab jab* signifies the event rather than the participants. The observable “expression of freedom” echoes both Carnival’s emancipatory history and the Mas’s anti-colonial origins. In the *Times* article, one participant in the Brooklyn J'Ouvert explains the supposed historical precedent for taking up the mantle of the stylized *jab jab*. Interpreting the meaning of the act when it was performed by “onetime slaves and their descendants” in defiance of their owners and later colonial authorities, he says, “It’s like saying, ‘You call me devil? I’ll show you devil’” (Neuman). Translated from the past, the act of covering oneself in oil and donning horns becomes a more universalized gesture of resistance through transformation, upsetting the order of the quotidian world. In the era of globalized capitalism and environmental catastrophe, one could scarcely effigy a more provocative villain than a devil made of oil.

What happens when a localized figure like a *jab jab* becomes a convention? What are the stakes when a radical act of defiance becomes sanctioned? In her long poem “Sunris,” Grace Nichols explores the challenges of individualized expression within a group as well as the hazards posed to the individual body by the group. Using the persuasive and subject-oriented powers of the lyric poem, Nichols deftly weaves through the Carnival crowd both part and apart.

An unfortunate generic limitation of Bakhtin's critical prose is its necessary distance from its object of study. In studying the Carnival's centripetal forces, Bakhtin assumes a rhetorical position outside the fracas. Ironically, it is the exact position that he claims the Carnavalesque prohibits. By contrast, the poet in Grace Nichols's 1996 "Sunris" is squarely at the center of the Carnival.

The poem's biographical prose introduction does not recuse itself from the drama of Carnival. It begins with a recollection:

I am fifteen, leaning through the window of our Princess Street home, having picked up the unmistakable sound of a steel-band coming down—the throbbing boom of the bass, the metallic ringing—and sure enough two minutes later, a lorry full of steel-band men come into being; heads bent intently over pans, oblivious of everything but keeping the pulse of the latest calypso going. (89)

As if being pulled from the isolation of her domestic home, the author describes how the noise, the "boom" and "ringing," precedes not only the sight of the steel-band and their truck, but also their very being. They "come into being," if not *ex nihilo* than certainly *ex audio*. Finally, the author explains she "can't bear to be outside such energy" (89). Like Brathwaite, she seizes upon the perceptible *energy* radiating from the event: its peoples, noise, and engines.

The first four paragraphs of the exceedingly rich introduction, those that are written in the first-person present tense, provide glimpses into the gendered arrangement of Carnival and the Guyanese society in which the author came of age. The central authority figures in both the Carnival festivities and the household are men. The author hears "the steel-band men" outside while inside she is "pretending not to hear the headmaster-voice of [her] father" which bids "come back here, girl" (89). The author responds to her father's command with a rhetorical

question, “[w]ho can keep their daughters forever from the forbidden or more rowdy side of life?” (89). Using “forbidden” to describe the calypso and Carnival is not hyperbole. As Nichols reminds us in her shift to non-narrative prose, British colonial authorities banned the drum, and more generally, “steelpan, calypso, in fact anything that came from the ordinary folk including the everyday creole speech, were regarded as ‘low-class’ not only by the colonial powers that be (in our case British) but also by the more snobbish of the upper and middle classes who frowned on folk-culture as common” (89). Especially for a poet, such prohibitions to language-rich public performances are likely to serve as an enticement rather than a deterrent.

Janet Neigh marks this transgressive impulse in a way that aids interpreting the male authority in the father’s “headmaster-voice.” Neigh writes, “During the colonial era, the authority of the written word was used to discredit oral forms of knowing and non-European performance rituals” (167). By making her father into a headmaster, the guardian of proper sensibility and formal education, Nichols demonstrates how the calypso serves as a counterpoint to other knowledge regimes. Thus, the author’s disobedience towards her headmaster father is a way to “overcome the colonial scripts that people were forced to internalize during their education, scripts that distort personal and collective memory” (Neigh 170). The steel pan spurs on the angst and excitement associated with the author’s coming of age, her “euphoric rites of passage” (“Introduction” 89). The pan is a symbol of endurance with historical significance. As Nichols relates, “despite various measures which included the banning of the drum, both carnival and the steel drum continued to flourish” (89).

Nevertheless, one notices the consistency with which men appear as the relevant literary forebears in the introduction. Nichols cites the historian David Cuffy on the history of Carnival and lists three poets who “found steel pan and calypso inspiring” (90): Derek Walcott, John

Agard, and Abdul Malik. While these predecessors are not denied or sloughed off—“Sunris” opens with an epigraph by Walcott and Nichols is married to John Agard—they do not represent Nichols’s perspective in their poetry. It is through association and passing remarks, rather than direct lineage, that the reader detects the women who comprise Nichols’s literary antecedents. Poet Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze “found the rhythms of reggae inspiring” (90). Drupatee was a practicing soca artist. And in the final paragraph of the introduction, Nichols relates that “the word ‘Sunris’ resonates with the name of my mother ‘Iris’ who like her mythic namesake, was for me ‘a bridging rainbow’” (91). The introduction gives the impression that, like the young narrator of the first four paragraphs, Nichols will need to strike out on her own in order to render a woman’s perspective on Carnival into poetry. Far from a utopia or an egalitarian, undifferentiated experience, Nichols’s poetic Carnival establishes new routes to navigate, new acts of resistance, and even more pronounced acts of self-definition.

“Sunris” transpires during the Guyanese Carnival and begins during the familiar occasion of J’Ouvert. In the first strophe, the Carnival procession emerges “like mist” from the “foreday morning” and the “pre-Lent morning” (92). In the tradition of the aubade, the poem seizes on the morning’s uncertainty as well as the potential that comes with it. Through an act of metalepsis that inverts cause and effect, the poet presents the J’Ouvert players as causing the morning itself as they “lift up dis city to the sun” (92). Consequently, the poem situates the Carnival as the origin for the ambiguities that the poet needs in order to name herself Sunris. The figural, poetic world ushered in metaleptically by the Carnival players and steel bands, rather than the real world with its solar and circadian rhythms, determines the poem’s temporality. Building off Gérard Genette’s *narrative metalepsis*, Julian Hanebeck observes that the phenomenon obtains in

“any violation of the boundary that separates the world of the narrating from the world of the narrated” (1).

Lyric poetry upturns the diegetic strata through numerous generic operations. In his *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler proposes the concept of the *lyric present* as a distinct temporality in which the lyric poem operates. Like *narrative metalepsis*, the lyric present breaks down barriers that separate the poet from the other subjects, objects, and events in the poem. In Culler’s estimation, “the narrated events seem to be subsumed by, trumped by, the present of lyric enunciation” (36). In “Sunris,” the poet is fully involved in the Carnival. Moments dilate and compress and the poet, like the Carnival procession in the opening, escapes the timeframe of a single day. Culler suggests that it is through the rhetorical figures of address and hypothetical questions that a lyric “poem pulls itself out of the narrative temporality of past event and into the distinctive present” (28). As a lyric poem, “Sunris” possesses a “distinctive present” founded in just such an act of temporal transgression which is in turn reenacted by the reader and echoed by the poem’s semantic content. An analysis of moments of address and hypothetical questions in “Sunris” reveals how the poet overcomes the unity of the crowd and its male-dominated, historical order to claim a unique, lyric space for herself.

The Carnival in “Sunris” teems with familiar Mas’ figures. The poet claims the “[s]ymbol of emancipated woman” or “Mas Woman” (93). In addition we encounter religious, historical, cultural, and mythological figures throughout the poem, including, “High-priestess and Devil / Aztec-King and me / Midnight-robber / Saint Theresa, / And Jab-Jab Molassi” (95). While men and women may be masquerading as recognizable figures, lyric speech acts within the poem complicate the certainty of their actual presence. The poet apostrophizes and interrogates the Aztec ruler Motezuma, beginning “O Montezuma, / How could you deliver all the glory /

Without a fight?" (96). When Motezuma responds, it is distinct from either the Carnival's temporality or the poet's modes of address. Montezuma's speech is set off by a capitalized cue line, after which his italicized speech intones a disjunctive gravitas as he recounts his capitulation to "*that / Half-horse-half-man-God....Cortez*" (97). In addition to the English Montezuma uses, occasional catachreses and anachronisms prevent us from thinking this is a voice from the past. He refers to Lake Texcoco, the site of Tenochtitlan, as "Lake Texaco" (96), inflecting it with the name of an American oil company, and he compares a comet to a photograph. His argument and its reasoning exit the past to be parroted by a masquerader in the present day. The language of the exchange, as well as the conflict it recounts, is gendered. Montezuma tersely responds to the poet's goading with the command, "Woman blame the bible and the sword / Blame the cross of that blood-devouring sun" (97). "Blame," anaphorically repeats at the start of the next two sentences, providing even more examples of people and things that might be blamed for the destruction of Montezuma's kingdom. Montezuma does not take responsibility for his actions and asks the poet "Who among us would not have been beguiled?" (96). Ironically, the answer to Montezuma's question may be the poet herself.

When the poet encounters Papa Bois, the sylvan folk figure, her customary greeting is rendered as an actual spoken address in quotation marks. The poet reminds herself parenthetically, "(I best be polite)," before speaking "Bonjour, Buenos dias, / Good day, Papa Bois, / How the caretaking coming. Sir?" (99). Papa Bois does not respond. So too, Africa, personified as a woman, receives questions and addresses, but never replies. However, unlike the dismissed greeting to Papa Bois, the one-sided conversation with Africa produces revelations. When Africa does not answer the poet's question, "how to begin / after all this time and water?" (102), we do not get the sense that Africa walks past the poet aloof. Indeed, due to their length

and tone, it would be ridiculous to imagine the poet speaking the lines addressed to Africa to a passerby on the street during Carnival. Instead, the questions and apostrophes (“I think of you too and I marvel / How your rituals have survived the crucible”) constitute the unique lyric present of the poem that inflects Africa and the poet’s momentary, “passing touch” with an impossible excess of language (102). When the poet later sees Columbus, yet another man responsible for historic violence, she makes short work of the exchange: “I think dis time I go make history / Columbus, you is not the only one / who can make discovery / I done unearth My Mayan mystery” (107). It is the exchange between the woman poet and the woman Africa that produces a different kind of lyric knowledge that persists through ambiguity and performance, or, as the poet says to Africa, “you endure sphinx-like” (102).

If poems like “Caliban” occasionally lapse into a noumenal space beyond the immediate, then “Sunris” repeatedly insists on the poet’s presence. One strategy to achieve this effect involves using the first-person steadily throughout the poem despite the many changes in wardrobe and personae. However, a particularly unique feature of “Sunris” and certainly one that distinguishes it from other poems that take Carnival as their occasion, is the poet’s negotiation of her own body within the crowd. Like noise, touch, as exhibited between the poet and Africa, is a category of experience that runs the risk of disappearing within the language game of the lyric.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing approaches the problem of the body in poetry from an entirely different standpoint, wherefrom the poet’s body may never exist outside language. For her, “[t]he social power of poetry lies in the concurrent annulment and reinstitution of the symbolic— however and to whatever local ideological ends it may choose to wield that power” (102-3). Poetry questions the real, but ultimately “conserves” it (103). It is a telling fact that the poets she attends to in her chapter “The Body of Words” are Wallace Stevens, Seamus Heaney, T.S. Eliot,

and Ezra Pound. By her own admission, the lyric poetry she studies are those poems in which “an ‘I’ talks to itself or to nobody in particular and is not primarily concerned with narrating a story or dramatizing an action” (2). By truncating the lyric’s purchase, Blasing relegates the promise of the lyric to the nonrational—a category that includes the body and the emotions. The entire operation by which poetry asserts and relies upon the rationality of a discrete *I* becomes suspect. In Blasing’s words, “Poetry keeps intact the emotionally charged linguistic histories of the mind and the body—abstractions that get carved out of poetic language” (102). But what if the lyric poet assumes that the available histories are compromised from the start? What if the lode of poetic language does not yield a material from which to carve?

Lyn Innes, in her reading of Grace Nichols’s poem, “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath,” draws the following conclusion: “Her body will assert itself, will be redefined in her own terms and contexts, and will challenge the discourse of male historians and anthropologists” (232). Innes’s observation accurately characterizes one of Nichols’s artistic preoccupations readily visible in the efforts of the “Sunris” poet as well. The universal *I* that Blasing rightfully distrusts does nothing beneficial in and of itself for the Mas Woman. The Black woman’s body becomes a publicly vulnerable site at risk of dispossession and, as we have seen, subject to male authoritative governance in the form of the father’s “headmaster-voice” and the historical fallacies perpetuated by men like Montezuma and Columbus (“Sunris” 89).

Two passages from “Sunris” in particular foreground gender to preempt idealization of either the free-floating lyric *I* of “Caliban” or the egalitarianism of the carnival offered by Bakhtin. The first moment is a strophe in which the poet navigates the unsolicited touches she experiences in the crowd.

So Coolieman, Blackman, Redman come,
 Potageeman, Chineyman, Whiteman, Brown,
 Whoever throw they hand round mih waist
 I come out to tasteup mih race
 But when I ready I moving free
 I sticking to the flight of my own trajectory
 I reaping the flowers of this deep dance mystery
 I think this time I go make history. (94)

Despite the apparent assemblage of diverse peoples that the Carnival presents, the poet uses homeoteleuton (“...man, ...man, ...man”) to highlight the gender disparity and contrast herself from the crowd’s brief embrace. After which, she moves freely and even comes to benefit from the crowd, “reaping the flowers of this deep dance mystery” (94). History is figured as the category in need of reclamation and transformation. By rhyming “mystery” and “history,” the poem implies that historical events are open to creative forces and ambiguities. The Carnival is not utopian, but it does provide an opportunity for reinvention, and corporeality plays a crucial role in the process. The hands that attempt to wrap around the poet provide the tensor she frees herself from, emerging as a body from bodies. As the poet mentions in the opening strophes, polyptotonically recalling the bodily, etymological roots of *carnival*, the Carnival players demonstrate a self-generating power, able to manifest themselves, “to incarnate their own carnation” (92).

The poet, the maker of the new history, does not insist upon a hard division between the fictional and textual worlds. She defines the Carnival in terms of body parts that also resonate with signifiers of the written word. She says of the objects and people, “Hands Hands / Is all a

matter of hands / Through the shaping and the cutting / Through the stitching and the touching / Through the bright door of love / Come the splendour of hands” (94). The gerunds associated with craft apply equally to the poet as the craftsman who makes the costumes and instruments of Carnival. Particularly, “stitching” (94) brings to mind both sewing and the poetic line, or *stich*. The entire Carnival world of “Sunris” is after all, the work of hands. The poet immediately revises her claim using another body part, “Feet Feet / Is all a matter of feet” (95). Indeed, a poem can satisfy the seeming paradox of being at once all a matter of hands and all a matter of feet.

Paronomasia and levity help the poet move through the Carnival. The second passage that brings the poet’s body back into focus uses parody to send up sexual prudishness. Set amidst the sound of a “Steel drum / On fire” (100), the poet initiates a mock prayer to bring attention to another’s trespass, entreating, “Father forgive us for we know not, / Forgive the man who just place he hand / on my promiseland / Later he will take the ash and close he eye; / Man born of woman, / you born to die” (101). The poet turns a prayer of forgiveness into a curse and uses Confession to point out an anonymous man’s hypocrisy, as he will still “take the ash” on Ash Wednesday, despite his trespass. Using “promiseland” to refer cagily to part of her body, the poet playfully demonstrates how her body can serve as the substitute for the biblical counterpart to the promiscuous reveler. Finally, the poet subordinates the man, reminding him that he, and all men, are “born to die” (101).

As Rosamond S. King observes, since the period immediately following emancipation in the nineteenth century, when Black people who were formerly enslaved began participating in Carnival on a large scale, their bodies and sexualities offended and threatened colonial authorities. Particularly the class of *jamettes*, “poor black Creoles who worked in marginal or

illegal sectors such as prostitution and gambling,” shocked the upper classes and “scandalized whites” both in and out of Carnival (214-215). King writes, “the revealed black woman’s body pointed to unsanctioned sexual behaviors and relationships” (221). The Mas Woman of “Sunris” performs acts of revealing and being seen antedated by the jamettes, “men and women whose work was often hidden—in the dark, inside or ‘underground’” (King 215). Only now, the poet’s sexuality and gender are used to undermine and bring to light a broader patriarchal order, no longer restricted to colonial figures. Similar to embracing the jab jab, baring the body reveals the observers’ prejudices and immoralities rather than any indecency on the part of the Mas Woman.

In “Sunris,” the individual identity is shown to emerge from social and historical phenomena. It is not achieved only through explicit declaration, but from partaking in the “deep dance mystery” (94) and the “sphinx-like” (102) ambiguities of interpersonal experience. Once again, the poet selects the steel pan as the singular object that best exhibits this pattern or approach toward the world. She contemplates:

How hammer blows
 Can make such tones
 How doves can rise
 From steel throat
 Will always be to me
 A sweet oil drum mystery (104)

The rumination invokes the material history of the steel pan, recalling without explaining or overshadowing the labor that transformed a purely instrumental object into a musical instrument. The poet, who did not fashion an actual steel pan, but rather a figural one, stands in appreciative and affectionate awe of the “sweet oil drum mystery” (104). The personified drum shares a

“throat” with its poetic double as the assonance in “blows,” “tone,” and “throat” contrast and accentuate the rhyme between the first-person pronoun *me* and the overarching “mystery” (104). From there, the poet spins off into a diachronic, transcultural reverie that considers the twinned fates of the “underbelly pan / with dih innerbelly / stars / of the underbelly / people” (105). Applying the same descriptor, “underbelly” (105), to the steel drum and the people unites them and physicalizes them through one another. The poet demands the sonic presence from the pan—she bids it “Spread re-echo” and “speak” (105)—and in doing so she further activates the steel pan as a poetic presence. Similar to how the poet reimagined her own sexuality as the promiseland, she metonymically connects the steel pan to the bible through the figure of the anonymous Roman soldier who pierced Christ with his spear, asking the pan to “pierce us with / yuh holy steel” (106).

The final image complex from this passage that I regard as a paean to the steel pan is as ambiguous as the “sweet oil drum mystery” itself (104). The poet entreats the steel drum “make your octaves / to fall on us / like a benediction / of leaves” (106). The arboreal image of falling leaves is not only out of season and out of climate, but the steel pan is repeatedly linked to the aquatic during this section. The drum’s sounds travel through the “blue crest / of old pirate water” and “down down” through the waters of “the middle passage” (105). The nearest the sounds come to trees is in their littoral landing when they “touch ground / of Atlantic / brown” (105). In their journey inland, the steel pan sounds travel through the histories of slavery and colonization, not disrupting, but even “sweeten[ing] / the bones of our / indigenous sleep” (105). The oil drum’s piercing steel does not efface historical violences but recalls them, and like the *jab jab* and the *Mas Woman*, take part in their occasion. It is an ambiguous gesture, but one that nowhere denies its involvement and presence. Finally, the “benediction / of leaves,” points in all

directions: to the headmaster, to the bible, to sheet music, to the environment and the millions-of-years dead aquatic plants that became oil and filled the steel drum's hollow, to the poem itself and the written word on the page (106).

The final line of the poem, wherein the poet names herself, demonstrates the inseparability of senses and references produced by the poem's Carnival. No longer a generic Mas Woman, the poet ends in boldly stating "I just done christen myself, SUNRIS" (109). The temporal frame shifts to the present perfect, as the poet casts a backward glance at both the poem and the Carnival it depicts. Set at dawn, or sunrise, the name reflects semantically the occasion of J'Ouvert. One cannot confidently claim whether the poem is named after the poet, or the poet is named after the poem. Like, the players from the poem's beginning able "to incarnate their own carnation," the moment of emergence is figured as a dislocated act of self-creation (92). The verb "christen" is particularly suggestive as it represents the Christian sacrament of Baptism and the associated process of anointment, a word that explicitly means the application of oil. The emergence from the historical and material substrate of the Carnival is accomplished without moral certitude. In no way do the poem's ambiguities resolve in the act of naming. SUNRIS, all capitalized like MONTEZUMA before her, but without his hubris, remains open to revision.

Victor D. Questel and Petropessimism

Each in their own way, Brathwaite and Nichols demonstrate the ability to see the utility in the Carnival and its repurposed oil drums. While neither poet demonstrates unreserved optimism, each finds luminous moments within the modern transnational and Caribbean contexts. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum is the poet Victor D. Questel. Questel, a

Trinidadian poet, categorically refuses to elevate the status of the oil drum, an object that his poetry unequivocally links to the oil industry and its destructive forces.

In *History of The Voice*, Brathwaite counts Questel among the “younger Trinidadian *nation poets*” (26) who incorporate elements of calypso drama into their poetry. While these generic conventions may be found within particular poems, Questel is no great supporter of calypso itself. In his exhaustive poem-by-poem analysis of Questel’s work, ““These Collapsing Times’: Remembering Q,”” critic Gordon Rohlehr repeatedly notices Questel’s misgivings about petroleum and its cultural afterlives, particularly as they manifest in Trinidad, the Caribbean’s largest oil-producing nation. Rohlehr repeatedly and correctly insists that in Questel’s poetry, oil and the pan represent decadence, violent extractivist tendencies, and profound cultural failings. I argue that Questel’s assumptions about nationalism and gender produce, in his case, an artificially foreshortened petrochemical imagination, incapable of envisioning a future for itself.

Reading the poem “Pan Drama,” Rohlehr notes that Questel “seeks to explore Mas and Pan as major metaphors in a theatre of secular ritual that annually absorbs, consumes and disgorges multitudes of players back into the tedium of ordinary reality” (191). In Trinidad, Rohlehr’s frames Carnival as an event that transpires when “cultural commissars” attempt to entice an international audience with a “cosmeticized redefinition of national culture” (192). In the poem “Tom,” Rohlehr observes, “[Questel’s] final image is one of offshore, oil-drilling platforms, the nation’s ultimate reality, generating mineral wealth at the expense of potential ecological disaster: the ruin of pristine beaches with oil slick” (201). In “Words and Gestures,” Rohlehr recalls the material history of the steel drum and interprets the image of “the sunken shells of drums” (“Words” 71) as “the extension of imperialism built on slave labour into the

parasitism of today's multinational corporations such as Shell and Texaco, which exploit ('suck') Trinidad's and the world's petroleum resources" (222).

Questel tells this version of history himself in the poem "This Island Mopsy." In a familiar, gendered cliché, he likens the nation to a woman and victim of sexual violence. The poet advises, "Treat she like how the Multi-national / treat dis territory / sink yer hand in she country / what yer get take it for free" (102). Urging the rape of woman and earth the poet suggests:

Extract what yer could before she start
 to fret and boil
 When she sugar done
 man drill for oil
 Then break all ties
 ignore she consternation
 and leave she wid a new
 growing population. (102)

This masculinist view occludes the reality that oil companies do not, in fact, "break all ties" (102) and vanish. As Nichols demonstrates in "Sunris," they leave behind materials that might allow for individual progress and communal reimagining. If the poem aims to offend the sensibilities of its readers by triggering an impulse to protect womanhood and nation, then it might admit that multi-national corporations and interests are not the only source of violence against women and the earth, an ugly truth that Nichols troping on her "promiseland" highlights.

The poem "Downstairs" ties the oil drum and the oil industry to decadence that reflects masculine failure. The poem opens with the suggestion of negligence and waste: "Downstairs is

where we keep things that soon harden into rust” (153). In fact, the basement contains “the whole fabric of society,” including “ice tongs” owned by the poet’s grandfather and a “a wooden man with a broken hand” carved by the poet’s uncle (153). The two objects that belonged to women are heavily qualified: a typewriter owned by the poet’s mother is “the lone relic of Mother’s adventure as a stenographer” and an oven owned by the poet’s grandmother who “took to baking after papa, / her husband, died” (153-154). This object defines her entirely as “A good Bajan woman, the symbol of her work ethic is now / broken” and the poetic line breaks with the matrilineal history (154). The objects of gendered, venerable labor rust as a metaphor for society. The father’s associated object is “an overturned oil drum Dad / once brought home from the Shell tanker, *MV Martina* / or maybe it was the *MV Point Fortin*” (154). Rather than alive and modern, the oil drum and the industry that bore it signifies a masculine failure attributed to the generation before the poet’s own. Robert Stilling observes a “propensity of early anticolonial writers to view decadence in the arts primarily as a symptom of the historical decadence of various imperial formations” (12). Even if, as Stilling argues, later postcolonial writers and artists used “fin-de-siècle decadents’ most critical and oppositional tools, their wit, satire, paradoxical formulations, attention to form, resistance to realism, sexual dissidence, and revisionist approach to history to critique what they saw as the failures of postcolonial societies,” Questel’s patriarchally regimented vision of national identity in a poem like “Downstairs” can only look back with nostalgia and a sense of loss (12).

In both the poems I have cited, Questel rejects the ongoing project that oil represents. By figuring oil as a site of expended energy and squandered resources, he ignores its ongoing potentials and influences over the modern world. Presenting oil as obsolete is a powerful gesture but filtering this message through a masculinist nationalism creates a sense of hopelessness that

does not imagine a way forward. Nichol's vision of a woman's ability to redefine herself through petrochemical signifiers, despite a pronounced masculine presence, more closely aligns with a project concerned with futurity. Even Brathwaite's vision of the nation in *History of The Voice* renders "neglected Gran an expert on the culture" (50). In denying the ongoing present and the difficult problems, and opportunities, oil instantiates, Questel resigns himself to the anti-carnavalesque position of observer rather than actor. Ironically, he comes to emulate the mentality of the multi-national corporations he vilifies by recusing himself of any active role in the nation's development. More than any other Caribbean poet, Questel forsakes anything remotely associated with oil, which in his imagination runs back to the plantation, as well, the very history of the nation. As a result, his poetry portrays oil to the least precise degree of any poet studied herein: inert and bygone.

To return now to Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's emphatic proclamation—"Imagine making music from oil!"—we see that in the case of all three Caribbean poets analyzed herein, this creative act of imagining takes no one form (4). The invitation to imagine particularly appeals to poets who attend to the uncertain spaces over which language presides. Expressing the self and the world through the poetics of oil produces the aesthetic effect of our complex, interpersonal status as subjects within a globalized, petrochemical world in a way that propositional language cannot. From the ubiquitous noise of modernism, to the oil coating the jab jab, to the thronging Carnival celebrations, and the persistence of history, poets and artists of oil are able to parse oil's ever-growing spread into provocative metaphors in which the self can endure.

While Questel's political vision as interpreted through oil and its signifiers is not transformative, it is consistent and pronounced. The poetic engagement with oil politics and oil economics takes on a different character than the ambiguous poetic relationship to

petromodernity and the steel pan. Like the first section of “Caliban,” entirely expressed through the world offered up by the newspaper, when poems approach oil as a globalized commodity, this potentially rich figure runs the risk of falling into committed and conventional tropes. In the chapter four, we will see how politically savvy poets, tasked with reimagining their environment, struggle with oil’s overwhelming influence. Even when poets critique petrochemicals, they cannot be accused of trying to get the oil out of art.

Chapter 3: Poetic Statecraft and The Production of Cuban Poetry

As a genre, poetry contains all manners of literary time. In verse, time can manifest as rhythm or meter, which can be treated with prosody. When reading a narrative poem, it makes perfect sense to discourse about diegetic time and invoke Bahktinian chronotopes. Regarding lyric poetry, Jonathan Culler in his *Theory of the Lyric* points readers to “the temporality of the lyric, linked to an unlocated present of discourse” (20). Poetry also proves up to the task of representing historical phenomena in particular places at particular times. If poetry incorporates such diverse conceptions of time, then what happens when we read poems with time in mind? What poetry might produce new aesthetic categories of time through its forms and its content?

Cuban poetry remains scarcely studied, discussed, and read even as the study of literature becomes more global in its scope. From this gulf, more voices sound. Scholars of Cuban culture, history, and society alert audiences in the West to what Sujatha Fernandes calls “a deep failure to understand Cuba on its own terms” (2). Literary scholars who would challenge, or complicate, Western literary hegemony remind their readers that however the map may be redrawn, there often persist discontinuities, terrae incognitae, and disproportionate Mercator’s projections. The Cuban poetry that I consider not only broadens categories of literary time, but it does so through a strong sense of geographical location and historical specificities that cohere to create the sense of a local presence emerging from a global backdrop that threatens to consume it.

As scholars of the Anthropocene reveal, time and timing become increasingly unfathomable prospects when seen in the light of globalization, technologization, and

environmental crises.¹² In some accounts of the poetics of global modernity, slowness figures as an alternative time structure from which to observe and even contest the dominant, accelerated time regime. In a recent issue of *ASAP/Journal* dedicated to practices of slowness, editors Katja Kwastek and Erin La Cour understand that “slowness encourages us to address the complexities of contemporary society’s production and reception processes with a heightened sensibility to multilayered temporalities and time scales” (458). Lutz Koepnick expresses at least one potential benefit of incorporating slowness into our aesthetic categories in that it “enables us to engage with today’s culture of speed and radical simultaneity without submitting to or being washed over by the present’s accelerated dynamics” (6). However, as even these scholars go on to point out, there is no universal or a priori slowness, and as such, like any temporal frame, it remains ambivalent.¹³

This article contrasts two modes of poetry that appear in Cuba at times of heightened geopolitical activity. I designate these two modes accelerated poetry and slow poetry.

Accelerated poetry uses metaphor and hyperbolic rhetorical structures to figure Cuba’s future.

Historically, it aligns with the struggle for national independence, which over the course of the

¹² On his way to conceptualizing an Anthropocene poetics, David Farrier reworks Keats to suggest that “[t]he Anthropocene involves us in a kind of deep-time negative capability, inducting us into the strangeness of a temporality that vastly exceeds both personal experience and intergenerational memory.” See Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 5.

¹³ To cast the ambivalences of slowness into starker relief, we can recall that Rob Nixon reminds us that the local effects of globalization, notably environmental destruction, generational impoverishment, and exposure to toxic pollutants, often manifest only as what he names slow violence. Nixon imagines a category of artists, *writer-activists*, who “can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the sense, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer.” *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Harvard University Press, 2013), 15. Presumably, for these writer-activists, slowness is both an existential threat and a luxury they cannot afford.

twentieth century, increasingly becomes a problem of economic and energy autonomies. Slow poetry arrays itself along the metonymic axis of signification. It dwells presently with its poetic objects, deploying tmesis to elongate its moment. Historically, it aligns with the Cuban Special period, when the nation was in crisis, severed from a steady flow of international commodities, including petroleum. As with any comparison, these modes rely upon one another to gain distinction, but it is also important to recognize that social and material conditions factored into what poets made and how they made it. My readings potentiate some of the many suggestions that inhere within these poems, anticipated by the following questions. What rhythms motivate this rich archive? What happens when a century's worth of literary innovation by poets who prioritized active revolution adjusts to the operations of globalization? Might new desires emerge from an island cut off from global trade that nevertheless experienced and translated global conflicts? How do Cuban poets account for their times?

In July of 1953, Fidel Castro (1926-2016), with over one hundred guerilla fighters, attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, losing more lives than were taken. When put on trial by the Batista government, Castro declined to take full responsibility for the maneuver, demurring, "the intellectual author of this revolution is José Martí, the apostle of our independence" (Gott 149-50). Given the extent to which Fidel Castro dominates the American conception of Cuba and its politics, it is worth recalling that Cuban poet José Martí (1853-1895) anticipated and exceeded Castro's symbolic political significance for many Cubans, including Castro himself. Martí, as a poet with outsized influence on his nation's political life, joins the ranks of the acknowledged legislators of the formerly colonized world.

Castro recognized Martí's dedication to Cuban independence from Spanish colonial rule, reviving him as a romantic, national hero and political martyr. Indeed, Martí suffered

imprisonment, exile, and eventually death in combat as a result of his commitment to his political beliefs. Martí was equally active as a literary figure, writing essays and poems and translating, editing and publishing the work of others. His last fragment of writing demonstrates the interconnection between these roles, coming in the form of an unfinished letter, interrupted by a fatal confrontation with Spanish forces in May of 1895, in which Martí accurately predicted, “I am now, every day, in danger of giving my life for my country” (Foner 5).

Poets are rarely as simple as the stories we tell about them. Readers who would attempt to read each line of Martí’s poems as vouching for, or even *authoring*, Castro’s revolution will be stymied. Despite the considerable overlap between Martí’s life as a political dissident and his activities as a writer, Martí’s poetry is not so single-minded an enterprise. At times, it celebrates nature and friendship. Other times, it condemns historic injustices in Latin America and longs for a better future for Cuba. Often, Martí’s poetry dwells self-reflexively on its own generic identity and the pitfalls and promises of the pursuit of poetry, as seen in Martí’s apostrophic lines, “We are condemned together, poetry, / Or else we both are saved!” (*José Martí* 103).

Following up his original use of Martí, Castro gave a later speech at his trial that simultaneously acknowledges Martí’s early death while using his spirit and his memory to advance the cause of his revolution. In what would become “the manifesto of Castro’s revolutionary movement,” he says of Martí, “It looked as if his memory would be extinguished forever. But he lives. He has not died. His people are rebellious...O Cuba! What would have become of you if you had let the memory of your apostle die!” (Gott 150-1). While Castro’s representation of Martí as a romantic freedom fighter rather than a trendsetting *modernismo* poet is a selective reading on his part, the quotation reveals Castro’s rhetorical debt to Martí’s poetics.

The lugubrious apostrophe to Cuba and the bleak future augured at this quotation's end operate in the familiar modes through which Martí writes about the nation in his poetry.

Emphatic proclamations and apostrophe riddle Martí's poetry. The poem "Does Patrias (Two Countries)," written during his prolonged exile from Cuba, demonstrates certain patterns of speech that help contextualize Castro's way of representing Cuba as a victim. In the poem, Martí creates an extended metaphor wherein Cuba is drawn into comparison with the night through the mediation of a widow in mourning. Cuba is personified "With long veils and holding a carnation" (163). In the poem's final image, the metaphor abstains from optimism, as "Crushing the carnation's / Petals silently, widowed Cuba passes by / Like a cloud that dims the heavens" (163). In addition to working within a melancholic register and explicitly naming Cuba, "Dos Patrias" collapses the complexity of the nation of Cuba and its people into a singular being. This poetic gesture bears similarity to Castro's reduction of the rebellious peoples of Cuba into the manageable, personified addressee of his apostrophe. Outspoken nationalists, neither Martí nor Castro withhold their unflattering assessments of their country. The political bodies they imagine are instead imperiled—forgetful, widowed—which in turn rouses the audience's desire to protect the nation and its memory.

Martí, harnessing poetry's oracular powers, speculates about the future of Cuba. In his bitter poem "Pollice Verso: Memoria de presidio (Prison Recollections)," Martí views the future in the light of his most painful memories. For Martí, some memories are metaphorical fires that "sear the mind," but they also illuminate. In the "bright light" of his memories of prison, Martí claims, "I can foresee my nation's future. / And I weep" (125). In Castro's speech, fire remains the implicit vehicle for the tenor of memory, in that it can be "extinguished," but Castro also contributes his own speculative lament—"What would have become of you if you had let the

memory of your apostle die!”—to imagine an imperiled Cuba (Gott 150). Both these authors withhold their exact vision of possible futures from their audience, marshalling a rhetorical force through metaphor and emphatic speculation.

Castro’s remarks belong to the proud tradition of instrumentalizing the legacy of Martí in service of Cuba’s political future. In the decades following independence from Spain, Martí was an icon of nationalism for the Republic of Cuba. In 1922 José Martí’s birthday became a national holiday and memorials, including sculptures placed in every school and streets bearing Martí’s name, appeared across the island (Pérez 146). At the other end of the century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Castro’s government faced the profound economic and political challenges of the Special Period, in the assessment of Nigel D. White, “the Cuban revolution survived the end of the Cold War and, furthermore, adapted by returning to the inspiration of José Martí, the embodiment of the Cuban struggle for independence” (182). While Martí’s poetry employs the grammars and logics of resistance, it also seems that his name carries a political charge all its own and never fully irrelevant.

Presciently, Martí questioned the terms of his reception. In a prefatory essay to his last collection, *Versos Sencillos (Simple Poetry)*, published in 1891 by New York printer Louis Weiss & Co., Martí questions the vagaries of publishers with considerable circumspection. In what serves as a thoughtful overview of his career, Martí ponders three of his poetry collections and why they were or were not fit to be published. He begins with *Versos Libres (Free Verse)*, asking, “Why do they publish this simplicity, written as if in play, and not my boisterous *Free Verse*, my hirsute hendecasyllables born of great fears or great hopes or the indomitable love of freedom or a painful love of beauty...” (57). For his part, Martí represents *Versos Libres* here through its formal preoccupations and emotional capacities. He does not offer a characterization

of its thematic content. He next considers another of his collections, *Versos Cubanos* (*Cuban Poetry*), and wonders why it was not published, though it was “so filled with anger that it is better left unseen? And all those hidden sins of mine, and all those ingenuous and rebellious samples of literature?” (57). Here the emotional content is matched with moral content as his unspecified *sins* come to the fore. From this vantage point, late in his career, Martí opens space between his *love of freedom and beauty* and his *ingenuous and rebellious* writing, reminding us of his poetry’s diverse preoccupations and attachments.

Of *Versos Sencillos*’s publication, Martí reflects on both the objects portrayed in his poems and the process of writing them: “why at this time, on the pretext of these wildflowers, exhibit a collection of my poetics and tell why I purposely repeat a rhyming word, or why I classify and group those words so they reach one’s sentiments through sight and hearing. Or why I leap over them when the tumultuous idea demands no rhyme or bears no *repoussé*?” (57). He concludes, at last, that it was a combination of fortuitous circumstances and artistic candor that enabled his poems to be published: “These poems are printed because the affection with which some kind souls received them...And because I love simplicity and believe in the need to put feelings into plain and sincere forms” (57). In this preface, three-quarters of a century before the time Pascale Casanova identifies as the Latin American literary “boom” and “the beginning of a proclamation of autonomy” within Hispano-American literature, we see Martí, through the apparatus of a New York publisher, “reject pure political functionalism” as the standard for literary achievement (325). Instead, he describes a poetry that conjures images from nature (“wildflowers”) and develops through repetition and association, both aesthetic and social. Despite this complexity, when mediated by Castro and the poets of the revolution, Martí must be considered the archetypal, purely functional political poet so handy to Casanova’s representation

of Latin American poetry. However, this oversimplification, which is to say, neglect, of Martí's poetry distorts more than it reveals.

Would that poetry were so ruly a material as Castro, Casanova, and perhaps even Martí himself, imagine it to be! Instead, our conception of what literature is and how it operates suffers an unnecessary and tragic foreshortening when a major literary figure like Martí becomes the antipodean touchstone for a compromised, nationalist poetry with nothing else to contribute to our broader literary histories. Incorporating anti-colonial poets and thinkers in its purview, the study of postcolonial poetry represents a unique disciplinary advantage that can maintain critiques of specific moments of national independence, particularly when they give way to either vicious nationalism or neoliberal globalization, while reassessing these moments' merits. By appreciating that political material can travel across national and linguistic boundaries to contribute to aesthetic production, scholars of postcolonial poetry foster a holistic understanding of literature. Martí's poetry benefits from such an approach. If we object to Castro's propagandistic use of Martí's memory, then we would do well to reject an impulse to consign his poetry to the category of nationalist propaganda, particularly when it comes to readers through transnational publication networks that may endue the text with a degree of autonomy by some accounts.

In Martí's deceptively titled *Versos Sencillos*, one finds the ambiguity, complexity, and artifice one would expect in any collection of poetry. Formally, the poems straddle sensibilities. Adapting the *serventesio*, Martí "takes the Spanish popular meter, the octosyllabic line, and converts the popular element of the Spanish classicists into a form that is dedicated to all of Hispanic America" (Foner 15). At first glance, one quatrain demonstrates Martí's patriotic zeal:

My manly heart conceals

The pain it suffers; sons of
 A land enslaved live for it
 Silently, and die. (61)

Here, the paralipsis demonstrates plainly that which it “conceals” (61). If we great that this obvious contradiction, that is the portrayal of that which is allegedly suppressed, is indeed a literary effect rather than the product of ignorance, the quatrain advertises that poetry is an alternative space to stoic abstention, one which lays suffering bare. The mode of the lamentation is familiar from the previously discussed examples of how Martí characterizes Cuba and its peoples, and Martí’s suffering heart or his emotional anguish is itself personified and masculine. In isolation, this stanza provides the materials needed to figure Martí as politically minded. However, reading on, the very next quatrain displays a rather different poetic imagination:

All is permanence and beauty,
 And all is melody and reason,
 And all, like diamonds rather
 Than light is coal. (63)

Metonymic mereology structures this quatrain. The flow of signifiers descends from abstract Platonic ideals, into the forms of *melody* and *reason*, concluding, rather than beginning, with the reminder that what is true for the most valuable gem holds for organic lifeforms as well as the regime of energy capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century, “all, like diamonds rather / Than light is coal” (63). The poet draws the reader’s attention from the lustrous appearance of the diamond to a more fundamental fact of its physical composition. The esteemed diamond is brought back to its humble origins, which is coterminous with the human universe that is represented by the repeated *all*. In a provocative inversion, the light of the diamond itself

becomes carboniferous, a fact that the fires of industrialization plainly attest. Here is a theory of object relations, one that, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea of globalactics, "embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension and motion" and offers "a way of thinking and relating to the world, particularly in the era of globalism and globalization" (8). In this quatrain, Martí's poetry asks us to see beyond the visible and attend to pre-human, mineral history. Even the craftiest statesman would struggle to corral these lines into political functionality.

This chapter analyzes two modes of poetry represented in an early stage in these two quatrains. I call these modes accelerated poetry and slow poetry. Continuing to attend to the circumstances of publication as was done for *Simple Poetry*, this chapter also investigates the ways in which the framing of Cuba and its poetry participates in an injurious cycle of politicization that blends with the poetics of petro-modernity. Leaving Martí behind without forgetting the lessons learned, I argue that while the poetry in this chapter is most legible within the contexts of political upheaval and publishing mechanisms that enable its reception, it is not reducible to these conditions. Instead, the poetry here considered by Nancy Morejón and Reina María Rodríguez creates an interpretative space from which readers may better understand what historical narrativization effaces. Informed by current critiques of petro-modernity, I argue that the fissure between accelerated poetry and slow poetry is the difference between ubiquitous oil dependency and its alternative. In this way, Cuban poetry follows the course of globalized modernity through the twentieth century, until it does not. We can learn a great deal from this rupture.

Accelerating the Revolution with Poetry

In their introduction to a collection of essays about Cuba and its relationship to the Soviet Union, *Caviar with Rum: Cuba-USSR and the Post-Soviet Experience*, editors Jacqueline Loss and José Manuel Prieto raise a productive contradiction that becomes readily apparent when studying the long history of Cuba and the geopolitical circumstances that Castro's revolutionary government faced. The authors suggest that their volume works to combat so-called "Cuban exceptionalism—that discourse which refuses to conceive of the Cuban experience as comparable to that of any other nation that has undergone either traditional colonialism or Sovietization" (3-4). Certainly, such work can go a long way in better understanding the conditions of colonialism and modernity abroad and represents an important turn away from popular portrayals of Cuban independence. Yet, if exceptionalism is conceived of in relative rather than absolute terms, the authors also make a compelling case for a variety of Cuban exceptionalism. Loss and Prieto proclaim, "No country in Latin America has sought to escape the symbolic influence of the United States to the extent that revolutionary Cuba has. The sustainability of this feat required the support of the Soviets" (1). Implicit within this counterstatement is the considerable international influence of the United States, particularly throughout Latin America. However, the authors bring us to this critical juncture where we do need to consider Cuba unique for reasons that do not recapitulate Cold War antagonisms.

While Cuba did undeniably resist direct United States imperialism, through both the government's relationship with the Soviets and specific nationalist policies, it nevertheless participated in the very thing that I take the United States to symbolically represent most in the twentieth century: petro-modernity. Legal scholar Nigel D. White explains how the resistance to

U.S. imperialism presented Cuba with another challenge to their autonomy, writing, “The Cuban revolution of 1959 brought U.S. imperialism to an end but the geopolitical context of the Cold War meant that the path towards securing independence and self-determination of the Cuban people was disrupted by Cuba’s dependence upon the Soviet Union and its turn towards Communism” (182). Instead of arriving back at exceptionalism, by considering the alliance with the Soviet Union, we see the operations of modernity and globalization shaping revolutionary Cuba. White’s analysis of the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Revolution illustrates the central role that petrochemicals and their production played in negotiating international alliances.

In the period between the US recognizing the revolutionary Cuban government in January 1959 and its severing of diplomatic relations in January 1961, and in response to the Cuban government’s expropriation of US-owned farmlands greater than 1,000 acres, President Eisenhower prohibited US refineries in Cuba from refining crude oil from the Soviet Union, significantly cut the Cuban sugar quota, and imposed an economic embargo on all trade with Cuba except for food and medicine. In response, President Castro confiscated US oil refineries in Cuba, nationalized US and foreign owned properties, and expelled a significant number of US embassy staff. (White 100)

After these events, “the support of the Soviets,” mentioned by Loss and Prieto as a condition for Cuban resistance, came in the form of the Soviet Union making up for these trade deficits. According to Richard Gott, the Soviets did this by buying considerable amounts of sugar (210). Even more importantly, notes Gott, “[t]he regular flow of Soviet tankers bringing cheap oil had been the Revolution’s economic lifeline since the 1960s” (287). Put differently, the need for oil, and an accompanying petro-optimism, played no small part in the revolutionary government’s participation in a global order that ultimately favored US interests abroad.

Throughout the greater Caribbean, the transition from a primarily agricultural economy to an economy with petrochemicals at its center was figured as active social progress, allowing for increased economic access and opportunity for workers. When considering Cuba's economic fate, for a nation where sugar "dominated the entire economy" and determined both domestic and foreign political life from the end of the eighteenth century up to the Revolution, we see in the Cuban-Soviet sugar-for-oil arrangement the persistence of an historically inequitable and symbolically laden economic structure rebranded as revolutionary progress (Nelson 150). In fact, as Lowry Nelson reminds us, Cuba's economic overreliance on sugar resulted from the country's historical immunity to revolution. Nelson argues, "...the decisive factor in [Cuban] sugar expansion...was the successful uprising of slaves in Haiti in 1789....During this uprising, the plantations and mills were destroyed. As a consequence of this sudden wiping-out of the main source of supply for the European market, prices rose rapidly" (91). When the Haitian Revolution dismantled that nation's sugar industry, Cuba reaped the benefits. In addition to sugar's historical ties to the Atlantic slave trade, sugar has remained tied to exploitation throughout the Caribbean. As Eric Williams, first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams observed, "Sugar meant labor—at times that labor has been slave, at other times nominally free; at times black, at other times white or brown or yellow" (29). Despite the historical problems for freedom that sugar represents, Castro's government only too readily agreed to continue to provide sugar for export. The poetry of the Revolution reflects a petro-optimism that these longer histories of Caribbean sugar production might have otherwise tempered.

Revolutionary poet Nicolás Guillén provides one of the clearest literary endorsements of the promise of a Cuban alliance with the Soviet Union in a poem from his 1964 collection *Tengo*

titled “Unión Soviética (“Soviet Union).” In this poem, Guillén, an Afro-Cuban poet whose international frame of reference includes European modernism, Négritude, and the Harlem Renaissance, proleptically defends criticisms of the Soviet Union. To do this, Guillén creates the space for potential advancement by apophatically contrasting an uncertain future allied with the Soviet Union to the visible and pernicious activities of the United States, “a funereal North” (25). The poem begins, “Never have I seen a Soviet trust in my country,” and moves through a list of other institutions of U.S. imperialism: “Nor a bank / a ten cents / a central / a naval base, / or a train. I’ve never once found a banana plantation / where on passing you might read: Máslov and Company, INC.” (21). The first stanza continues detailing the scenes of U.S. financial interest in Cuba before the poem moves to its portrayal of American segregation and anti-Blackness. The poet imagines himself on a train in the USSR where he sees no signs reading “*White Only—Colored Only*.” The poem repeats this familiar phrase from the Jim Crow era five times in total, failing at each attempt to locate these words anywhere in the USSR—not on public transportation, nor in private businesses, “Nor in love / or at school” (23). Taken together, the poem’s relentless criticisms of US foreign and domestic policy manage an effective condemnation, but by way of the operations of antithesis that which in the poem is defined only as *not-American* could hold true any number of nations or places.

It is not until the third stanza that the poem affirms anything about the Soviet presence in the region. Here, the poet likens US naval ships and their crews to “pirates,” before having to contend with the presence of trade ships. The poet, as if repeating somebody else’s provocation, asks, “Soviet ships?” and replies, “Very well; / they’re tankers [petroleros], you see. / That’s right, and fishing boats. / Others carry sugar, and ship coffee / perfumed by fragrant clusters of blossoming hope” (23). A grammatical change marks the entrance of the oil tankers in the poem.

The poet shifts into allaying the obvious concerns he raises for himself, deferring to a naturalized, botanical metaphor of flowery hope. At a remove of six decades, this “blossoming hope” and the optative mode that it inaugurates within the poem comes across as painfully ironic. In these lines, all the pieces are in place for Cuba’s eventual subjection to the globalized order of the twentieth century. Guillén ignores the harsher realities of Cuba’s continued economic dependency upon sugar and oil in favor of a future to come through this new international alliance.

In its final stanza, “Unión Soviética” commits to the metaphorical and grammatical operations of what I am calling accelerated poetry. The Soviet Union is apostrophized and further treated through the particular operation of metaphor known as personification. The tense switches to that of the future, while a militaristic image is conjured. The poet declares, “Thus we march together and free / against an enemy we two will defeat [habremos de vencer]” (25). As was the case with the aforementioned “blossoming hope,” the poem’s shift to a representational strategy dependent upon metaphor is important because these metaphors simplify the complex conditions of modernity, painstakingly chronicled throughout the poem. What was once an appreciable list of metonymic signifiers for US imperialism and racism dissolves into an impossible image, marching nations, that provides no real instruction for a project of liberation. This poem enacts the strategic alliance observed by Loss and Prieto that allowed for the Cuban resistance to the US while auguring its limitations. The fault in this project is realized within the horizon of its historical alternatives. “Unión Soviética” luxuriously and optimistically tropes upon the abundances and excesses that result from the global trade in commodities, only superficially contrasting trade partners.

The comparisons I am drawing between revolutionary, accelerated poetry and the logics of modernity are predicated upon the paradoxically complex and manifold operations of simplification. Scholars of Cuba, its history and its literature, have observed this phenomenon within a range of discourses and assigned to the tendency to reduce complexity a host of references. Antonio Benítez-Rojo describes Guillén himself in the late 60s as a sensuous, subversive figure “at that time the Cuban governmental machine was claiming to produce a ‘new man,’ a man apparently unpolluted by material cravings, a man as homogenous and standardized as a grain of refined sugar” (139). In this case, Benítez-Rojo pits Guillén’s subversiveness, his refusal to take “refined sugar” as his standard, against the revolutionary government’s “politics of frugality” (139). So too, Benítez-Rojo reads Guillén’s 1972 *El diario que a diario* as an “attempt to rid his own poetry of the parasitical presence of the island’s sugar-producing history, a presence that had been giving meaning to his work for more than forty years” (140). The processes of refinement, those that affect oil and sugar alike, enable the abundances and excesses that result from the global trade in commodities so luxuriously and optimistically described within the poem “Unión Soviética.”

Literary scholar Geoffrey Hartman (1929-2016) provides a useful framework for understanding how metaphor achieves its rhetorical effects. For Hartman, metaphors work because they remove, without completely erasing, the “chain” of associations, phenomena or dependencies upon which we understand the world to be built: “the strength of the end terms [of a metaphor] depends on our seeing the elided members of the change...the more clearly we see them the stronger the metaphor which collapses that chain, makes a mental bang, and speeds the mind by freeing it from over-elaboration and the toil of consecutiveness” (242). Hartman’s description, which itself relies upon a metaphor of combustion, as it bangs and speeds along,

characterizes the metaphor as an agent of anti-labor, anti-materialist thinking, as metaphors free the mind “from over-elaboration and the toil of consecutiveness.” In much the same way, I contend, globalization and the supply chain, in Guillén signified by the Soviet oil tankers, discursively accelerate movements between nature, labor, and consumption.

In Jahan Ramazani’s assessment, Guillén belongs to a list of male, “non-anglophone postcolonial poets” who “often grapple with the legacies of colonial occupation, and...aesthetically mediate between local and imperially transmitted cultural forms, traditions, and languages” (“Introduction” 4). In Guillén, I argue, the move is more dialectically extreme than the word *mediate* implies, but I also think Ramazani’s generalization gives us another insight into how the categories of local and imperial are strained through the commodification that global capitalism requires. A loss of distinction characterizes the process, as exchangeability defines the commodity. As Marx phrases it, “To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use value, by means of exchange” (51). Commodities exist as such only prior to their deferred use. In the section that follows, I read the work of revolutionary poets alongside those publishers and editors who potentiate these texts’ dissemination, as part of a trend to prepare the poetry and its political content for a broader audience and market.

El Corno Emplumado, Cuban Issues

Beyond the internationally recognized work of Cuba’s two premier anti-colonial poets, José Martí and Nicolás Guillén, Revolutionary Cuban poetry also made its way to wider readerships via the efforts of poets associated with the Beat movement and their international

publishing institutions. Although the spread of Cuban poetry continues at a modest pace—translator Mark Weiss laments, “Very little of the poetry of Cuba and its diaspora has made its way into the awareness of non-Spanish speakers” (2)—these Beat-adjacent publishing experiments are now invaluable for studying how a poetic correspondence between the US and Cuba could overcome conditions of censorship, trade restrictions, and ideological divides. American-born poet, writer, and activist, Margaret Randall (b. 1936) and her partner, Mexican Beat poet Sergio Mondragón (b. 1935), used their Mexico City-based, bi-lingual journal *El Corno Emplumado* to create a space for a broader appreciation of Cuban poetry. *El Corno Emplumado* issue 7 and issue 23, in particular, are crucial documents for understanding the generic features of accelerated poetry within a larger context. I argue, these issues condition their contents for the global marketplace through a series of direct interventions that emphasize the poems’ political exigencies, further accelerating the poems aesthetic projects.

As a form of publication, the literary journal has begun to receive increased attention in defining aesthetic, material, and communications networks. Eric Bulson uses the little magazine to question the foundations of the field of World Literature, observing, “The positions for and against world literature are all based on the assumption that circulation, and with it translations (both formal and linguistic), is what enables us to study the process by which texts (not print media like books or magazines) move through the world. Except when they don’t” (47). In Bulson’s view, then, World Literature, underestimating the importance of local, material production, assumes the kind of circulation and translation exemplified by mass media in print, which is not a given when studying the little magazine. Bulson advances the exceptional status of the little magazine by arguing it “was not a commercial medium. Therefore, it was not designed as a commodity for a marketplace where the accumulation of capital, and profit, mattered” (48).

Bulson's choice of the word *designed* is telling, because it emphasizes the actions and intentions of the creators. Letting Bulson's point stand, that the little magazines he studies were "not designed as a commodity," does not mean that those very publications can neither enter into commodity relations, nor recapitulate aesthetic forms derived from mainstream magazines. Publishers did tap into the symbolic potential of the commodified magazine and the world literary marketplace.¹⁴

Journals' symbolic and material connections to the world literary marketplace sheds a different light on Harris Feinsod's observation that "the idea of a poetry of the Americas motivated a great many poems and poets of both the United States and Latin America...despite how frequently efforts toward a robust cultural hemispherism were scuttled by patterns of US intervention and imperial expansion" (2). Journals and magazines, either operating as deterritorialized commodities or repeating such publications' aesthetic tropes, formally resist the nationalist ideology one may find within their pages. In Feinsod's assessment, it is the "the hemispheric little magazine *El Corno Emplumado*, and the reciprocations engendered between the works of rebellious Beats and revolutionary Cuban barbudos" that best demonstrates "the new inter-American poetry" (25). Reading *El Corno Emplumado* may benefit from extending beyond Feinsod's frame of hemispherism. After all, when describing poems by Martí, Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), Feinsod himself claims for them as common "an expression of geo-political desire, a vision of an alternate world, and the manifestation of a network of writers and institutions" with a ready analog in the political

¹⁴ In his analysis of multi-centric modernism, Robert Stilling names Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, Laetitia Zecchini and Lawrence Rainey as three authors who contribute to his understanding "that Commonwealth writers were no less engaged in a complex negotiation between artistic autonomy, market forces, and elite cultural institutions than their Euro-modernist predecessors" (134).

institution known as “creative diplomacy” (2). I contend that this geo-political desire exceeds the limited inter-American framing proposed by Feinsod and further renders *El Corno Emplumado*, specifically, as a commodity legible to global trade and its explicit intervention into Cold War global politics.

Feinsod writes of *El Corno Emplumado* founders Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón, “Randall and Mondragón were privately labeled ‘integrationists’ by poets who felt they sacrificed editorial standards for a wider range of national and ethnic inclusions” (18-19). Thanks to the voluminous writings of Margaret Randall, we do not need to refract her intentions through the relays of provincial gossip. Reflecting on the publication, Randall writes,

El Corno Emplumado brought together diverse authors, belief systems, lifestyles, and forms of writing. This was one of the journal’s hallmarks. As long as a poem advocated life instead of death (i.e. some form of humanism rather than fascism, classism, racism, or sexism), and as long as it was a good poem—well crafted, innovative, its use of language original and evocative—it was welcomed on our pages. (*To Change the World* 187)

This capacious humanistic view may be the only way to account for the eclecticism seen across the thousands of pages of the journal’s thirty-one issues, published between 1962 and 1969. It certainly rings truer than the generalization Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips offer when claiming that the journal grew “[i]ncreasingly political as the decade wore on” (147). If anything, issue 7 from July 1963, early in the journal’s life, is remarkable for its synthesis of political and poetic texts.

In most regards, issue 7 of *El Corno Emplumado* represents the broad field of Latin American poetics that its editors cultivated. Forgoing a substantial editor’s note about the

issue's contents, the editors instead draw attention to "what is happening elsewhere" in the world of poetry, establishing the issue's global character (5). They direct their readers to the back of the journal, where they might find an "incomplete and spontaneous" list of "new magazines" that "should serve to tune the world in on a network" (5). Over two pages, this list sprawls to include dozens of journals from around the globe—North and South America, Europe, and Asia—categorized as "magazines speaking for peace through art" (196). In addition, the editors offer instructions: "Read them subscribe to them, collaborate with them" (196). Whatever the aesthetic contents of these magazines and the connections within this "network" may be, we see that one way the editors imagine readers ("the world" to be tuned in) can engage these disparate efforts in publishing is through the economic model of the subscription. Such practical publishing features, in my argument, qualify and challenge other local, national, regional, or hemispheric collectivisms that may be at work within *El Corno Emplumado*'s pages. In issue 7, the two-hundred numbered pages of the journal are likewise generically diverse, containing artwork, letters, advertisements, and of course, poetry.

In addition to selections of ungrouped poetry in English and/or Spanish, issue 7 publishes three nationally-defined groupings: *Poesía Nadaísta de Colombia* [Colombian Nadaist Poetry], *Poesía de Nicaragua*, and *Poesía de Cuba*. Contrary to a claim made by Clay and Phillips, issue 7 does not, in fact, "[print] English translations of...a generation of new Cuban writers" (147). Instead, in the twenty-four pages set aside for the poetry of Cuba, issue 7 prints work by fourteen male authors, each of whose work appears in its original language.¹⁵ The section, *Poesía de*

¹⁵ The complete list of Cuban authors is as follows: Fidel Castro Ruz, Nicolás Guillén, Region Pedroso, Cintio Vitier, José Lezama Lima, Eliseo Diego, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Fayad Jamis, Heberto Padilla, Pablo Armando Fernández, Marc Schleifer, Marco Antonio Glores, Miguel Barnet, and Antón Arrufat.

Cuba, is only bi-lingual in the sense that it has one poem written originally in English, Marc Shleifer's "Juan Pedro Carbo Servia Running Thru the Palace Gate," whereas the rest of the texts appear untranslated in Spanish. If *El Corno*'s assumption of a bi-lingual readership is a refreshing break from the monoglot offerings of other modernist little magazines appealing to global anglophone audiences, then the journal's graphic design reminds us of 50s and 60s American countercultural sensibility. Even in the section *Poesia de Cuba*, one encounters the little magazine mainstay of found art, this time in the form of reprinted, fortune-telling, tarot cards, in addition to an abstract black-and-white painting reminiscent of work by American painter Franz Kline (1910-1962), by California artist Raymond Barrio. Graphically, the journal resembles higher-end publications from the American Beat and San Francisco Renaissance literary movements. One unexpected entry, however, is the first text one finds in the section *Poesia de Cuba*: Fidel Castro Ruz's "Palabras a los Intelectuales."

Castro's "Palabras a los Intelectuales" appears out of place within a section comprising poetry, particularly so given that prose typically finds a home at the end of issues of *El Corno Emplumado*. The editors reprinted this speech, originally delivered in June 1961, as a *fragmento*, a heavy-handed editorial operation priming the text for publication. Insofar as the excerpted "Palabras" speech begins this section and makes certain claims for the role of writing and art within the Revolution, it serves as a framing text for the poetry that follows—an artistic manifesto that orients readers in the manner that the later section title, *Poesía Nadaísta de Colombia*, promises aesthetic coherence. Outside the pages of *El Corno Emplumado*, the speech itself is anything but a literary text. Issued during the Year of Education, it is a troubling document described by Mark Weiss as "a long chilling justification of censorship and a series of slightly veiled threats" (13). Even within the excerpted text, one reads the specious division

between artistic “libertad formal [formal freedom]” and “libertad de contenido [freedom of content],” with the first of these freedoms being guaranteed and the second a matter of discussion (38). Castro arrives at the less-than-reassuring conclusion that “[The Revolution should only renounce those who are incorrigibly reactionary, who are incorrigibly counterrevolutionaries]” (40).¹⁶ The autotelic mandate through which the Revolution renounces those it deems counterrevolutionaries by way of its own assessment leads to the excerpted *Palabras*’s inevitable proclamation: “[What are the rights of revolutionary or non-revolutionary writers and artists? Within the Revolution, all; against the Revolution, no rights]” (40).¹⁷ This is where the editors chose to cut the speech. The historical speech carries on from here, but my focus is on this text’s double framing function within issue 7 of *El Corno Emplumado*.

I maintain that the placement of “Palabras a los Intelectuales” within the section *Poesía de Cuba* does not miscategorize the text, but instead reveals the susceptibility to which the accelerated discourse of the Revolution lay open to commodification for global consumption. Castro’s speech both directs Cuban artists and poets and advertises the unity between artist and state in Cuba. Two complementary trends converge within the journal’s framing of this speech as a type of poetry. One is the discourse that portrays Castro and the Revolution as poetic; the other is the discourse that stretches literary genres to include Revolutionary texts. To recall, it was Castro himself who initiated the discourse by which the Revolution could be imagined as poetry: “the intellectual author of this revolution is José Martí, the apostle of our independence” (Gott

¹⁶ The Spanish reads, “Revolucion solo debe renunciar a aquellos que sean incorregiblemente reaccionarios, que sean incorregiblemente contrarrevolucionarios” (40). Translation mine.

¹⁷ “¿cuáles son los derechos de los escritores y de los artistas revolucionarios o no revolucionarios? Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución ningún derecho” (40). Translation mine.

149-50). That said, members of the loosely grouped, international network of Beat poets beyond Randall and Mondragón also contributed to Castro's authorial mystique.

One telling encounter is recorded in American poet Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones) 1961 *Cuba Libre*. In *Cuba Libre*, a short, travelogue that Todd F. Tietchen classifies as a Cubalogue, an "explicitly political subgenre of Beat travel narrative," Baraka relates his firsthand experience of the early days of the Revolution in Cuba (2). Funded by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, which Margaret Randall among others endorsed, Baraka's trip to Cuba is characterized throughout *Cuba Libre* as excessively uncomfortable. He frequently remarks on his thirst or the heat, but he is made most uncomfortable when poets allied with the revolutionary government critique the scope and political goals of his American poetry. Over a series of exchanges, Baraka typifies his attitude toward poetry with a self-quotation: "I'm a poet...what can I do? I write, that's all, I'm not even interested in politics" (2). This statement and the attitude it characterizes are met with disgust wherever Baraka goes. In Havana a poet calls him "a cowardly bourgeois individualist," and another poet, Jaime Shelley, screams at Baraka, "we've got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of" (2). If within the revolution, by decree and popular understanding, poetry and politics are to work in tandem, as these encounters suggest, then it is little wonder that Baraka's eventual face-to-face encounter with Fidel Castro should further collapse these categories. According to Baraka, he met Castro on stage during an all-day political rally and celebration in which farmers were apportioned "land under the Agrarian Reform Law" (7). He is introduced to Castro and asks, "What did [Castro] intend to do with this revolution" (8). Baraka records the response: "'That is a poet's question,' he said, 'and the only poet's answer I can give you is that I will do what I think is right, what I think the people want. That's the best I can hope for, don't you think?'" (8).

Elsewhere, Baraka expresses the scintillating effects of Castro's patterns of speech—enough to make crowds delight “for about twenty minutes crying ‘Venceremos’”—but this quotation comes off a bit flat-footed (10). The salient feature is that the entire exchange inverts the expected roles of its interlocutors. Baraka leads with a political question, but Castro attributes it to poetry and, allegedly, responds *as* a poet. Anticipated by the revolutionary poets' reactions to Baraka's political apathy, Castro and Baraka's exchange certifies for the reader the compatibility between the revolutionary government's political sensibilities and its endorsement of poetry, even at the highest level. In other words, poetry benefitted directly from whatever momentum the revolution enjoyed. In the estimate of poet Harmony Holiday, the events *Cuba Libre* portrays left a mark on Baraka, as “[w]hat's different post-Cuba is that LeRoi Jones is militant now and armed with Marxist ideology...He now understands class struggle and how the concept of race blinds many to the tyranny of class within Monopoly Capitalism.” This transformation is also supported by Rafael Rojas argument that “[t]he Cuban Revolution radicalized Jones intellectually and politically, opening him to the world of Afro-Caribbean literature through the poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire” (204). While this is appreciable historically, I think the content of this exchange demonstrates in real-time how Castro came to appeal to poets more broadly.

I introduce this episode from *Cuba Libre* to establish a precedent for the enthusiastic and favorable reception of the revolution's ideology within the very international artistic community to which both Baraka and the editors of *El Corno Emplumado* belonged. I suggest accounting for this enthusiasm when reading the re-printed and redacted “Palabras a los Intelectuales.” The text's final words may signify to us an arbitrary and draconian apportionment of human rights on the basis of literary interpretation, but to editors and readers of *El Corno Emplumado*, they also

signified an endorsement of the subsequent poems, the authenticating imprimatur of the revolution issued from its very source. Following the associations Castro and Baraka put forth, the text itself belongs within the section *Poesía de Cuba*—poetic because political. The stamp of authentication and the expansion of the genre aids publishers in transmitting, or exporting, Cuban poetry as a commodity, an object fit for exchange. All the better that there was an international audience eager to read, or at least own, these poems. Accelerated poetry, I argue, moves rapidly through publication practices condensing and expressing a poetic and political message for which a certain international audience was eager.

There is certainly aesthetic diversity within the Cuban poems collected in *El Corno Emplumado*'s issue 7. However, there is a remarkable coincidence to be found between the poems that explicitly engage the revolutionary government's ideals and historical figures and those that employ the signifying patterns of accelerated poetry that I identified in Guillén's "Unión Soviética." Two of Guillén's poems appear immediately after "Palabras a los Intelectuales" in issue 7, but I will focus on other poets instead. To illustrate the compatibility between the form of the journal and those poems that orient themselves toward the future in which they will be received, I analyze Regino Pedroso's "Y Lo Nuestro Es la Tierra," Fayid Jamís's "Por Esta Libertad," and Marc Shleifer's "Juan Pedro Carbo Servia Running thru the Palace Gate."

Regino Pedroso (1896-1983) was a poet who received governmental accolades and appointments on both sides of the Cuban Revolution. As Huei Lan Yen records, Pedroso, a Cuban of Chinese and African decent, won the *Primio Nacional de Poesía de la Secretaria de Educación* in 1939, and under the Revolution, was named the Cuban cultural advisor to Mexico in 1959 and China in 1962 (49-50). His state sponsorships further distress the distinctions

between artists and political agents, and they also demonstrate his national and international commitments. Pedroso has one poem in issue 7, “Y Lo Nuestro es la Tierra [And Ours is the Earth],” and it rings with revolutionary promise and a sustained resistance to U.S. imperialism [See Appendix A].

The poem apparently takes its title, “And Ours is the Earth,” from Rudyard Kipling’s 1895 poem, “If—”: “Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, / And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!” The first line departs from the literary antecedent, firmly establishing the poem within U.S. and Cuban context, commanding its readers, “[Leave them with their dollars, their bills, and their Wall Street]” (43). Wall Street metonymically references America and the capitalists who live there. The poem rebukes Americans, claiming that their “[gods were always deaf to our complaints];” their ill-gotten “[luxury is borrowed],” or on loan; and “[they are dressed with our misery]” (43). In resistance to the impoverishing, personified effects of American imperialism, Pedroso imagines a different wealth. His fellow Cubans, “[are also rich],” and can claim for themselves in the polysyndetonic grammatical pattern established in the title (“Y lo nuestro...”), “[the immense forge of the sun / and the song of the hammer / and the great tapestry of the sea, embroidered with fish / and the combined strength of the workshop and the factory]” (43). Laden with metaphor, this list comprises the revolutionary government’s industrial promise. More abstractly, the poem adds on, “[And ours, / is the pain of those who suffer and hope!]” (43). Yet, it is at this point, around halfway through the poem, that a shift in tense to the future characteristic of accelerated poetry brings to the fore the limitations presaged by the poem’s title.

The poem’s alternative visions of wealth begin to resemble the familiar symbols of capitalism and the fervors of imperialism. Displacing “[the pain of those who suffer and hope],”

the poem promises that “[The great days will come / like new coins rolling into our life, / and then our hands will be filled with joy!]” (43). The simile that likens the future, the great days to come, to money, turns into a metaphor where overflowing coins are a vehicle for joy. Echoing the title, the poem claims for itself the land, a symbol for agrarian production, “[And ours is the immense land, all / ripened by longings and flowered by twilights]” (43). Claiming undifferentiated land, here primed for exploitation, mimics the historical, imperial interest in the region for agricultural development. This heedless similarity takes a historical turn in the final strophe. Signifiers of the Soviet Union—the hammer (“el martillo”), the workshop, and the factory (“taller y la fábrica”)—appear earlier in the poem. In its concluding tercet, the work of a sickle (“la gran hoz”) accurately reflects the Cuban-Soviet trade agreement. The poem ends with a note of optimism, “[And ours / is the great sickle of the wind, / that in the morning is reaping bunches of the future!]” (43). Here, Pedrosó, like the revolutionary government itself, binds Cuba’s future to the exploitative Soviet interest in the nation and its land’s agricultural yield. Worse yet, he mistakes the reaping sickle as Cuba’s property. The problems that stemmed from extending Cuba’s historic monocultural sugar economy indefinitely grew worse with time, but as Richard Gott notes it was not without its criticism from the start: “The return to sugar remained a subject of debate. Some believed, as Guevara had done, that it was a historic error. Others concluded that the forced redirection of Cuba’s sugar trade from the US to the Soviet Union gave the island ‘an historical reprieve’ by substituting an expanding export market for a shrinking one” (242). Organized into, “bunches of the future,” Cuba’s crop is transformed into a commodity exchangeable for Soviet petroleum, here absent because yet-to-be-imported. This poem’s economic error is that of the revolutionary government. In the name of resisting the local manifestations of American imperialism, it makes no provision for possible exploitation under

global capitalism. As I am arguing, we can see in the poem's grammar and means of dissemination complementary structures that subject it to broader market determinations.

In fact, Cuba had its own institutions for authorizing and spreading revolutionary literatures. Studying minoritized novelists from the Global North who “turned to the Global South’s prose style and epistemology of *lo real maravilloso* monumentalized by the Gabriel García Márquez and the Cuban Revolution to transform their visions of history writing in the novel,” José David Saldívar argues that “the constructing of alternative versions of (literary) history...related to a desire to transform a narrow Anglo-American-centric concept of literary tradition and the linear view of history on which it was predicated” (137). For Saldívar, the Casa de las Américas Prize, founded in Havana in 1959, played an invaluable role in this process, transforming Havana into “an alternative artistic and cultural (not only political) capital for the region” (137). While the prize always had distinct genre categories, Saldívar reflects on the institution’s power to shape what work certain genres should perform. Ventriloquizing the prize’s judges, he muses, “Was the testimonio, they wondered, not a hipper, more revolutionary genre, made all the more so when Che won the inaugural prize for his testimonio *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War, 1956-58*, and more recently when Rigoberta Menchú, the Guatemalan Mayan activism won it with her riveting and provocative *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú: Y así me nació mi consciencia?*” (139). Of this privileged Latin American genre, Patricia DeRocher convincingly argues, “testimonio is nothing less than a hybrid textual praxis for those who use the written word as cultural weapons to rearrange well-worn bourgeois narratives and replace them with radical social visions of justice for all” (16). However, just as *El Corno Emplumado* played its part in shaping what constituted Cuban poetry for an international readership, Saldívar’s work reminds us of the role that the premier Cuban literary institution

played in priming literary exports for the market. The organization, Casa de las Américas, “was created as a way to continue an intercultural exchange with the Américas and the planet in the face of the U.S. blockade of everything Cuban” (Saldívar 229). In issue 7, we encounter in Fayad Jamis’s “Por Esta Libertad [For this Freedom]” a poem endorsed by Casa de las Américas and *El Corno Emplumado* alike.

Fayad Jamís (1930-1988) has two poems in *El Corno Emplumado* issue 7. One of these, “Por Esta Libertad,” is the titular poem from his 1962 collection that won the Casa de las Américas poetry prize in the year it was published. Jamís’s biographical note at the back of the journal includes a reference to this fact as well as stating that he “today works for the newspaper ‘Hoy’” (186). The Spanish version of his biography elaborates on this detail including a clause, “Acualmente integrado a la *Revolucion* trabaja en el diario *Hoy*. [Currently integrated into the *Revolución*, he works at the newspaper *Hoy*]” (181). In 1965, the newspapers *Revolución*, “the official Castro Newspaper from 1959 until 1965,” and *Hoy* would fully merge to form *Granma*, “the pre-eminent voice of the Communist Party” that is still running in 2021 (Carty Jr. and Terry 61-2). Taken together, Jamís’s Casa de las Américas prize and his newspaper work demonstrate his, like Regino Pedroso’s, compatibility with the ideology of the revolutionary government. This public endorsement is worth underscoring, because his poem, “Por Esta Libertad,” could easily present an unflattering version of the party’s demands, yet it may be more informative to understand how the poem ultimately serves the party’s aims.

Jamís takes the title for “Por esta Libertad [For this freedom]” from the refrain clause that structures the poem. The poet cites a number of freedoms that he observes around him. Sometimes, these freedoms are metaphorical abstractions, including “la noche de los opresores [the nighttime of the oppressors]” and “el imperio de la juventud [the empire of the youth].”

Other times, the freedom is located within a more concrete image, as in the opening line, “Por esta libertad de canción bajo a lluvia [For this freedom of song beneath the rain].” In either case, the freedoms exact their toll as the repeated clause is paired with the individuated, sobering line “habrá que darlo todo [we will have to give everything].” The resulting construction, “[For this freedom...we will have to give everything],” distorts the implied immediacy of the poem’s deictic reference point of “this” into a reminder of a debt to be paid, in perpetuity. The poem’s final four lines make this clear:

habrá que darlo todo
 si fuere necesario
 hasta la sombra
 y nunca será suficiente
 [we will have to give everything
 whatever necessary
 unto the darkness
 and it will never be enough]. (55)

Ransoming a vague, protean freedom for an arduous and indefinite expenditure of effort rhymes too well with the historic promise of the Spanish *encomienda* system to ignore. As Gott emphasizes, in the sixteenth century, Ferdinand of Aragón promised early settlers lands, and “to do with that property as they please, freely and independently,” in exchange for four years labor (17). In practice, however, without a ready supply of white labor, settlers enslaved the Indigenous population to satisfy Ferdinand’s terms. To understand how this poem’s vision of freedom could be construed as anything other than an historically untenable nightmare of debt and domination, we need only recall two previously mentioned strains of revolutionary thought.

On the one hand, Benitez-Rojo reminds us of the Revolution's "politics of frugality" that would gain momentum throughout the decade (139). On the other hand, Castro's totalizing vision of artistic *libertad* as communicated within "Palabras a los Intelectuales" stipulates that freedom results from active participation within the ongoing revolution. Joining these propagandistic threads commits the poem to the economic and political vision of the revolution. This vision, as I have been arguing, perpetuated the imbalances in historic, agricultural labor relations for the sake of Cuban resistance to the U.S., even when such resistance meant Cuban exploitation for the practical necessity of Soviet oil.

Like Pedrosa's "Y Lo Nuestro es la Tierra," Jamís's poem employs familiar symbols from the Soviet Union. The industrialized factory reappears in one particularly jumbled image complex: "Por esta libertad de girasol abierto en el alba de fábricas / encendidas y escuelas iluminadas / y de tierra que cruje y niño que despierta/ habrá que darlo todo," which Jotamario Arbeláez and Frederic Will helpfully translate as "for this freedom of an opened sunflower in the dawn of / factories / lighted and illuminated schools, / and of land that cracks and a child that awakes / we have to give everything" (108). The naturalized, botanical factories and the incandescent schools give a romantic conception of industrialization, but the figure of "tierra que cruje [land that cracks/creaks]" departs, offering instead a distressed landscape that befits the overused fields from either the agricultural or the petroleum industry. Even more specifically, "cracking" sonically recalls handling and processing of sugar cane, a hard, fibrous substance. The strophe's final lines refuse any alternative to the arrangement of liberty for exhaustion: "there is no alternative but freedom / there is no other road than freedom / there is no other country than freedom / there will be no more poem [(“poema”)] without the violent music of freedom" (Arbeláez and Will 108). The parallel construction of these lines situates liberty at the

extreme end, deferring it as long as possible. The final line uses the same verb and tense as the provocative repeated line, “habrá que darlo todo,” but this time in a negation. To rewrite the line as a positive claim, the future only has poems with “the violent music of freedom” (Arbeláez and Will 108). Here, the poem becomes as much an artistic manifesto as “Palabras a los Intelectuales,” prescribing a type of permissible poem within the confines of its own ideology. The poem goes on to state that its version of freedom “is the terror / of those who have always violated it / in the name of luxurious miseries,” condemning the history of Cuban exploitation that it comes to mirror (Arbeláez and Will 108). Until this point, however, it would be difficult to substantiate the idea that the music of freedom should be violent. The only prior representation of music, that of the first line’s “freedom of song beneath the rain,” is pleasant and unthreatening. The only image in the opening strophe that approaches violent music is the “land that cracks,” an ominous sign within an image complex signifying the freedom of consumption that comes from abundance (108). If this poem demonstrates the revolutionary government’s vision of its future, it also possesses the same blind spots.

The final poem worth considering in order to understand how poetry of the revolution worked within *El Corno Emplumado* issue 7 to satisfy a wider market hungry for such exports is “Juan Pedro Carbo Servia Running Thru the Palace Gate” by Marc Schleifer (b. 1935). Schleifer, who would later change his name to Sulayman Abdallah Sharif Shleifer, was, along with Amiri Baraka and other Beats, a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. He wrote extensively on the Cuban revolution, and “shared [Allen] Ginsberg’s and Jones’s support for vanguard culture within the American leftist imaginary, but also expressed more open support for the Cuban Revolution’s socialist ideological orientation” (Rojas 201). Baraka also served on the editorial board for Schleifer’s *Kulchur* magazine. The biographical note for Schleifer at the back of *El*

Corno Emplumado issue 7 works overtime to connect this New York Beat poet to Cuba's terra firma. The note provides the detail that Schleifer is a "North American," no mere American, "who went to Cuba to work (in the city and in the fields) just after the revolution. He spent two years there before returning to New York and sent us this poem while still in Havana" (186). The note reads as though it procataleptically answers the question of why Schleifer's poem should be included in the section *Poesía de Cuba*. The Spanish version of his biographical note is different enough to warrant analysis. In this version, he is still "un norteamericano," but now "al triunfo de la Revolución se trasladó a Cuba donde trabajó como campesino, y más tarde filmó algunos cortos en La Habana [at the triumph of the Revolution he moved to Cuba where he worked as a *campesino*, and later filmed some short films in Havana]" (181). Whereas, in the English version, the revolution is a historical point of reference, in the Spanish version, it prompts Schleifer's relocation. Furthermore, the designation of *campesino*, a peasant farmer, appeals to the revolutionary discourse that champions rural, agricultural labor. His involvement in Havana's cinema also signals solidarity with the revolutionary government, implying their approval. The editorial framing of Schleifer can also be seen in a pair of sentences relating to his New York-based magazine *Kulchur*. In English, Schleifer "founded and edited the first issues of the political-literary magazine *Kulchur*" (186). In Spanish, he "fundó la revista literaria y política *Kulchur*, de marcada tendencia izquierdista, totalmente escrita por poetas [founded the literary and political magazine *Kulchur*, of a markedly leftist tendency, written entirely by poets]" (181). Notwithstanding stories by prose writer Fielding Dawson as early as 1962, what stands out from the characterization of *Kulchur* as "markedly leftist" and "written entirely by poets" is the repeated editorial insistence that poetry (as practiced within the network of the Beats that includes Schleifer, Randall, and Baraka) and revolutionary activities are compatible with one

another. Beat writers' fascination with Cuba stands to prompt a reevaluation of what exactly made the Beats countercultural at all. *El Corno Emplumado*'s efforts to position Schleifer and *Kulchur* within the revolutionary government's framework expand that journal's more narrow, nationalized boundaries. Rafael Rojas observes a broader representational pattern that might explain this obsessive reconciliation:

the translation of the Cuban revolutionary experience in the work of New York intellectuals in fact downplayed Cuba's status as a border community. Both those who defended and those who rejected communism in the Caribbean treated the revolution as a US domestic drama, a fact all the more striking given the drama in question constituted the very definition of an international and transnational event symbolized by the construction of the Berlin Wall. (7)

Schleifer's stint in Cuba redounds on the politico-aesthetic merit of his poetry and his publication, *Kulchur*. There is very little that either of these give back to Cuba in exchange. Instead, the editors of *El Corno Emplumado* reaffirmed their connection to the American Beats through Schleifer, even if it means distorting the category of Cuban poetry. Through the international context of *El Corno Emplumado*'s network and Schleifer's uneasy placement within *Poesía de Cuba*, a discourse more representative of the "international and transnational" scope of the revolution, as observed by Rojas, takes shape.

"Juan Pedro Carbo Servia Running Thru the Palace Gate" memorializes the Revolutionary fighter-cum-martyr named in its title. Ostensibly, the poem leans into its American Beat sensibility, celebrating Servia's "pothead poetry" and in so doing casting this revolutionary figure as a poet (60). The poem refers to the police as "Havana's fuzz," and apostrophizes Servio with a popular Beat glyph, "Yr a cool one, Carbo" (60). The poem begins

in the present: “Juan Pedro Carbo Servia / running thru the Palace Gate / yours is a futurist beauty / that found itself / alley-trussed by a hundred bullets” (60). While any number of elegies aestheticize their subject’s death, attributing to a bullet-ridden corpse “a futurist beauty” strains the project. The poem, in fact, does not do much to elevate the reader’s opinion of Juan Pedro Carbo Servia, as he is described in only the most generic and touristic terms. The poet’s apostrophes place Servia into ready-made scenes; such as, “you’d have a 3 cent coffee / in the streets,” or “Yr a cool one, Carbo / sitting in hotel lobbies” (60). But just like the poems I have been considering characteristic of accelerated poetry, Schleifer’s poem turns at the end to the future, inscribed within a metaphor. After the uninspiring first strophe, the poem imagines the world to come as it concludes,

No statues now, Carbo
 100 years
 safe in a communist world
 when the state has withered
 there will be gardens of love
 for you
 roses, dreamy lakes
 perfumes of a new race. (60)

In this metaphor, the descriptions of gardens operate as the frame with the words “love” and “race” serving as the foci that bear the burden of metaphor and deviate from more standard uses of language. The word they stand in for, *flower(s)*, participates in the familiar botanical, romantic portrayal of life under the revolutionary regime. Just as the revolutionary Cuba’s economic future was tied to Cuba’s land and what it could produce, here, the death of Juan Pedro Carbo

Servia finds its justification in the future prosperity of plants, an economic and poetic order even by then preciously outdated.

Here, accelerated poetry arises out of the joint efforts of poets and publishers to create a product fit for the market and for a readership who expected politics with their poetry. The turn toward futurity and the loss of distinction achieved by metaphor serve as the aesthetic features through which the poem anticipates its life-to-come as a commodity defined by exchange. As we have seen, resulting from U.S.-Cuban antagonisms negotiated through the oil and sugar industries, the future of the revolutionary government required Soviet intervention so that Cuba could continue to participate in the global economy and access oil. Both poets and politicians failed to imagine the unsustainable consequences of this arrangement, and poetry, through and as metaphor, helped alleviate the burden of recognition.

It is a fitting if tragic irony that *El Corno Emplumado*'s international reach should capture in issue 7 a prophetic utterance for the Cuban predicament. Separated from the Cuban poetry by national boundaries and section headings, Beltrán Morales (1945-1986), 18 years old at the time, found a home for his poem "Petroleum" in the section *Poesía de Nicaragua* [See Appendix B]. This poem unleashes a startling vision of a world decimated by oil. Planes (historically, American-made) fueled by petroleum scorch "ciudades [cities]" and rural "pueblos [villages]" along with the "trigales [wheat fields]" (136). In this poem's associative chain, oil prevents agriculture as "miles [thousands]" of farmers cannot "tomar un solo puño de tierra, porque / no había tierra; y aun cuando: sin dedos, /es imposible tomar nada con las manos [take a single fistful of land, because / there was no land; and even if there were: without fingers, / it's impossible to take anything with your hands]" (136). Here, the destruction wrought by oil disfigures both the land and the workers. The poem sarcastically reminds the reader that "el

petróleo trabaja por la paz [oil works for peace],” citing the oil “abundancia [wealth]” of the Allies that enabled them to defeat the Axis powers in World War II. The poem then begins its critique of “el mundo libre [the free world]” (136). Through parenthetical interjection, the literary figure of tmesis, Morales once again reminds the reader that the Allies included “Rusia Comunista / aliada desde luego al mundo libre [Communist Russia / allied of course to the free world]” (136). The poem, which observes the history of U.S. violence in the region and sees fit to mention Russian interest in the free world, ends with a question: “quién / nos libraré de los aliados? / [who / will free us of the Allies?]” (136). This ending casts further doubt on freedom, a privileged term for the free world, the free market, and revolutionary discourse, and rhetorically, it does not provide a romantic vision of the future, declining any utopian idealism. The poem puts its question to the reader, denying the pleasures of imagistic closure. Elaborate, often metonymic, association, tmesis, and a resistance to abstract futurity are some of the hallmarks of the enterprise that I will designate slow poetry, a mode of poetry that may offer a corrective to accelerated poetry.

The next time *El Corno Emplumado* so prominently featured Cuban poetry was in issue 23, from July 1967, four years after issue 7, and also published in the historic month of the Cuban revolution. In the interim, *El Corno Emplumado* grew its worldwide distribution network, a fact that a glance at the back covers of issues 7 and 23 reveals. In 1963, issue 7 marks prices for international consumption in four currencies: “\$12.50 m.n. / \$1 U.S. argentina \$50 uruguay \$10.” In 1967, issue 23, represents fourteen currencies, having expanded through Latin America and now including European and Australian pricings.¹⁸ Issue 23 advertises its contents on the

¹⁸ The full pricing information runs: “Argentina: 150 pesos / Australia: 7 / 6 / Brasil: 1000 cruzeiros / Costa Rica: 5.50 Colones / Chile: 2 escudos / Ecuador: 10 sucres / Guatamala: 80

front cover with a colorful illustration of Cuban barbudos by Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg that prominently incorporates the words “Poesía Cubana.” Unlike issue 7, issue 23 contains a bi-lingual editors’ statement that helps us understand how they imagined *El Corno Emplumado*’s cultural work.

In condemnation of the American blockade of Cuba, the editors in issue 23 write, “*El Corno Emplumado* is a literary magazine and the economic blockade must be left to those more qualified to cope with that particular lunacy” (6). While I have been arguing that *El Corno Emplumado* can be considered an economic institution, this stance of non-involvement might be taken to express *El Corno Emplumado*’s desire for autonomy amongst the preponderance of global dynamics manifesting as the blockade. The editors’ reliance on the blockade when constructing a metaphor for publishing speaks to such a desire. They write,

...we propose, with this issue, to ‘break’ the cultural blockade... We offer some two dozen poets (from the provinces as well as the capital, and in bi-lingual selection), several of the country’s best artists, the Cuban attitude towards the Latin American Intellectual (in the recent declaration from Habana) as well as letters and notes from the editors’ lived experiences within the revolution. (6)

From their privileged position in Mexico City, the editors could supply readers in the United States with otherwise unobtainable literature. In this way, the economic blockade and the cultural blockade could conceivably combine to benefit the journal insofar as it is exempt from the former and offering a solution to the latter.

The distribution history of issue 23 also contains a detail that complicates representing *El Corno Emplumado* as a Pan-Latin American publication. As Margaret Randall recalls in her memoir, *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba*, upon publishing issue 23, the editors immediately received a telephone call from Rafael Squirru, the Argentine poet who headed the Organization of American States's cultural branch, the Pan American Union. He was upset we'd provided a forum for Cuban letters and threatened to cancel the five hundred subscriptions the Union had recently purchased. We refused to stop publishing Cuban artists. The Pan American Union canceled its subscriptions. (15)

That the OAS, headquartered in Washington D.C., scorned the entire journal on the basis of Cuban inclusion in issue 23, culminating in subscription cancellations, reminds us that within the Latin American literary world there were different conceptions of unity, with Cuba serving as a point of contestation. U.S. cultural imperialism and anxieties around Cuba extended through the OAS, manifesting in the economic retaliation of cancelled subscriptions. Because of the international entanglements throughout Latin America and the diversity of cultures represented by the term, it is difficult to distinguish between the economic blockade and the cultural blockade such as they affected the journal.

This complex political terrain of Latin America is addressed within the pages of issue 23 in the expression of "the Cuban attitude towards the Latin American intellectual (in the recent declaration from Habana)" mentioned in the editors' statement (6). At the back of the magazine, in both Spanish and English, the "Declaration by the Contributing Editors, *Casa De Las Americas Magazine*," warns of "the recent Northamerican offensive [sic] on the cultural level, designed to neutralize our intellectuals, divide them or win them over to their side" (133). In this declaration, the higher ideals of art—"the nourishment of the future" and "cultural exchange"—

are made impossible as a result of the material conditions of oppression “under the fist of Northamerican [sic] imperialism, native oligarquies [sic] and the blackmail of highly industrialized nations” (135 137). Despite the declaration’s consistent reference point of Latin America, it ends with an unexpected and global call to action:

The present situation creates the need for a great general assembly in which exchange of experiences among the writers of Latin America could take place. And in addition to the writers of Latin America, we feel that Asian and African writers would profit by inclusion, for beyond the differences of language and cultural background, we all share a similar situation. (137)

The “similar situation,” the interventions and distortions of industrialized nations, supersedes the organizing effects of nationalism, regionalism, language, and culture (137). In this way, the contributing editors to *Casa De Las Americas*, the official publication of the eponymous Cuban cultural institution, including Margaret Randall herself, arrive at an artistic-political vision entirely complimentary to the form of an international magazine: a global network of artistic belonging.

In terms of the marks of signification that define the revolutionary Beat axiology, issue 23 would receive the highest honor. Margaret Randall recounts her 1968 introduction to Fidel Castro: “Fidel turned and said: ‘Oh, Margaret Randall. I’ve read your *Corno Emplumado*, a very fine magazine. The issue devoted to Cuban poetry was wonderful’” (*To Change the World* 30). The revolutionary government, apparently, subscribed. Like issue 7, issue 23 displays enough aesthetic diversity to prevent a singular reading of the poetic content alone; however, it gains particular legibility through framing mechanisms, such as the cover art, editorial prose, and this recovered anecdote, that align the journal with revolutionary ideology. Like the two quatrains

from Martí's *Simple Poetry* that began this chapter, one untitled poem by Cuban poet—and student of Nicolás Guillén—Nancy Morejón (b. 1944) in issue 23 affords a glimpse of the two aesthetic modes of poetry that I seek to develop. The poem is set in Havana and divided into two sections separated by a caesura. Translated by Tim Reynolds, the poem ends with the familiar tropes of accelerated poetry. Two apostrophic lines, “oh dreams oh sweetness of face / oh words like traces of love,” designate *love* as the vehicle for the concluding metaphor (83). The rain that recurs throughout the poem becomes love (“plunged in the roofs in / the fingers / in the grass”) in the final section, and the last line turns (literally, “dará vuelta,” in the original Spanish) toward the future, when, personified, “love will walk about across my bones” (83).

The poem's first section, however, is not only written in the present tense, but its sense of the present is reinforced by direct description of the surroundings complemented by the temporal pacing of walking and observing. Unlike many of the poems considered up to this point that seem to flourish within a romantically generic scene of nature, a parenthetical attribution, “(de *Amor Ciudad Atribuida*, La Habana, 1964),” explains that the poem first appeared in Morejón's collection *Amor Ciudad Atribuida*, and helps locate the text in Havana. Curiously, when preparing his translation for dissemination within *El Corno Emplumado*, Tim Reynolds omitted this attribution, effectively generalizing the poem and erasing its original publication information. At the beginning of the poem, the rain oscillates between recognizable and abstract:

the water goes
 —the street trembling in the rain—
 as though it crosses the stone of centuries
 and goes as though it went to install
 some new diety [sic]

some magnanimous prize. (83)

The rain innervates the city. It animates the street through an intrusive, tmetic break. Rain may well fall upon a street and tumble across stones, but rarely outside of a poem does it establish “some magnanimous prize,” an activity more befitting a literary institution. The rain is brought into non-abstract likeness with the poet as the poet enters, soaking wet, into the city, proclaiming “I come across the skin of the old city / and am drenched in thirst” (83). The poet and the rain continue to go together through the street, which the poet details: “with my legs I walk on it / the liquid runs / takes communion with the simple man / street work / to embrace the forever” (83). Here, the future, “the forever,” is not represented by a grammatical shift and a promise, but placed alongside a series of objects:

street work

to embrace the forever

and later big houses

bricks bread broken crusts

let’s go. (83)

The objects, “big houses / bricks / bread / broken crusts,” are separated on the page from the abstract conception of “the forever” by a large, intervening space. This first section concludes with the poet’s Eliotic urging to herself, the reader, and the rain that clings to her, “let’s go” (83). This strong sense of the material present, echoed in the poetic breaks, forestalls the rush to the future so crucial to accelerated poetry. In this way, it offers a break from the ever-anticipatory, speculative mode of petro-modernity, culminating in a slower poetry.

In Praise of Slowness

No consideration of Cuban economic history and the popular imagination would be complete without reference to the work of Cuban historian and essayist Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969). Ortiz worked through his writings to assert the importance of Indigenous and Black populations in Cuban history. In his seminal text, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Ortiz uses the figures of tobacco and sugar to understand the different modes and rhythms of Cuban cultural change. Ortiz's expresses his view of historical change rhythmically writing, "Among all peoples historical evolution has always meant a vital change from one culture to another at tempos varying from gradual to sudden" (98-9). Ortiz presents the colonization of Cuba and genocide of Indigenous peoples as one such moment of vital change:

At one bound the bridge between the drowsing stone ages and the wide-awake Renaissance was spanned. In a single day various of the intervening ages were crossed in Cuba; one might say thousands of 'culture years,' if such a measurement were admissible in the chronology of peoples. If the Indies of America were a New World for the Europeans, Europe was a far newer world for the people of America. They were two worlds that discovered each other and collided head-on. The impact of the two on each other was terrible. One of them perished, as though struck by lightning. (99-100)

In this description, the change is immense, but what most characterizes the change, is, in fact the suddenness of its "tempo." Ortiz seems to struggle with the exact phrasing of how to express the suddenness of this encounter when he writes of the perceived developmental gap between the peoples, which he identifies as "thousands of 'culture years,' if such a measurement were admissible in the chronology of peoples" (100).

A similar suddenness of tempo pervades Ortiz's description of the Atlantic slave trade and its enslaved peoples: "They were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery. They arrived deracinated, wounded, shattered, like the cane of the fields, and like it they were ground and crushed to extract the juice of their labor" (101). In this description, the trade in enslaved African peoples collapses differences between populations all at once. In this passage, Ortiz also draws a comparison between the enslaved African peoples and the sugarcane they work. Relying on the chronotope of the sugar mill, Ortiz demonstrates the sudden brutality inflicted upon the enslaved workers who were "ground and crushed to extract the juice of their labor" (101). Ortiz uses the term *transculturation* to describe moments when cultures converge, for better or worse; but that he represents these two inestimably violent moments in Cuba's history, different though they are, as occurring at a tempo more sudden than gradual establishes both a theory of culture and a representational strategy at the same time. Due to the scope of Ortiz's project, its interest in the entirety of Cuban history and the means by which we represent it, tobacco and sugar operate throughout *Cuban Counterpoint* in ways that are both material and abstract.

Philosopher Héctor Hoyos revisits Ortiz and the complicated legacy of transculturation while developing his theory of transcultural materialism. Commenting on the texts he studies, for Hoyos, "Latin American literary and cultural interrogation of globalization—the accelerated, uneven flow of people and things—make the region a privileged site at which to theorize our times" (2). Once again, in Hoyos, we see suddenness, in "the accelerated, uneven flow of people and things," defining the Latin American manifestations of globalization. What Hoyos wants to recuperate from *Cuban Counterpoint* is the object-oriented, "narrative praxis" of transculturation

(10). For Hoyos, it may be true that “*Counterpoint* ‘counterfetishizes’ its title crops, in the sense that it reveals the social relations involved in their production and circulation,” but it is a mistake too frequently made by critics of Ortiz, to reduce tobacco and sugar to allegorical figures in a Marxist tale of historical materialism. Hoyos intervenes against this critical tendency:

if we accept the reductive reading, sugar and tobacco are excuses to refer to the broader, abstract problem. At best, when Ortiz goes into great detail about the specific botanical properties of plants, this amounts to digression; when he dresses them up and treats them as characters in a novel, the effect is embellishment. At worst, sugar is simply a stand-in for capitalism and tobacco for socialism, and transculturation is something of a third way.

(8)

As a corrective to “the reductive reading,” Hoyos stresses the agential properties of the plants themselves and their active role in shaping the world. In this way, Ortiz needed to develop a narrative practice to accommodate relationships between humans and nonhumans. Learning from Ortiz, Hoyos proposes a method for recognizing globalization in the Latin American context that he names *transcultural materialism*, that is “the noninstrumental use of stories and literary language to upset the nature-culture divide, affect our rapport with things, and reassess our place in human-nonhuman history” (13). With its object-oriented slant and its origin in the Latin American problems and manifestations of globalization, which includes the extraction and movement of petroleum, transcultural materialism provides a helpful vantage point to read the Cuban poetry herein considered.

Up to this point, I have argued that we can consider accelerated poetry and official revolutionary discourse complementary, through their historical entanglements and shared susceptibility to the representational patterns of petro-modernity. With transcultural materialism

in mind, oil takes a more active role in shaping our aesthetic and political discourses. The challenge of accounting for oil's ability to go unnoticed is the challenge of my project, and Timothy Mitchell also recognizes the challenge in his magisterial account of the co-development of modern democracy and the petroleum trade, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. Mitchell complains that too often "those who write about the question of the 'oil curse'... have little to say about the nature of oil and how it is produced, distributed and used. They discuss not the oil but the oil money" (1). Mitchell himself strains to think non-metaphorically about the politics of oil. In an epiphanic tone, Mitchell describes the compositional evolution of his book:

Initially, like everyone else, I thought of oil as one thing and democracy as another, and wanted to make better sense of why one seemed to be bad for the other. But after following the way the oil industry was built in the Middle East, as I traced the ways in which people had explored for oil, built pipelines and terminals, transformed the petroleum into forms of heat energy and transportation, converted the income from those processes into profits, and sought ways to circulate and govern those flows of money, it became increasingly clear that carbon energy and modern democratic politics were tied intricately together. Rather than a study of democracy and oil, it became a book about democracy *as* oil... (4-5)

There is something counterintuitive, perhaps, that the author, after immersing himself in the histories, material processes, and policies that shape the petroleum trade, should arrive at a metaphorical abstraction, comparatively devoid of specification. From a transcultural materialist standpoint, however, we can understand this turn toward the literary language of simile as one of the many overlapping human-oil interactions Mitchell cites. In his own words, the focus of

Mitchell's book changed in response to the study of oil. Recognizing this effect on the imagination is the speculative challenge confronting the transcultural materialist and the poet who would upset oil's influence. How does one clear space in the presence of oil's ubiquity?

Timothy Mitchell describes "the politics of the economy" that emerged in the twentieth century from the global petroleum trade as "de-natured;" that is "formed out of the dematerialized circulation of money, made possible partly by not having to count the cost of using energy or of using it up" and "the use of cornucopian techniques for representing the size of the world's energy reserves" (251). The representational strategies of easy flows and unlimited abundance that lose the human scale unfortunately appeal to critics of the oil industry too. Sourayan Mookerjea, when describing the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta dwells on the rapidness with which a site of oil extraction merges with the sense of the economy, as the tar sands join "another order of unlimited magnitudes, that of globalization" (325). With literary flourish, he represents the interlocking frames of oil and globalization as accelerating the mind: "It is at this point that Atlas's knees suddenly buckle and the ebb and flow of these spatial images abruptly crystalize into a thought of time, urgently calculating the years or decades before one or another finitude, of climate or culture or energy or environment or of them all, overtakes us" (326). Veering into the mode of what I have elsewhere called the petrochemical sublime, Mookerjea's nervous calculus renders anything human invisible, as his imagination considers inevitable and agentless these possible futures precipitated by patterns of global petroleum consumption.

Geoffrey Hartman saw clearly the overlap between the literary figure of metaphor and the erasure of human agency. He writes, "Human life, like a poetical figure, is an indeterminate middle between overspecified poles always threatening to collapse it" (251). In both cases, in

Hartman's appraisal, "The excluded middle is a tragedy also for the imagination" (251). If the globalized trade in petrochemicals and the imaginative effects of petroleum production both rely on eliding human and material elements, encapsulated in the fungibility of metaphor, then alternative representational strategies may avail us with ways of thinking outside of petroleum's world building project. For Hartman, the literary figure that most offsets the collapses inherent in metaphor is that of tmesis.

Tmesis, literary interjection, takes on new complexities in Hartman's assessment. Tmesis effectively emphasizes the suppressed middle of a metaphor or a phrase as it "splits a conventionally bonded phrase by means of an assertive middle term, creating stronger poles as well as intruding a strong middle" (249). Tmesis is intimately connected to "the function of silence, those zero values of juncture, elision, and decontraction which play so vast yet intangible a role in poetry" (246). The effect of tmesis, "best represented by a dash," is a "bursting in" that "gives extra value" to phonemes "which otherwise would have been slurred. The end terms are stressed...by their being distanced, crowded away from each other" (247). While Hartman's tmesis shoulders a heavy aesthetic burden, I propose that by reading for the dash, both figuratively and textually, we can recover some of the silences that persist through, even enable, globalized modernity and accelerated poetry. Reaching back to Hoyos's assessment of Ortiz, the literary project of giving voice to the silenced and agency to things while reestablishing the material bases for human life, enjoys its own rich history in Cuban writing. Under the circumstances of the Cuban Special Period, these aesthetic operations gain saliency in the writing of two Cuban women poets, Nancy Morejón (b. 1944) and Reina María Rodríguez (b. 1952).

In a sense, accelerated poetry and official revolutionary discourse were made to be complementary, as each endorsed the other. I have been arguing that they also share a poetics

through their entanglements and shared susceptibility to the patterns of globalized modernity. As Castro's revolution lost steam, running into geopolitical barriers and internal corrosion, new representational praxes emerged, corresponding to a recalibrating Cuba. The comparative difficulties and poverty of the Cuban Special Period inspired new poetic forms.

Practically speaking, the Cuban Special Period in Time of Peace, or Special Period, began in 1990, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It began, as Richard Gott relates, "with an interruption to the flow of Soviet oil. In March 1990, the government was obliged to respond with its 'economic defense exercise,' when gas, water, and electricity were cut off for short periods in all areas of the country...Oil and gas deliveries would be cut by 50 per cent across the island and electricity consumption by 10 per cent" (289). Austerity was enforced and labor relations transformed immediately as "industries dependent on foreign imports were closed down and thousands of urban workers were sent to the countryside to engage in the labor-intensive task of growing food" (289). Predominantly dedicated to sugar production, Cuba's agricultural industry, much celebrated by revolutionary ideology and within accelerated poetry, could not feed the country. Cuba's reliance upon Soviet oil not only dictated what was grown, but how it was grown. Industrialized agriculture's oil dependency had transformed the methods of farming. As Sinan Koont observes in his study of the rise of Cuban urban agriculture during the Special Period, "Within the space of a few years, the highly industrialized agriculture [Cuba] had historically practiced was no longer feasible for lack of imported petroleum, fertilizers, pesticides, and agricultural machinery" (1). The reduction in oil was felt across Cuban society. It manifested in visible and appreciable alterations to the way Cubans lived and the ordering of labor and nature. The former symbolic order, built upon the revolutionary promise of abundant

imported oil, no longer structured Cuban poetry. The poetry that corresponded to the new circumstances of the Special Period was set to a slower tempo.

To return to poet Nancy Morejón during the early years of the Special Period is to acknowledge poetry's inherent ambiguities and the Cuban Revolution's transformative limitations. One way to describe Morejón is, as in Juanamaría Cordones-Cook's characterization, a poet who "belongs to the second generation of poets born after 1940 who came into prominence with the Revolution and who identified themselves with its ideals" (37). The revolutionary government must have shared this assessment of Morejón's literary priorities when it labeled her an *oficialista*, that is, one of the poets who "were allowed to travel abroad as promoters of Cuba and their own work" (Weiss 2). This simplification, however, that transforms Morejón's poetic productions into a state-sanctioned export, replicates the aspirational foibles of accelerated poetry and the error that overexposed the revolutionary government to the workings of global capital.

Indeed, if Morejón were, to recall Casanova's phrase, a poet of "pure political functionalism" then there would be little to say for her, and we would scarcely be more nuanced critics than those who determine the list of *oficialistas* (325). As we observed in Morejón's untitled poem from *El Corno Emplumado* issue 23, we find in Morejón's work the basis for a wealth of interpretations. The aesthetic diversity remains present in her 1993 collection, *Paisaje célebre*, only, within the contexts of the Special Period, her present-minded poetry serves as both an aesthetic counterpoint to accelerated poetry and a critique of the socioeconomic situation confronting Cubans.

Morejón published *Paisaje célebre* with Fondo Editorial Fundarte in Caracas, Venezuela. Until this point, nine of her eleven poetry collections were published in Cuba, with the only

exceptions being *Elogio de la danza* published in 1982 by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City and *Grenada Notebook* published in 1984 by Círculo de Cultura Cubana in New York City. Whether or not *Paisaje célebre* could have been published in Cuba, it certainly deviates from the publication pattern established up to this point in Morejón's career and breaks out of the currents of the Cuban publication network in which she trafficked. Specifically, the New York-Mexico City-Havana nexus that *El Corno Emplumado* and Morejón's publications represented for two decades prior no longer determined the horizons of *Paisaje célebre*.

Stylistically, there is reason to suppose this collection deviated enough from what Cuban censors could tolerate to warrant the change in publishers. Translator David Frye observes, "In texts published since the beginning of the so-called Special Period in Times of Peace in the early 1990s, the poet appears worried about shortages and the wear and tear on the city" (14). At the same time, critic William Luis sees *Paisaje célebre* as a return-to-form for Morejón, in which she "moves away from interests that brought her poetry to the attention of readers both inside and outside Cuba and toward a more personal voice as seen in her first works" (44). Both observations, I believe, provide insight into the reality that, in *Paisaje célebre*, the shortages of the Special Period bring about a poetic consciousness that is incompatible with the hallmarks of accelerated poetry, the genre which, in my estimation, "brought [Morejón's] poetry to the attention of readers both inside and outside Cuba" (Luis 44).

The final poem in *Paisaje célebre*, "Marina," demonstrates the abandonment of accelerated poetry aesthetics with particular clarity. Translated in a later anthology by Gabriel Abudu as "Seascape," the poem stays compulsively in its moment. The scene it establishes is set "by the anchored / boats," a phrase that repeats four times, taking up eight lines in total, in this

twenty-one-line poem (105). The repetition reinforces the figure of stagnation present in the “anchored boats.” Like the boats, which cannot enact the shipping functions of Guillén’s tankers in “Soviet Union,” the poem’s subject, a woman who is a “fortuneteller,” is stuck in the poem. The fortuneteller does not read her cards or otherwise prognosticate. Instead, her actions are defined by inactivity, as she is “awaiting the zero option” and “waiting for / nightfall” (105). Luis helpfully explains the historical references in this poem: “Zero option points to a stage in which the Cuban people will lack all of the basic necessities; and the skinny horse, an obvious reference to Fidel Castro, shows a condition that is approaching quickly, a lack of food and scarce transportation” (51). Indeed, *zero option* names specifically the petrochemical crises of the Special Period. As Luis acknowledges, the emaciated horse may signify Castro, whose nickname was “The Horse,” but horses and horse drawn carriages, such as the one the poem references, were an increasingly popular mode of transportation due to fuel shortages in the Special Period. This poem is much more of a single moment elongated into a tableau than it is a symbolist rendering of the Cuban port in which it transpires. The moment shared between the fortuneteller, the horse, and the anchored boats, those objects which Abudu elsewhere calls collectively “symbols of the desperate economic circumstances prevailing in Cuba in the early nineties,” captures the strange new relations between humans and objects, wherein none perform their expected functions (1022-3). In the final lines, the fortuneteller is presented as “waiting for / nightfall, / without a dahlia in her hands” (105). If accelerated poetry has conditioned us to expect a characteristic turn toward the future and a metaphor drawing from the representational patterns of nature, here, the dahlia, is only registered in absentia. Unlike William Luis, who reads a kind of optimism in the image wherein, “the woman is prepared to look forward and not back,” I see this conclusion only as a stubborn refusal to deny the present and its material circumstances

(51). The fortuneteller, alienated from her labor by the undeniable precarity of the Special Period and the threat of the Zero Option, has lost her lease on the future. Coming as it does at the end of the collection marshals the power of the printed medium to emphasize the poem's self-containment within its moment. The boats do not launch, the horse does not find sustenance, and the fortuneteller offers no hope. The repetition, the non-abstract language, and the attention to the immediate surroundings culminate in slowing down the poem to the point where it becomes a non-event. This new aesthetic is not explicitly critical of the Revolution's failures, but it is a change of pace necessary to properly capture the tempo of a city deprived of oil.

In *Paisaje célebre*, and in Morejón's poetry more generally, Havana is this city that bears evidence of the change. In writing about this collection, Abudu observes, "Time seems to have come to a complete halt in Havana...but the desire to carry on living in spite of everything is very strong...and the attachment to simple, everyday things has not diminished with time" (1023). Building off this I suggest that a resistance to grandiosity and abstraction, achieved by "the attachment to simple, everyday things" in Havana, creates the sensation of halted time for those accustomed to the rapid, urban flows of petro-modernity. For Abudu, the poem "Peñalver 52," named after the house across the street from Morejón's house, depicts a version of Havana in which "[t]ime has certainly taken a toll on the city, as evidenced in the crumbling infrastructure" (1020). In "Peñalver 52," Havana is a city where events pass "en cámara lenta [in slow motion]," and the city appears damaged "como después una batalla [like after a battle]" (43). But upon closer inspection, Havana teems with nonhuman life. The first lines attempt to describe the foundation of the titular house but require immediate revision when the "piedras [stones]" reveal themselves to be "arenilla y musgo polvoriento [sand and dusty moss]" (43). Birds descend from their perches upon "los cables colgantes de Peñalver 52 [the hanging cables

of Peñalver 52” (43). The cables are then anthropomorphized by two interjected adjectives, enclosed in em dashes: “—indecisos, antónitos [indecisive, thunderstruck]” (43). The slack power cables are, in one tmetic stroke, personified and reconnected to their nearest analog in nature, lightning. In a similar figure, “aguaceros [rainstorms]” are described as made “de cemento infinito [of infinite cement],” blurring the natural and manmade worlds (43). The particular word used throughout the poem to describe the cityscape, “paisaje [landscape],” recalls the book’s title while designating Havana as the object of an artistic rendering (as a paysage), confusing a scene of nature with the scene of the city. Corresponding to the influx of oil that transformed and modernized the countryside through sweeping agrarian developments, this poem’s observations of decay result in categorical confusions as nature creeps back into the city. As a result, new assemblages emerge, and poet finds ways to incorporate them into the new Havana.

Cordones-Cook writes, “Through her poetry, Morejón seeks to resist the passage of time and the inevitability of oblivion, constructing memory in order to retain, concretize, and perpetuate the transitory and the ephemeral of her world and her personal experience” (31). While this characterization may be true of any number of poets who write from “personal experience,” or use their poems to memorialize their poetic objects, Cordones-Cook helps us see Morejón’s preoccupation with finding poetic means to subvert the passage of time. What Cordones-Cook does not consider is that Morejón’s world, across the decades of her career, is not always, equally “transitory” and “ephemeral.” The slowdowns of the Special Period are an aesthetic challenge for a poet so invested in marking otherwise unmarked flows of time. In “Marina” and “Peñalver 52,” we see two different ways in which the poet dilates a moment, rather than speeding it along. In his later translation of “Peñalver 52,” found within the biglot

Before a Mirror, The City from 2020, Frye incorporates three more em dashes, in addition to the original two, to impart a greater sense of the breaks and halts in the original poem.

The em dash, Hartman's chosen grapheme for tmesis, figures heavily in the poems written during the early years of the Special Period by a different poet, Reina María Rodríguez. Rodríguez, a poet ever attentive to her typography, rounds out the present conception of slow poetry. She forges her own distinct poetic take on slowness. Her publications also constitute a notable exception to the patterns of literary production heretofore considered.

In his study of Cuban narratives and the literary market, James Buckwalter-Arias writes, As long as books by Cuba's best-known contemporary writers off and on the island are easier to acquire for the middle-class Spanish speaker not living on the island or the First World scholar (e.g. through *Amazon.com*) than the best-educated and -paid Cuban, authentic Cuban literary artifacts, it would appear, are primarily for export. Cuban writers on and off the island supply the literary raw material, while the text is elaborated into a commodity abroad, more often than not in the former metrópoli. (372)

Of course, in the revolutionary government's heyday, the state did its part to foster the production and exportation of literature, making Buckwalter-Arias's "literary raw material" model slightly less applicable in decades past. Nevertheless, it should come as no surprise to find that global capitalism continues to dictate the flows of literature into the twenty-first century—what other story is there?

Kristin Dykstra, however, brings to our attention the various avenues that Rodriguez finds for her poetry, given that the opportunities available to, say, Nancy Morejón are not available to her. Dykstra, challenging Buckwalter-Arias, contends,

it is significant that Rodríguez does continue to try publishing and reading her work in local venues. Meanwhile, she relies on certain sources of energy to spark her ongoing writing, so I will mark them as provisional ‘third ways’ for getting around dilemmas imposed via the embargo and internal policies...they are significant to her writing process and allow her to *resolver*, or make do. (52)

Distinct from either the model set by Rodríguez’s few international publications, such as American translations of her poems, and the state promotion of oficialistas, these *third ways of making do* include publishing and reading locally, maintaining a literary community in Havana, and even corresponding with readers and writers by email. These ways of being a poet on a restricted, local scale result in a poetic practice that is overall less-susceptible to reification and reflective of a society in which resources are scarce. In Cuba, the chain between poet, poem, and reader is actually short, not artificially collapsed.

Reina María Rodríguez is included in the *Generación de los ochenta*, or Generation-80, those poets who established themselves in the 1980s. According to Roberto Tejada, these poets marked a shift from the modern to the postmodern in Cuban poetry as they “reclaimed a more complex lyric self as a legitimate political construct” (60). The shift to postmodernism corresponded to “the collapse of the master narratives of modernity” and “dominant systems of value” and resulted in a “comprehensive reevaluation—or threefold disavowal of totalization, teleology and utopia” (Tejada 63). Even more immediately, the poets of Generation-80 opposed “the formal ‘transparency’ of conversationalism and the supposed ‘transparency’ of the state” (Tejada 64). The aesthetic transparency of the literary style of conversationalism that became popular in the 1970s is different from the Soviet-style platform of *glasnost*, or transparency in governmental matters, but the conflation demonstrates that some thinkers continue to read

politics into poetry and poetry into politics as a means of understanding Cuban history. We can understand Rodríguez's poem, "La detención del tiempo," originally published in the 1992 collection *En la Arena de Padua*, as participating in a politically conscious reinstatement of nuance and complexity.

"La detención del tiempo," translated as "Time's Arrest" by Kristin Dykstra, is what may be considered a prose poem. It is one un-indented chain of clauses, broken up by em dashes, ellipses, colons, full-stops, and commas. As the title suggests, time operates in a non-standard, slowed or impeded, way within the poem. It does that by elaborately portraying the poet's cognitive actions far more than it engages in representing the phenomenal world. Insofar as the poem represents the poet's bodily actions, they amount to tasting Proust's madeleines. That is, they are the platform for further occasions of thought. The simple and repeated action, "I toss a stone into the ocean," leads to a chain of phenomena ("out go circles, circuits, spirals, mirrors") and the invitation to create further conceptual space alongside the poet ("you can ponder the forms and steal them out of the water") (39). The act of tossing a stone and the consideration of the properties of water also give way to a British modernist literary reference: "how in *The Waves*, Virginia's, human nature changes, only seeming to be transformed, like particles of water moved by a wave" (39). The polyptoton between *The Waves* and "a wave" reactivates the real phenomenon that motivates literary invention. At the same time, it is an allusion that explains itself through strategic repetition, rather than relying on the reader's familiarity and access to the text—far from a given.

The overlapping aesthetic challenges of representation pose a material challenge for the poet, whose work is recapturing that which has been oversimplified, the suppressed middle. She claims for herself, "I want a complexity that doesn't just include duration, but also creation"

(40). The poet is ambivalent about the need to be ever-present in thought and action. She writes “I want to throw stones without thinking about it anymore” but she interrupts her desire with a clear typographic break, an em dash, followed by further symbolic action “—knowing that it’s inane and doing it, because that’s how you do inane things” (39). In this way, the breaks in the poem only sustain the indomitability of a present defined by consciousness. No time elapses in the break apart from the time of thought itself. It is an act of syntactical tmesis, “to insert phrases that remain bonded to the poles,” where the poles are thought and action, and poet and reader (Hartman 249). The poet recognizes the unsustainable proposition of divorcing thought from action when she imagines the consequence it will have on her reader: “I choose to throw stones without thinking about it anymore, and then you hide, you hide, you fall asleep” (40). Here, when the poet stops thinking, the phantasmic reader, the poem’s *you* or addressee, recedes. The result is the production of Tejada’s “more complex lyric self as a legitimate political construct,” particularly when one recalls the legacy of accelerated poetry as tending toward a reduction in complexity (60). When Rodríguez envisages her audience, they are present in her thoughts.

The poem ends with a cryptic ritual: “I bring in a jug containing a hot, strange drink for us to share, with a strong burnt flavor that we’ll learn to recognize and quickly forget, we are seated and unique at the center, where the smoke burns my mouth, my nose: I’m extraordinarily thin, I unravel like a thread of smoke” (41). The imagery and sensorial experiences, derived from combustion and an unnamed liquid, contrast to the sustaining waters that ripple throughout the poem. In the close, the poet has grown *thin*, a word unlikely to be used when describing this dense poem that appears as a stolid block on the pages it spans. The incorporeal smoke, like the halted industrialization of Cuba, vanishes, preserved only figuratively within the poem. One may also read in interaction between the drink that burns and the effusive smoke the play between

rum derived from sugar and the tobacco leaf, Cuba's premier crops that require a use of the land that leaves the poet underfed. The poet dissolves, necessarily, as the text ends and nothing is left to be read. There is no guarantee of any future.

In a later essay, "Nostalgia," Rodríguez recalls the removal of Soviet products from Cuba: "Afterward, there was desolation in the streets they once inhabited; in the theaters, the vacuum left by the films no longer shown; and confusion in the rhythm of a language that penetrated our syntax with its *tempo-lento*, slow and overloaded" (51). It is not enough to understand the sense of time in Cuban poetry of the Special Period only through the development of popular literature and governmental speech patterns. One must also consider the many transculturations and their sudden removals from the island. For both Morejón and Rodríguez time needed new representational strategies. As oil retreats, poetry, like Havana itself, slows down. New observations are made and language represents the act of thought rather than a thought already conceived. Unlike the future promised but never realized in accelerated poetry, these poems are unrealized only because the larger problems that they portray will not cease at their conclusions. Slow poetry helps us anticipate the shock of a world without oil as it exposes a world with so much more.

Critics who have analyzed the U.S. sanctions on Cuba with an interest in Cuba's political and economic futures discover a range of petro-optimisms in the current situation. As Sujatha Fernandes describes, "The Cuban economy received a boost through an agreement signed in 2000, which stipulated that Venezuela supply subsidized oil to Cuba in exchange for Cuba's sending health care workers, physicians, sports coaches, and arts workers to Venezuela, as well as offering free medical treatments to Venezuelans in Cuba" (164). Building off Bret Gustafson's analysis of the Petrocaribe initiative, Fernandes recognizes that "although it was dependent on

fossil fuels, it provided a vehicle for regional cooperation and a challenge to US oil hegemony over Caribbean nations” (164). Oil dependency is qualified, but it is understated to emphasize the good of regionalism and “a challenge to US oil hegemony” (164).

Writing under the Obama administration, Nigel D. White remarks, “The recent resumption of talks on migration, the re-establishment of direct postal relations, and growing cooperation in combating oil spills and air search and rescue missions, all serve to illustrate that dialogue can work” (123). In this account, environmental catastrophe seems almost a small price to pay for improved diplomatic relations.

With an even more perverse optimism, Stephanie LeMenager encourages further U.S. intervention in response to resumed petro-relations between Cuba and Russia when she writes, “The fact that Cuba is initiating an offshore program in the Gulf of Mexico, in cooperation with the Russian company Gazprom, may do more than any domestic environmental lobbying to inspire rigorous federal standards and regulatory oversight. The United States needs to regulate its own industry so that it can negotiate similar restrictions on Cuba and Russia” (177). Whatever well-intentioned environmentalist bent this represents, it is not the perspective of one who has suffered through the shortages of the Special Period.

After recognizing Cuba’s unique struggles for independence along with its international engagements, it may ultimately prove a fraught enterprise to fit Cuban poetry too neatly within the conflicting frames of global, hispanophonic, American hemispheric, Latin American, or Caribbean literatures. Slow poets remind us that there are ways of being independent from energy regimes that are worth fostering and do not require, even if they historically resulted from, the imbalances in power that produce the aforementioned organizational schemas. It seems far less costly to internalize those values than to continue to write oil dependency and

imperialism into the future. The inventive language acts of poets provide ways of thinking that get outside of the U.S.-Cuban dialectic that has defined too much of the popular discourse around these two nations as they construct a present that could take place anywhere for anyone willing to disengage from their geopolitical desires. At the same time, these poets reveal dimensions of time as yet under-theorized by literary scholars.

The next chapter will look at another literary production, *Tapia*, a Trinidadian journal that developed with a consciousness of the importance of oil autonomy for participation in the global market. Through the precedent established by that journal and its contributing authors, we may consider other ways of popularizing alternative discourses for understanding our encounters with oil.

**Chapter 4: “High-Powered Intellectual Labours”: *Tapia* Journal and Poetic Production:
Lloyd Best, Eric Roach, and Derek Walcott**

Oft-quoted, William Carlos Williams’s truism, “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every / day / for lack / of what is found there,” expresses one recognition of the desire for poetry’s autonomy, particularly in relation to the popular news cycle (“Asphodel”). As Jahan Ramazani frames this modern dynamic, “For poetry, the news is an especially pressing other under modernity, when the media’s assumptions about time, information, language, nation, and representation are everywhere—assumptions that...poets often contest” (*Poetry* 80). Although Ramazani acknowledges that “poems often bespeak a newslike consciousness of the historical now,” he helps us see that journalism as a genre and newsprint as a medium grate against poets’ aestheticized and embodied modes of production (80). The case considered in this chapter complicates the distinction between news and poems as I attend to the Trinidadian newspaper, *Tapia*. Founded by Trinidadian economist and social critic Lloyd Best and running from 1969-1981, as a whole *Tapia* contains the expected assortment of advertisements, letters to the editor, articles, blurbs, and books reviews, along with a modest but important selection of poems. Specifically, I focus on poets E.M. Roach and Derek Walcott and the poems they contributed to the paper’s pages. Understanding these poems’ relationships to the news requires a unique reading practice. To develop it, I pay considerable attention to Lloyd Best’s conception of poetry’s role in post-independence Trinidad.

The study of newspapers is particularly important for expanding postcolonial literary archives and the thoughts contained therein. Scholars have recognized the need to shelve the book in favor of alternative media when studying burgeoning, community productions. Eric Bulson develops his conception of the little magazine not only as an alternative to the single-

author poetry collection, but as a medium with a global character. He asserts, “[t]he form of the little magazine, so often identified with modernism, does not...belong only to England, the United States, and Europe,” and I would add, *neither does the periodical* (190). My interest in reading newspapers with poems also follows Sarah Brouillette’s insistence that literary scholars begin “outlining and critiquing the political economy of literary production” to better understand literature in the age of global trade (98). *Tapia* develops, extends, and responds to a flurry of metaphors and imaginings of literature, politics, and economics. Studying *Tapia* not only expands research into forms of print but revisits the work of one of the Caribbean’s most active writers and thinkers in Lloyd Best.

To structure this chapter, I am treating *Tapia* as a kind of imagined community, i.e., one that, like a nation is “both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). Nationalism remains an imprecise diagnostic for the numerous political forces and opinions that conspired throughout the Caribbean in the wake of colonialism, and *Tapia* encodes a plurality of often-conflicting ideas about the role of thought in political formation. *Tapia* creates conditions where questions of community, the public and private, and generic and territorial boundaries occur. Here, Benedict Anderson’s remarks on the nature of assessing imagined communities are important to recall. Anderson reminds us, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). Anderson’s interpretive approach is particularly helpful for the literary critic interested in accessing the stylistics, or poetics, of the composite object that is *Tapia*.

Benedict Anderson also provides a term, *printmen*, that I will explore through my consideration of Lloyd Best and *Tapia*. In his chapter “Creole Pioneers,” Anderson affords space to the functions of the newspaper throughout the Americas. Anderson explains that newspapers

drove those early nationalisms throughout North and South American colonies that resulted in the severing of ties with their respective European metropolises from the seventeenth century forward. As printers added newspapers to their presses' output, a new category of printer-journalists arose, "initially an essentially North American phenomenon" (61). These newspapers were originally reports on market conditions but were also heterogenous containing "commercial news (when ships would arrive and depart, what prices were current for what commodities in what ports), as well as colonial political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and so forth" (62). Political opinion soon followed. Gathering this disparate information on discrete pages, the readership these newspapers created constitute "an imagined community...to whom these ships, brides, bishops and prices belonged" (62). Anderson's account of newspapers and the "printmen" who produced them ends in the nineteenth century (65). However, remembering this historically revolutionary and productive function of newspapers and the politically-minded people who ran them proves appropriate for understanding Lloyd Best, the printman, and what he intended for *Tapia*.

In the mid-sixties, Lloyd Best formed the Tapia House group, a Trinidadian political movement that functioned as an arts and community organization, too. The group took their name from a traditional form of Trinidadian dwelling space, the tapia, made from materials readily available on the island. As the 1973 "Independence Special" of *Tapia* tells it, the meeting place for the group "was quite literally a house, or spacious palm-thatched shed, built by Best, his followers and associates, and neighbors in the backyard of Best's house on the Upper Tunapuna Road" (8). The newspaper eventually spun out of this community space, and just as the house in Best's backyard provided a space for local activity and conversation, *Tapia* placed an "emphasis on artistic as well as high-powered intellectual labours" ("Independence" 8).

Understanding the exact importance and the active imagination behind this emphasis is essential for recognizing the poetics of Best's political and economic thought and by extension, recognizing the formative work he did as a printman with *Tapia*.

As the Tapia House Group was taking shape, Lloyd Best was working with Canadian economist Kari Levitt on what they called the pure plantation model of economy to explain why, despite the promises of then prime minister Eric Williams, Trinidad and Tobago had not experienced the anticipated sweeping structural changes following independence. In an extensive paean to Best, the "Independence Special" of *Tapia* explains the three main tenets of the pure plantation model of economy: "'hinterland' societies are structurally part of an 'overseas economy' of the metropole;" these hinterland societies are total economic institutions, meaning that like a historical plantation every activity in the society is done in relation to its primary economic function; and that "the value flows in such a system are incalculable" (8). In *Tapia*, Eric Williams often stands in as a political and intellectual adversary to Best's opinions and ideas, fairly or otherwise. As will be discussed further, Best criticized Prime Minister Williams for both his domestic policies, such as increased policing of Trinidadian citizens and unfair treatment of laborers, and his international policies, specifically regarding Trinidad's natural resources and trade arrangements. Methodologically, perhaps more so than ideologically, Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* stands apart from Best's writing on the legacy of slavery and the structuring forces of the plantation. Whereas Williams proposes "strictly an economic study of the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system" ending in the nineteenth century, Best's pure plantation model aimed to prove the

endurance of the plantation's socioeconomic patterns and characteristics in the present, long after abolition (Williams 15).

As may be expected, mathematical models and econometrics would scarcely figure into the plantation model of economy. Instead, a more substantivist approach, foregrounding historical and social factors, came to define Best and Levitt's thoughts. Norman Girvan writes in his foreword to the 2005 publication of Best and Levitt's *Essays on the Theory of Plantation Economy: A Historical and Institutional Approach to Economic Development*, "Plantation Economy in the Age of Globalization," that in the face of the erasures and shortcomings of neoliberal globalization, "The theory of plantation economy asserted the specificity of the Caribbean experience...It is heterodox rather than orthodox, eclectic rather than ideological, and Caribbean-centered rather than Eurocentric" (XVII). Best himself would insist on conceptualizing both the problem of Caribbean economic precarity and its solutions in no other terms, writing in a pithy phrase, "underdevelopment is a highly-developed state" (*Plantation* 1). When Best denounces Western thinking, citing "that curious reification which confuses technology with science and which separates thought from action, the polity from the economy, and them from us," he demonstrates that the theory of the plantation economy develops not only in response to the plantation's totalizing influence throughout the Caribbean, but in rejection of Western categorical thinking (*Plantation* 2). Because Best seeks to address all aspects of Caribbean experience and propose a new mode of Caribbean thought, his theories turn extraordinarily complex. However, keeping the threat of reification in mind helps draw out the significance that "high-powered intellectual labours" represented to Best as he speculated about the Caribbean's future ("Independence" 8).

In his essay “Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom,” Lloyd Best offered a prospectus for Caribbean social and political transformation. This process explicitly involved the creation of “intellectual capital goods” and the development of a media platform to disseminate these goods (29). Indistinguishable from the labor that produced them, working backwards through the assumptions of the pure plantation theory of economy, such goods demonstrate in miniature the whole web of Caribbean experience and the potential for liberatory progress. *Tapia*, as the space where “artistic as well as high-powered intellectual labors” become goods, is the manifestation of Best’s totalizing economic vision. In this made space, writing, and specifically poetry, can be understood as a socioeconomic problem. Poetry’s concision and reproducibility certainly recommended the genre for easy dissemination. However, poetry’s notorious ambiguity may not provide a remedy to the ills of a system defined by incalculable values.

In his book *Critical Interventions in Caribbean Politics and Theory*, political scientist and poet Brian W. Meeks helps us understand Best’s “abiding respect for the innate creativity of the Caribbean people,” which, for Meeks, segues into a political problem of “the appropriate relationship between leaders and followers, particularly in those rare moments of unprecedented popular upheaval” (86). Meeks questions why Best, stayed relatively uninvolved in the popular political movements, such as the racially-conscious National Joint Action Committee, of the late 60s and early 70s, especially given his conspicuous presence in the intellectual and social spheres of Trinidadian life. Revisiting a debate between Best and other political thinkers, Meeks comes up with the following answer as to why Best did not become the political leader his popularity, experience, and good standing entitled him to be: “[Best] underlines the importance of democratic organizations as critical in the building of a new society and redlines the danger of

one-man leadership of the traditional Caribbean variety” (91). If those two concerns represent Best’s misgivings, Meeks also goes on to attribute to Best an “alternative modality of popular engagement in which the intellectuals act as a forum or tribune to stimulate popular consciousness and gestate new political institutions” (92). Meeks does not consider the role *Tapia* may have played in this process, but I believe it is where Best the printman and Best the political thinker converge and, at times, conflict in their commitment to intellectual stimulation and political transformation.

I advise we take seriously Best’s “emphasis on artistic as well as high-powered intellectual labours” (“Independence” 8). The descriptor *high-powered* itself further blends the economic with the intellectual. The Trinidadian energy sector was and is a major source of GDP for the nation. In the -pure plantation model of the economy, Best and Levitt show that sugar, bauxite, and petroleum were the three major products in “the traditional export sector” (138). However, as Kari Levitt clarifies, “[t]he petroleum sector, at the time the [Trinidad and Tobago System of National Accounts] was constructed, was also controlled largely by foreign companies” (Levitt 181). Thus, it was emblematic of the exploitative exchanges between metropole and hinterland and in need of correcting. In the 2007 article “Best on Energy,” reproduced within the voluminous 228-page memorial essay collection, *Lloyd Best: Reflections*, the energy correspondent for the *Trinidad Express* muses upon the continued role that energy played in Best’s economic thought. As the so-called Golden Age of Trinidadian economic growth continued into the aughts spurred on by revenue from the energy sector, Best remained incredulous about the role foreign investments played. The correspondent represents Best’s stance succinctly as “too many resources of all types are being devoted to expansion of the energy sector ‘offshore’, while there is stagnation onshore” (101). Best observed the

unsustainable, temporary national development and suggested that the solution was greater investment in onshore energy initiatives. So expressed, this stance tracks with Best and Levitt's wish for Caribbean economic independence. As much as "artistic as well as high-powered intellectual labours" represent the centrality of thought and creativity to Best's idealized political order, it also encodes a vision of energy autonomy and creative force that taps into the metaphoric powers of petroleum ("Independence" 8).

As ambitious and variegated as any *gesamtkunstwerk*, *Tapia* was a special experiment in postcolonial literary production. In the most generous assessment, it represented its founder's rigorous commitment to fostering pursuits of the mind and a generic openness that reflects the diverse populations and ideas within the Caribbean. However, the publication, perhaps because of Best's eagerness, was not without its shortcomings. As amenable as such a periodical may have seemed to poets and critics, the symbolic claim of the *tapia* building to an authentic Caribbean culture could create tight quarters within the pages of the newspaper. One week after the "Independence Special," *Tapia* ran a piece by Brian Lewis called "Development of Indian House Cont'd 'The Modern Period.'" In it, Lewis offers a racialized account for "the emergence of a new 'modern style' for the domestic building development of the Indian in Trinidad" (5). Even in the opening sentence, the home and the Indian population of Trinidad are conflated. At the top of this same page, the image of a house is described as "a wealthy home," as if the house itself had a class identity. In this article, these new houses are contrasted to the pre-colonial housing tradition of the *ajoupa*, a type of thatched roof structure reminiscent of the *tapia*. However, whereas Best's *tapia* house was portrayed as a hub of community activity, Lewis laments, "[s]ometimes, the old *ajoupa*, which often stands in the backyard, provides an outdoor kitchen, and an *ajoupa* room may be provided where prayers and small meetings take place" (5).

The abandoned site of prayer reinforces Lewis's anti-Indian argument that "[t]he Indian had adopted every western job available to him, adjusted his religion, became educated and skilled and therefore generally more prosperous" (5). Lewis attaches moral judgment to the globalization that Best observes broadly. For the author, participating in the Western market results in the loss of identity. As a result of Lewis's dizzying back-and-forth between discussions of actual houses, their occupants, and V.S. Naipaul's literary representations of both, the neglected ajoupa seems at all times beset by the "western 'furniture'" (5) and "western materials" that characterize and construct these new houses (8). Brian Lewis's article leaves almost no room to imagine anything between the maligned modern house and the ajoupa.

Lloyd Best tapped into the significant community-shaping powers of the newspaper to create the social and political communities he imagined. As a medium, the newspaper boasts a track record within the region to suggest it was up to the task.¹⁹ Lewis's article is but one prefatory example of how a pernicious ideology like racism can enter into a space that was designed neither to champion nor censor such antisocial and destructive ideas. One of the major problems of Best's materialist approach toward literature manifests in the problem of judgment. Best never explicitly defines what types of intellectual goods ought to be produced. This is a dilemma for the printman at the head of *Tapia*, invested with editorial control, and the facilitator of open exchange who Meeks described. By reading with this in mind, *Tapia*'s poems work as intellectual goods whose poetic content complicates the paper's centripetal force. From a certain perspective, Best's idea of "intellectual capital goods" and the cultural work of *Tapia* may seem to be a single-minded, if not draconian, expectation placed upon poetry. Inevitably, poetry within

¹⁹ In the 1960s, Eric Williams and the PNM party used both the *PNM Weekly* and *Nation* to publicize their visions for an independent Trinidad. C.L.R. James served as editor for *Nation* for a time.

Tapia complicates Best's ideals as much as his political vision and material considerations as a printman may delimit a poem's complexity. It is with these tensions and contexts in mind that I turn to the work of Tobagonian poet Eric Morton Roach, such as it appears in *Tapia*.

Eric Roach's Historical Memory

Writing on Eric Roach is a difficult and painful task. As Kenneth Ramchand describes, on April 17, 1974, Eric Roach, then 58 years old, drove to Quinam Bay where he "drank the insecticide he had been careful to provide himself with; from the spot where he imagined Columbus had landed, he swam out into the green sea. It was a literary death, the *finis* inscribed at the end of a stubbornly literary life" (11). A literary death, perhaps, because it was ploddingly intentional and obsessed with history. A literary death, perhaps, because Roach wrote poems that anticipate the act. However, if the isolation and finality that accompanies suicide conspire in our imagination to label Roach's death *literary*, perhaps re-imagining him as a poet engaged in a broader imagined community will restore to his poetry some measure of openness and freedom it may otherwise lack.

The April 2, 1972 issue of *Tapia* contains the first of three poems by Roach that would appear in the newspaper over the span of about one year. Roach's "Poem" pulls the snake from Eden while considering the necessity of death for the political world to come. The first stanza opens with a victory in progress with the lines, "Dying, the serpent's / writhing in its coils, / tumbing itself" (2). Before the poet can be accused of advocating violence against an otherwise unspecified adversary, the second stanza proleptically admits the inevitability of the serpent's defeat as the poem asks and answers, "Who struck the coup de grace? / No one, no one. / The

thing undid itself" (2). The poet concludes, "Well, let it die...It ruined paradise, / despoiled our virgin innocence / and will devour / each pure Utopia / we may dream" (2). Not expressing the activist's view, the poem suggests its audience need only permit the serpent's death to protect the future, those Utopia yet to be dreamed, which is to say imagined. Though the poem suggests death is a necessary political force, it must be remarked that non-violence characterizes these dreamers.

In this two-page spread, death is tangled up with politics. Around the poem, the paper's commentary, attributed only to "The Movement," lambasts Eric Williams and the supposed Trinidadian police state, praises Lloyd Best, and rings out in bolded headings that provocatively connect to Roach's poem like "Black Dream" and on the opposite page, "Overkill Mania," "Hate and Violence," "Wounded Beast" (*Tapia* vol. 25 2-3). In the space of the newspaper, it is impossible to tell which indeterminacy led to another's conclusion. Given the unstable state of politics that The Movement describes readers may interpret a complementary message that the maligned Trinidadian government was killing itself. Did Lloyd Best intentionally lay out the paper's commentary around the poem in as suggestive a manner as possible? The dialogue formed between "Poem" and the surrounding, inflammatory prose moves interminably back and forth. The ambiguity in "Poem," who or what Roach's allusion to the Biblical serpent may allegorize, rises and falls depending upon how we read it within the charged political context. The despoilers of paradise may be those historical agents of slavery and colonization, figuring the Caribbean as Edenic, or, they may be the PNM, in which case we could imagine the liberatory potentials of independence as another paradise. The present tense of the poem and its collective *we* suggest the latter interpretation, but the promise of the serpent's cyclic violence, that it "will devour / each pure Utopia / we may dream," strains that chronology (2). So too, the

passive revolution described within the poem may be an expression of faith in evil's self-defeating premise, or it may represent an ironically tragic view of human nature in which "No one, no one" in a postlapsarian world ever delivers "the coup de grace" to the serpent (2). Certainly, Roach's poem remains a nuanced, if deathly, note amidst all the Bestian bombast.

The second of Roach's three poems in *Tapia*, "Poem for this day," appears in the December 17, 1972 issue, surrounded by the comparatively more affable contents of book reviews. This poem is more strongly political than "Poem," elaborating upon the prior poem's serpentine conceit with its description of "the politician's cloven tongue" (14). In fact, "Poem for this day" is thoroughly preoccupied with the similarities, more than the differences, between men and animals. If politicians are like snakes, the rural poor who the poet observes "grow bovine in their bovine round / of work, feed, sleep, and blind begetting" (14). Their only way out of this cycle, by the poet's account, is to "abandon home / to prodigal in the sour slum" (14). Here, we see the word *prodigal* unexpectedly chosen for its biblical connotation of leaving one's home rather than its stricter definition of excessive spending. It would be uncharitable indeed to imagine impoverished people as spendthrifts.

At first glance, the poet is removed from the squalor he describes, positioned with the reader "on motoring roads...as we cruise by / in shades of opulence, / in varying degrees of cool contempt" (14). The culture of gas-powered motor vehicles creates the poem's particular and contemptuous vantage point. Yet, the Roach bridges the distance. Upon closer reading, we learn that those who live in the slums are those "who've failed their hope / like writers" (14). Here, we can see that the poet is like the poor. Roach further involves himself in the poem. Punning his own animality, while acknowledging his own relative privilege, the poet declares "all that goes free are rats and roaches" (14). Admitting that paronomasia, too explicit to ignore, we are

provoked into admitting further self-conscious commentary on this temporary collective of animals when the poem concludes in a further political development: “all left of liberty is abuse of power; /all left to live is drunkenness and lust / and mania for the bestial carnival” (14). If, in this poem, all men are animals, and Roach is a roach, then it is a comparatively modest claim to consider Lloyd Best’s *Tapia* as the “bestial carnival” wherein they gather (14).

The dichotomy, or interplay, I am establishing between Best and Roach is not meant to figure Roach as either an unsavvy poet or an unwitting crony to Best’s whims. After all, “[f]rom 1961 until just before his death [Roach] worked as a journalist in Trinidad” (Breiner 8). Rather, it is to show that Roach had complicated and not-always-flattering opinions of Trinidad’s poor and downtrodden, and it is easy to understand how those opinions may be at odds with Best’s universal commitment to the poor and oppressed. Eric Roach, of course, did have his own political and artistic convictions. In his book on Roach, *Black Yeats: Eric Roach and the Politics of Caribbean Poetry*, Laurence A. Breiner goes to great lengths to demonstrate Roach’s shifting and manifold attachments. Giving the regional, biographical context, Breiner provides four historical phases against which one may chart Roach’s career: “from the era of violent strikes that led to the formation of most of the region’s political parties, through...decolonization, the founding and subsequent failure of the Federation of the West Indies...and the coming of Independence” (7). Without losing sight of the racialized political context of the West Indies, Breiner’s book demonstrates the outsized influence that Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) had upon Roach, such that “Roach’s poetic career might be said to play itself out between the poles of ‘black’ and ‘Yeats’ and along the trajectory of decolonization” (15). Acknowledging these greater preoccupations is important for considering Roach’s oeuvre, but it is far from the only formulation of Roach’s politico-literary ambition. As we will see, remaining squarely

within the pages of *Tapia* with Best at the helm as printman permits us our own vantage point from which we need not settle our eyes upon the more fatalistically disastrous conclusions Roach's later poems augur. *Tapia* allows us to resist the determinism implied by either Roach's supposed literary death or literary life.

Roach cast a wide net over the topics he wrote on and his attitudes toward them. One observes that his poetry often carries political and moral charges. Laurence A. Breiner, in his chapter "Postcolonial Caribbean Poetry," places Tobagonian poet Eric Roach (1915-1974) into a postcolonial literary schema that refuses "an anglophone demurrer from the characteristic forthrightness of Caribbean political poetry in French and Spanish" (22). In this way, Roach, writing in English, assumes a recognizable political exigency more typically found in French and Spanish poetry from the region. Often, he contrasted the political present with the past as a means of raising the emotional force of his poems.

A Grenadian political leader and labor organizer, Tubal Uriah Butler (1897-1977) gained infamy on June 19, 1937 when he led the so-called Butler Riots at the Fyzabad oilfields in Trinidad. Following the oil workers, sugar workers also rioted, leading to a swift and violent response from colonial police and British naval forces (Teelucksingh 96-100). The riots were the manifestation of Butler's political vision: "to 'mix sugar and oil' to rally a coalition of Negro oil workers and Indian sugar workers behind a 'people's government' which would revolutionize the distribution of political and economic power in Trinidad and Tobago" (Ryan 89). Thereafter, Butler would continue to agitate oil workers to resist unjust labor practices; however, multiple extended detainments in the late thirties and throughout the forties significantly curtailed his political efficacy. Still, the Butler Riots and his imprisonment were enough to cast him as a

political hero for a generation of Caribbean political thinkers. And beginning in the fifties, Butler Day was celebrated annually on June 19.

Butler's iconic role in the 1937 riots stands as an extraordinary success in a career otherwise marked by organizational frustrations and thwarted political aspirations. Butler's persona endured not only because of his indefatigable efforts to improve working conditions, particularly for oil workers, but also due to his penchant for giving speeches and penning manifestoes characterized by a "messianism" that "arose from his conviction that his authority was grounded in supernatural approbation" (Teelucksingh 92). Butler as a man of action, who understood history as the interconnectedness of Caribbean economics, race and politics, and whose words, dashed off to newspapers or in pamphlets, carried a righteous urgency, is a nationalist figure whose symbolic importance exceeds his quantifiable impact.

Mike Walonen places the utmost literary significance on the Butler Riots, claiming "the strike marked one of the earliest sparks of anti-colonialist agitation in the Caribbean, opening the way for successive stages of decolonization and helping to fuel the emergence of a distinctive Trinidadian literature that lent the island a sense of national identity and cultural legitimacy" (60). Whether or not the literary archives agree with Walonen, I think departing from the exact historical event of the Butler Riots, and considering its symbolic legacy, is useful for demonstrating the larger challenges the riots emblemize. I take Butler's assortment of concerns—labor as it relates to oil; the relationship between race, injustice, and the nation; the need to be a moving speaker—to form yet another basis for an ongoing tension recoverable from post-independence political and literary labours.

Roach's "Hard Drought" originally appeared in the April 22, 1973 issue of *Tapia*. Despite Roach's own ambivalences and poetry's perennial ambiguity, its dramatic situation is

relatively clear. The poem begins by telling how “we marched in Butler’s / barefoot mad battalions [sic.] / in a damned time /on the slave world’s slipping edge” (5). The interstitial nature of the past here alluded to is an important key to understanding the poem’s sense of history. The reference back to slavery, and the need to contend with its lingering consequences for the organization of labor and society, its “slipping edge,” was the challenge the Butler Riots took on in their campaign against oil and sugar. Placing slavery, oil production, and twentieth-century agriculture into such a seamless continuity reflects Lloyd Best’s own theory of economic development. Despite the militaristic metaphor, violence does not directly characterize the rioters, here soldiers in “battalions [sic.]” (5). Instead, Roach tells us “our arms were rhetoric / and they shot us down” (5). In this metaphor, non-violent rhetoric metaleptically fuses the rioters, the fiery, messianic Butler, the social critic, and the poet, each now the possible recipient of the government’s historical violence.

If the first stanza tropes upon certain implicit sympathies between Best, Roach, and Butler, the second stanza departs from Butler’s past to a political present wherein Best and Roach further align. The first two lines introduce a familiar adversary within *Tapia*’s pages: “Williams called us / and we thought we’d won” (5). Typical for *Tapia*, Eric Williams is portrayed as a deceiver, and a false start as far as political progress is concerned, as when in the third stanza Roach makes clear, “he was not ours but history’s ruin” (5). The ambiguity opens to the possibility that Williams is both a historical ruin or relic in that “his homing instinct’s back to barracoons / and slave plantations” and that he is history’s ruination, particularly the history of intelligent rebellion Butler represents in the first stanza (5). The dichotomy between Butler and Williams motivates the entire poem, and whatever happened to Butler’s legacy does not efface its redemptive exemplum. When the poem ends, as it does with religious piety, suggesting that

history moves like Christ and his worshipers “Station by station” over “bloody” ground, the image of “the hero’s face” apotheosizes Butler (5). The final stanza’s allusion to the crucifixion mirrors the first’s social and economic vision of slow, difficult progress. To understand that, for Roach in 1973, death and failure were not identical to one another is to afford to his politico-poetic vision a wider berth than is typical. Roach’s obsession with the past and redemption will also provide a counterpoint to Best and Walcott’s forward-facing outlooks.

In “Hard Drought,” Walonen observes, “[Roach] presents the Strike as both an instance of grand collectivization and a pipe dream” (73). While Walonen observes the Christian allusions throughout the poem, he is quick to dismiss the final image in it working “not as in the biblical story of Veronica wiping Christ’s face...a mark of divinity, but of human frailty and defeat” (76). As in the Bible, this image of “the hero’s face / stamped on the woman’s napkin’s masked in blood,” is reminiscent of both the divine and the human (“Hard Drought” 5). Revisiting the poem and considering its publication, and, therefore, its political contexts will find Roach redeeming Butler, rather than dismissing him “through images of raggedness and decrepitude” (Walonen 75).

Walonen is not alone in his one-sided appraisal of the Butler who appears in “Hard Drought.” Laurence Breiner claims that Roach, in this poem, “strips every shred of idealism from the events” (*Black Yeats* 249). Breiner’s interpretation treats the poem as a kind of corrective to a generalized amnesia, noting that in the intervening decades since the Butler Riots, “history has provided alternatives enough to make Butler look attractive” (250). Breiner also helps us see how Roach’s career coincides with Butler’s: “The poem begins by presuming, and then almost at once rejecting, a cyclical view of the political events that punctuate Roach’s own career: Butler’s oilfield marches of 1938 (the year of Roach’s first publication), the “March in

the Rain” of 1960, at the height of Williams’ popularity, and the mass demonstrations associated with the February Revolution and its aftermath during the early 1970s” (249). The poetics of demystification and rejection certainly operate within the poem, and the anti-allegorical reading that Walonen and Breiner promote obtains saliency when considering Butler’s own claims to divine inspiration. Yet, “Hard Drought” as it stands does invite a Christological interpretation that may ultimately distinguish between Butler’s erstwhile disciples and the later “mob...of fools” who fell in with Williams (5). In what seems to be an oversight, neither Walonen nor Breiner mention *Tapia* in discussing “Hard Drought.” Although Breiner acknowledges earlier in his book that with Roach in particular “the coherence of effort implied by the term ‘career’ can be misleading” and that Roach wrote and published iteratively in numerous publications without ever publishing a volume of poetry, he nevertheless forces Roach’s poems into an uneasy coherency where Butler is concerned (8-11). Out of this impulse, Breiner reads “Hard Drought” alongside the deprecatory “Ballad for Tubal Butler,” a poem which incidentally would serve Walonen’s argument better than “Hard Drought.” Published in *New Writing in the Caribbean* in 1972 (the year before “Hard Drought” appeared in *Tapia*), “Ballad for Tubal Butler” begins “When I met him face to face / he had become a poor buffoon, / a decrepit toothless hound / whining at his private fleas” (157). Simply put, this is not the same Butler we have just seen, nor does it represent the same poetic project. Considering “Hard Drought” within the confines of *Tapia*, rather than within a sub-genre of Butler poems, becomes an important qualification.

In the February 27, 1977 issue of *Tapia*, published one week after Butler’s Death, Lloyd Best affixes his name to the front-page article, “Butler Adieu.” In the three-page article, Best remembers the labor leader as one “whom few so richly illustrate the power of the heart in history and none so definitively clinches what impact the Word imposes on the heart” (1). It is

scarcely conceivable that this sympathetic Lloyd Best, himself a self-styled reformer not dissimilar from Butler, would champion “Ballad for Tubal Butler” within his newspaper. By contrast, *Tapia* was a well-built shelter from which “Hard Drought” could extol the Trinidadian spirit of revolution while taking a swipe at Eric Williams. In this account, *Tapia* represents a set of imaginary, political, and material concerns that produce the more generous “Hard Drought” instead of the caustic “Ballad for Tubal Butler.” We may imagine a more optimistic version of Roach and his poetry by considering Best’s influence, be it direct or indirect. Using the public genre of the newspaper, Roach galls his readers to countenance their own mistreatment of Butler and with him “leer and squint at time telescoped / in Jesus’ spear-cleft side” (5). Best’s integrity as a printman and his commitment to high-powered intellectual labours only becomes visible through the deep ambiguities in a poem like “Hard Drought.” Walonen and Breiner are correct: this is no panegyric. However, the poem’s aspersions fall to the living rather than the dead. After “Hard Drought,” Roach would never publish another poem in *Tapia*.

Roach’s later unpublished poem, “Littering Earth’s Centre,” returns to Butler. In it, unanswered questions pose themselves as “What turmoil do we leave inheritors? What wrath, what miseries?” (200). For the poet stuck on an “endless treadmill of hard indigence,” history itself appears as a kind of waste, “a people’s compost heap” (201). The poet also vacillates between his indictment of history and a yearning to reconnect to it. The poem shifts between blaming historic Caribbean political figures for the world they left behind and seemingly wanting to enact their style of activism. In section VII of the poem, the poet recounts Jamaican Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante’s political action. Roach uses the language of a volatile substance to represent political agitation, writing “Once Busta worked a Kingston mob combustible” (202). This anticipates the poem’s historical account of the Butler Riots. This time,

Roach renders the event as “Butler, / shouldering Cipriani out, / lit fires in oil and canes” (202). Oil and sugar, products regulated by exploitative and racist businessowners, become the targets of righteous Butler’s action, rather than his rhetoric.

No sooner does the poet lionize the actions of these two figures, than does the poem turn quickly to diminish these achievements by misrepresenting their purpose to better suit the poet’s own. The poem advances a historical revision by suggesting that Bustamante and Butler were politically active in order “to give their sad slave labour today’s meaning” (202). Unlike in “Hard Drought,” slavery is here imagined as fully instated at the time of the riots. This reading does not account for the political leaders’ interest in the betterment of conditions for workers nor does it consider these acts as invested in an ongoing struggle for liberation. As the poem tells it, these actions were only performed to justify the participants’ lives to the future. The poet recants slightly by conceding, “Moved men make miracles” (202). At this point, it seems “Ballad for Tubal Butler” is winning out over “Hard Drought” in Roach’s assessment of history.

Roach’s penultimate unpublished poem, “At Quinam Bay,” offers an imaginary account of Columbus’s arrival at the beach in Trinidad where Roach would take his own life. The poem reflects the poet’s own melancholy as he portrays himself in the third person as having “seen and known and done too much; / bone-weary as Colon himself, / soul-wretched as the slavers’ crews” (208). The poet asks “Will the sea yield [me] quiet death. / Wake [me] a ghost of the despairs / of all the dead who trafficked here?” (208). Quinam Bay’s haunted shores compel the poet’s self-destructive thoughts, bringing him closer to both “Colon himself” (208) and “the dead who trafficked here” regardless of the fiction at the root of his claim (208). However, the poem is also recognizably haunted by the specter of oil and its industries.

In the opening lines, the poet offers a quaint picture of this part of the country, mentioning a “south town of quiet ways / and modest means” (207). But when it comes to the actual location where the poet stages the entire atrocity of slavery, what is to be found is “a green plain / of old oil wells and planted teak, / it is land’s end in Quinam Bay” (207). Oil’s color and fluid dynamics animate the surroundings and suddenly “The road’s a black canal to sea / where Colon’s schooners rolled off shore” (207). “Littering Earth’s Centre” and “At Quinam Bay” speak to one other. In both cases, history defeats the poet and drags everybody down with him. The ahistorical persistence of slavery in “Littering” and the presence of “old oil wells” in “Quinam” fatally conspire to produce the poet’s despair. We may imagine an alternative poem in which the poet takes arms against a sea of troubles, as did those activists in the past. It is enough to remember that Butler struck his resounding blow against the oil industry whose old wells appear inactive, if provocative, to the poet. For Best, such energy sources metaphorically drove high-powered products, intellectual and material, into the future. For Roach, such power could not be controlled.

Walcott in and out of *Tapia*

In “Littering Earth’s Centre,” Eric Roach deems fellow poet and *Tapia* contributor, Derek Walcott, “disdainful, cool, offhand, ironical” (206). Such an appraisal of the Saint Lucian poet in language that recalls the motorists in “Poem for this day” provides illuminating context for Walcott’s fraught relationship to the Caribbean. In this section, I consider Walcott’s involvement with *Tapia*, the alternatives to Best’s and Roach’s ideas that his poems present, and finally his 1976 collection *Sea Grapes*, which contains additional poems that refer back to his involvement

in this community. Bruce King argues that *Tapia* may have been the first fitting Caribbean publication for Walcott while he was living in Trinidad, both because it was based there and because it “gave serious attention to the arts and carried long review articles by local critics and writers” (303). As active as *Tapia* was in promoting Caribbean literary and artistic production as high-powered intellectual goods, it also clearly enunciated its prescriptive, economic and political attitudes. In my reading, *Tapia* represents a coherent, yet complex, authoritative discourse that Walcott’s poetry variably engages.

Walcott’s first poem in *Tapia* appeared in the June 27, 1971 issue, where it was simply titled “Poem.” Above “Poem” is an ad for a published speech, *The Idealism of Youth*, by Dr. Eric Williams. Below “Poem,” a short announcement recounts a recent screening at Tapia House of a film version of Walcott’s play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and advertises a future production of Walcott’s *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* “to be directed by the playwright himself” and performed at the Tapia House Moonlight Theatre (“Dream” 3). The film version of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* must be the NBC Experiment in Television production from 1970; the Moonlight Theatre production of *Ti-Jean* is not documented in future issues of *Tapia*.

The poem begins by relocating Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) to a Caribbean context, envisioning that poet’s death “among the yellowing coconuts” (Walcott “Poem” 3). Grammatically, the poem puts its lines in the interrogative, introducing its images through questions of *why* and *what* rather than direct description. The poet can be described as paranoid, as he anthropomorphizes his “gift,” his poetic talent, making it cast a glance “over its crouched shoulder” waiting “for a shadow to fill the door / and pass this very page into eclipse” (3). The deixis, which specifies the page upon which the poet writes, will specify a different page for the eventual reader, and creates a tension between an intense vision of guarded privacy and

the nature of very public reproduction within *Tapia*. The shadow, which may be the shade of Mandelstam as much as a plagiarist or imaginary censor, disappears under the brightness of the moon said to “increase into an arclamp” (3). The next image represents a familiar paranoid scene, wherein the poet imagines himself booked, as it were, into a jail: “why does... / the inkstain on my hand prepare to press thumb down / before a shrugging sergeant” (3).²⁰ The ink from writing becomes the ink of documenting either guilt or unjust imprisonment, but it also provides a certain amount of identity to the poet, seemingly detached from his own hand. The final image wherein “children’s eyes already seem like horizons, / and all of my poems, even this one, wish to hide” equates future readers, the children, with physical distance as the poems, rather than the poet, attempt to hide. As in the opening, the suspicions of poetry, enacted by the poems themselves and the officials who cast a shadow over them, are at odds with the practice of publication. When this poem reappeared in *Sea Grapes* in 1976, its title became “Preparing for Exile.”

What the spread on page 3 illustrates are the conflicting forces of control and proliferation that *Tapia* instantiates. It is consistent with Best’s ethics as an intellectual printman to provide space for the high-powered work of Eric Williams and Derek Walcott, with the added benefit that running the ad for *The Idealism of Youth* would bring *Tapia* revenue. Yet the pressures with which Walcott contends—a global network of writers represented by Mandelstam and the poem’s would-be readers and local suspicions—risk overwhelming Best’s designs for the future political utility of Caribbean arts and letters. By recapturing some of Walcott’s growing prestige through the efforts of the Moonlight Theatre, Best positions the *Tapia* movement as the

²⁰ Walcott’s later poem, “Forest of Europe,” will revisit the scene of a jail where the poet and Mandelstam are connected through a transcontinental “archipelago” of prisons, in a world where “there is no harder prison than writing verse” (377).

premier venue for all things Walcott. At the bottom of the page, below the blurb about the Moonlight Theatre, an announcement reads: “Now Available TAPIA in bound volumes” (3). It prompts us to imagine the newspaper resembling a book.

Mandelstam, born in the same decade as Tubal Uriah Butler, was an exile who ultimately died imprisoned under Stalin because of his poetry and ideas. The question of how seriously Walcott took the threat of state censorship and brutality seems secondary to the animosity he felt toward his local circumstances. Thinking through the poem’s future title, we can reread this poem as an early gesture towards Walcott’s emigration. In an article from 1980, D.S. Izevbaye notices that exile and prodigality figured heavily into Walcott’s poetic project and critical responses to him. Izevbaye cites a 1962 article by Hugo Williams of *London Magazine* to make the case that critics noticed Walcott’s “prodigal style” and “the exuberance and excess in the language” (71). Izevbaye associates this line of criticism with Walcott’s growing pains, or a necessary stage in “the development of the poet as a user of language” (71). Izevbaye understands Walcott as a prodigal twenty-four years before Walcott would don the mantle for his 2004 collection *The Prodigal*. Of the two terms, exile and prodigal, the latter is particularly interesting for its suggestiveness. What does it mean to be a prodigal? Is it that one squanders the patriarch’s money? Is it that one leaves home to do so, as we saw Roach suggest in “Poem for this day?” Is it, on the biblical example, that one passes through this lavish phase to return home? Is to call one a prodigal, amidst the rising action of the narrative, expressive of condemnation or hope?

On September 9, 1973, one week after its “Independence Special” and in the same issue as Brian Lewis’s article, *Tapia* published four poems by Derek Walcott in an enclosed literary supplement: “The Federalist,” “Non Serviam,” “At Last,” and “The Volcano.” All but “Non

“Non Serviam” eventually appeared in *Sea Grapes*. If Roach, over one year prior on the pages of *Tapia*, imagined Satan as the serpent self-destructing, Walcott, like the expatriate author James Joyce (1882-1941) before him, takes his motto as his own for the sake of self-creation. In “Non Serviam,” the poet listens to “heavy rain falling” (9). In doing so, the poet hears other voices than those who would diminish his poetry when they “say I’ve wasted my calling / if it isn’t without hatred, / torrential rage, or their pity / claiming the moans of the dead” (9). Unlike Roach, Walcott declines the bitterness that accompanies an obsession with history’s many violences and trespasses. So the poet declares, “not even my race / can keep me from what I must write / or the rain from falling” (9). Here race’s stultifying power can either be conceived as prejudicial exclusion from certain literary venues, or it can represent Walcott’s African ancestry. *Falling* appears twice in the poem, even enjoying the special distinction that comes with being the poem’s final word. Given the context, the word readily alludes to the biblical fall of man, but its association with rain removes the moralizing overtone. Walcott’s choice may well result in an exile, as Adam and Eve from Eden or Satan from heaven, but it preempts the narrative structure of prodigality. There will be no return, and indeed, these four poems were the last of Walcott’s to appear in *Tapia*.

Derek Walcott did not face political exile at the hands of a coercive state regime. Whatever he might have said about Caribbean politics could be no worse than Best’s voluminous tirades. Walcott was unwilling to accept the model of the prodigal. In rejecting Roach and Best’s rootedness, Walcott’s own obsession with leaving the Caribbean was exactly that: his own. If the biblical stories of Adam and Eve and the Prodigal Son could not be his models, and Osip Mandelstam’s fate would not be his own, then that left the literary alternative already suggested by the likes of James Joyce, that is, expatriation. As “Non Serviam” suggests, Walcott wanted to

leave because he wanted to write like his literary idols and achieve comparable stature. He, like Milton's Satan, embraces his ambition. The case becomes much clearer when considering the poem that appeared beneath "Non Serviam" in the literary supplement, "The Volcano."

Of the three poems that did make it into *Sea Grapes*, "The Volcano" underwent the least extensive revisions. "The Federalist," which became "The Lost Federation" in *Sea Grapes*, and "At Last" address politics and literature respectively in a committed and vituperative fashion similar to "Non Serviam" in their adamancy. And while those texts and their variants communicate plenty about Walcott's situated identity as a poet, "The Volcano" hazards a statement about literature, politics, and Walcott's relationship to both that foregrounds the regional petroleum industry's operations and infrastructure.

"The Volcano" begins by invoking two modernist figures, one an expatriate and one an exile: James Joyce and Joseph Conrad. We are introduced to Joyce by way of his well-known astrophobia ("Joyce was afraid of thunder") balanced against the apocryphal tale that "lions roared at his funeral" (9). Lines three and four work together to remind the reader of Joyce's expatriation. We are told correctly in line three that he died in Zurich only to have the poet aporetically question whether it was, in fact, "Zurich or Trieste" where Joyce died (9). Already, the poet has demonstrated his knowledge of Joyce, while generating an international dialogue between himself as a reader and the reader of his poem. The poet accomplishes the shift from Joyce to Conrad by positing that whereas Joyce's death "is a legend," Conrad's death is a "strong rumour" (9). Both the rumor and the legend make us think of something between written and oral forms of knowledge, but importantly a rumor is more likely to be interrogated for its veracity than a codified legend. Therefore, while Joyce's death is as much maintained as denied

by its status as a legend, we find ourselves actively asking: in what way might the poet mean that Conrad's death is just a rumor?

Because of Walcott's heavy use of literary references throughout his career, critics have given us excellent ways to understand the gesture being performed here. Jahan Ramazani celebrates postcolonial poets' use of modernist texts and authors through their strategic deployment of "postcolonial metaleptic" (114). Relevant to this poem, in Ramazani's estimation, this ability for postcolonial poets to use modernist texts by an associative logic has more to do with their talents as readers than as writers, their ability "to read [modernist poetry]...against the grain of its limitations" (114). To develop the political dimension of this aesthetic decision, Best and Levitt suggested that in order to rework the asymmetries in economic power between the hinterlands and the metropole, Caribbean exports had to outstrip imports from former colonizing countries. Walcott seemingly confronts suspiciousness toward imports in his poem from *Sea Grapes*, "Sainte Lucie," when he writes: "This is important water, / important? / imported? / Water is important" (37). In these lines, water's basic importance is questioned relative to its origin. As a result of this abrupt interrogation based upon a misheard, and therefore, mistaken premise, the poet must patronizingly restate water's importance before carrying on with the poem.

In "The Volcano," the literary imports of Joyce and Conrad are highly valued by the poet. Through a currency of reading, they are transformed into a refashioned export, changing genres from prose to poetry. Conrad's own novel, *Victory: An Island Tale*, enters the poem under the same condition as its author, within the penumbra of a "strong rumour" that suggests the novel "is ironic" (9). Ironically, to make anything of this rumor whatsoever, one would have to read some portion of *Victory*.

Set in British Malaya, on the fictitious island of Samburan, *Victory* follows Axel Heyst, former manager of the liquidated Tropical Belt Coal Company as he traipses about on all sorts of existential misadventures before he eventually kills himself. If naming a book about an imperialist who kills himself *Victory* seems ironic to you, you may not be the audience for this poem. And yet, the poem owes much of its imagery and even its language to *Victory*. Observing some “gasflares,” the poet likens their “glare” to “the glow of the cigar, / and the glow of the volcano / at victory’s end” (9). In *Victory*, as any reader of the novel would know, the cigar is a metaphor for the volcano: “His nearest neighbor...was an indolent volcano which smoked faintly all day with its head just above the northern horizon, and at night levelled at him, from amongst the clear stars, a dull red glow, expanding and collapsing spasmodically like the end of a gigantic cigar puffed at intermittently in the dark” (Conrad 7). This does not happen at “victory’s end,” but at the beginning (Walcott, “The Volcano” 9). Consequently, a careful reader of “The Volcano” will notice that “victory,” the second time it is used, is not in italics (9). This opens up interpretive possibilities for the phrase “victory’s end” (9). Does it mean defeat? Does it mean the kind of disillusionment experienced by Lloyd Best and the Tapia House movement after the anti-climax of Eric Williams’s post-independence Trinidad? Certainly, the third time and final time that the word “victory” appears in the poem, also un-italicized, it is a rather inert proposition in which “so many refuse to enter the silence / of victory, the indolence” (9).

Glancing back up at the passage from Conrad’s novel, we see the phrase “an indolent volcano” transformed into “the indolence / that burns” in Walcott’s poem (“The Volcano” 9). More words from this passage, “horizon” and “night,” appear in the poem, but the full phrase “glow of the volcano” also appears in both. In an exact instance of metalepsis, the somewhat odd pairing of Joyce and Conrad can be explained as a conjugate between Joyce, “afraid of thunder,”

and Conrad's volcano, possibly reverse engineered from reading in *Victory* about "those silly thunderstorms...[that] hang about the volcano" (307). The pleasure of this poem comes from being able to keep up with Walcott without any of Brian Lewis's anxiety about the "western materials" that compose it (Lewis 8).

Even when the poet attempts to draw a false dichotomy between being either a writer or a reader, we are given subtle hints to understand that these distinctions are not so easily maintained. The poet ponders, "One could give up writing, / and the slow burning ruminative ambition / of the great, / for being, instead / the ideal reader, ruminative, voracious, / making the love of masterpieces / a superior art to attempting / to repeat or outdo them" ("The Volcano" 9). Here, both the great writers and the ideal readers are described with the adjective "ruminative" (9). This section of the poem also establishes another false dichotomy between "attempting / to repeat or outdo [masterpieces]" (9). The poet himself has already repeated parts of *Victory* in this poem. And one could imagine that the only person who could assess whether this poem outdoes any given masterpiece, including *Victory*, is the poet's "ideal reader" (9). Either way, through these misleading binary oppositions the poet and the reader are brought into close proximity by both their reading habits and their need for each other.

"The Volcano" is set "on the edge of the night horizon from the beach / house on the edge of the rocks" (9). We cannot ascertain whether this house is a *tapia*, an *ajoupa*, or some modern house, and the obsessed speaker located on a shore might be Best, or Roach, or Walcott. The speaker looks out to see the "two glares from the miles-out /at sea derricks" (9). Had any of these three figures looked out, they would have seen such emblems of the petroleum trade. It would be true too for anybody on that beach in Trinidad. *Tapia* registers the popular discourse around the petroleum industry by publishing, two pages after "The Volcano," a "statement by the

Managing Director of Shell Trinidad Limited” in which he addresses the “concern being expressed by people worried by possible adverse consequences” of Shell’s regional activity (Bates 11). What distinguishes the speaker of “The Volcano” from Best, Roach, or the average Trinidadian is what he makes of what he sees in the distance, for it is neither the economic future of Trinidad, nor Christopher Columbus’s ships, nor an environmental catastrophe.

By their homophonic relationship to the author, the “miles-out /at sea derricks” serve as his “at sea” doubles—readers and great writers. They are also the site of great industry and potential power. In her reading of “The Sea is History,” Sonya Posmentier acknowledges the ambivalence of Walcott’s sea such as it “exemplifies nature’s status as at once freighted with history and independent of it, existing in both metaphoric and metonymic relationship to human experience” (111). Even though, for that poem, Posmentier, working with a quote from J.P. White, concludes that the sea as “an environment that ‘does not have anything on it that is a memento of man,’ seems an ideal geography for imagination,” in “The Volcano,” evidence of the petroleum trade does not disrupt, but drives, the poet’s imagination (108). Ramazani helps us understand this messy seascape and how it relates to Joyce and Conrad when he writes “[t]he choice for Walcott...was not between an imported modernism and a pristine native culture, since the forms of cultural dominance against which [he] struggled were often local instantiations of the *imperium*” (99). For Walcott, both the exterior and interior worlds bear the marks of colonialism—trade and education—and he chooses to stare directly at them, making them his own. If Walcott is in the business of producing high-powered intellectual goods, he is also expressing in this poem an affinity for industry.

The November 7, 1971 issue of *Tapia*, the “National Crisis Special,” makes clear how difficult Best’s protests against the future of Trinidadian oil expropriation were. The front-page

headline reads “Not Black Power but Black Gold!” For five pages, Best decries everything about the state of Trinidadian oil: international corporations’ involvement, Trinidad’s own National Petroleum Company, the Petroleum Act, and most pointedly, Eric Williams who “dismissed Tapia’s call for localization of oil as a mere ‘intellectual fetish’” (National Crisis Special 1). Certainly, Best stands as an exception to Brian Meeks’s more general observation regarding the political challenge oil created in Trinidad following independence when he opines, “I suspect that oil and gas wealth and the complications of ethnic politics may have served to dampen, at least among intellectuals, the discrediting of the elsewhere moribund neo-liberal agenda” (97). Best remained equally critical of the neoliberalism that exploited Trinidadian resources and the structures through which Trinidad received some of the wealth from these endeavors. We must also admit Roach and Walcott to this strain of intellectuals who were not dampened by wealth. For this period, history never permitted Best’s purported “intellectual fetish” a chance to challenge the trajectory of international petro-hegemony; however, these two poets and their high-powered intellectual goods remain active, circulating beyond their original production, un beholden to their historical moment.

In 1976, Derek Walcott’s *Sea Grapes* was published by Jonathan Cape in the United Kingdom and by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the United States. Each publisher advanced a slightly different version of the author. While the front covers are the same, Walcott’s author photo occupies three quarters of the back of the Cape edition. By contrast, FSG’s Noonday Press paperback includes a bio on the back cover that begins “Derek Walcott lives in Trinidad.” The top blurb, from poet Edward Hirsch, defines Walcott as “a poet...engaged in a complex struggle to render his native Caribbean culture, the new world, first successor to Eden.” As Gail Low notes, “[t]he reception of Walcott at Cape and their subsequent promotion were to position him

within, as opposed to differentiating him from, English poetry” (113). The front matter of the FSG edition of *Sea Grapes* includes a list of publications where a number of the poems in the collection previously appeared. In a list that contains major literary journals, including *The New Yorker* and *London Magazine*, one may look askance at the first publication acknowledged: *Tapia*.

To understand Walcott through *Tapia* involves recognizing that his immediate circumstances when in Trinidad consisted of a wealth of ideas and artworks that were accommodating to his own poetic vision. Some of the ambiguities, false equivalences, and endless acts of doubling in Walcott’s poems seemingly position him against ideas expressed by Roach or Best, though neither were his enemies, and each conceived of poetry, let alone politics, differently from the other. That such complexities arise within and between these intellectuals speaks to the vibrancy of Trinidadian intellectual life at the time. To imagine them as each other’s readers requires recognizing *Tapia*’s material contributions to Caribbean cultural production. Two poems from *Sea Grapes* gain a special significance by referring to the community that formed through *Tapia*.

Within the article “Fallen Angel in a Shroud of News Print,” from the December 17, 1972 issue of *Tapia*, the word *prodigal* stands out from the surrounding text, bolded and on its own line. That article begins, “June 19, Butler Day while hawking papers in Independence Square I pushed a *Tapia* in front of a bloated, aging mulatto woman who turned away” (12). The woman in question was Gene Miles (1930-1972), who the article describes as “a fallen angel, a prodigal daughter of the establishment who was not given a chance to return to the fold” (12). What had Gene Miles done to earn that ill-fitting yet condemnatory adjective *prodigal*? As the article tells it, in the consistently misogynistic terms established in the beginning, she was “a

civil servant” who turned opportunistic activist once she “fell out of favor” with the People’s Nationalist Movement. Her activism was emblemized when she took to “the witness stand of the Gas Station Inquiry” in 1967 and exposed national corruption in “the gas station racket” (12). It is hard to understand the anti-eulogy’s real complaint with Miles, who struck her own memorable blow against both perennial opponents of *Tapia*, the PNM, founded by Eric Williams, and the petrochemical industry. Perhaps this newspaper hawker really did encounter an older Miles on Butler Day of that year, but the author certainly did not afford her the dignity which that holiday’s namesake garners within the pages of *Tapia*.

In *Sea Grapes*, the elegy “The Silent Woman” bears a dedication to “Jean [sic] Miles” (23). The poet describes “her final silence” and the relief it brings to those in power (23). The irony of the title, calling silent a woman who was predominantly known for her testimony, emphasizes the importance of spoken challenges to corruption, even if they bring on the potential for tragedy. In this way, we can understand how the poet and the activist share some overlap in their recourse to words. Walcott does not qualify her accomplishments in the way the *Tapia* article does. The poet apostrophizes “Miss Miles” when he proclaims, “it was better to be broken / than like the rest, your betters, / to leave the truth unspoken” (23). In this way, the poet, like Gene Miles, bears witness. By recognizing Miles’s contributions, Walcott, here, does not need to imagine poems as materially complex intellectual goods or worry about his own relationship to political action.

I will conclude with “The Wind in the Dooryard,” a three-page elegy coming right after the imported “Volcano” (sans definite article) in *Sea Grapes* and dedicated to Eric Roach. The poem begins on a resigned note as the poet claims twice, “I did not want this poem to come” (58). The poet then declares “I will tell you what he celebrated,” where *he* is Roach (58). We

would do well to remember here that whatever a reader—especially a reader of either edition of *Sea Grapes*—was told about Roach at this time would have been both news and the whole of the story. Roach’s poems were not readily available. A further cautionary note: celebratory is seldom the mood of Roach’s poetry. Even when Roach describes beauty, such descriptions will bear a trace of melancholic reservation. As such, when the poet describes Roach’s suicide by drowning through the image of a man who “went swimming to Africa / ...to reach his ancestors,” we should bear in mind Walcott’s adamant rejection of this relationship to history, as glimpsed in “Non Serviam,” even though the transatlantic voyage of the later *Omeros* springs to mind (58).

In what follows, Walcott identifies plants—the coralita, the ackee, and the almond—along with images of rural labor: “the jaws of the sugar mules / ruminant and grind like the factory” (58). Following this, the poem introduces more ambivalent language as it describes the poet’s reluctance to hear “the echo of broken windmills, / the mutter of the wild yams creeping / over the broken palings / the noise of the moss / stitching the stone barracoons” (59). The decadence in these images reminds the reader of the history of slave labor in the Caribbean, as the “broken windmills” and the “barracoons,” metonymize the sugar industry and the trade in enslaved African peoples respectively. Yet, these windmills are not free from their quixotic implications as all these noises conspire to remind the poet of Roach’s “rusty theme” (59).

In the final stanza, a smell from “under the armpit / of the hot sky” and an optimistic coralita that “like us, / ...smells the freshness of life” seem to be the final conjoined objects that the poet proposes were Roach’s celebrated poetic objects (59-60). The beauty of the poem belies a certain cynicism. Whether or not Roach’s view of the interminable persistence of slavery into the present is a conclusion with which one agrees, describing Roach as a poet who *celebrated* the

mundane reminders of colonialism and slavery is far less generous than acknowledging that Gene Miles spoke out against that with which she disagreed.

Between Lloyd Best, Eric Roach, and Derek Walcott, we can approach a very specific and peculiar understanding of the role poetry may play in an imagined community. What seems so remarkable to me is that, at base, all three writers must have agreed that the state of Trinidadian and Caribbean politics needed some amount of reform, and that poetry could have had a role in it. None of the three were overly enthusiastic, to put it mildly, about Eric Williams. While we may imagine poetry's autonomy in the face of daily politics and the news, it stands to reason that the greatest point of disagreement between these three figures and what forced them each into their position relative to one another, was the role poetry should play regarding societal progress. None of them believed poetry to be either apolitical or immaterial. Charting these intellectual crosscurrents proves no less difficult than recognizing the processes of globalization emerging at the time in Trinidad. If these three were each other's reader, they also wrote back.

[Appendix A]

And Ours is the Earth

Leave them with their dollars, their bills, and their Wall Street.
 Now, we are the sad ones of the cities and the fields.
 Leave them with their gods and their luxury:
 their gods were always deaf to our complaints,
 and their luxury is borrowed:
 they are dressed with our misery.

We are also rich;
 but none will take our treasure from us!

And ours is the immense forge of the sun
 and the song of the hammer
 and the great tapestry of the sea, embroidered with fish
 and the combined strength of the workshop and the factory,
 the rebellious gesture, the hope,
 and the muscle.

And ours,
 is the pain of those who suffer and hope!

The great days will come
 like new coins rolling into our life,
 and then our hands will be filled with joy!

Leave them, today, dropsical of gold,
 that none will take from us what is ours!

And ours is the immense land, all
 ripened by longings and flowered by twilights.

And ours
 is the great sickle of the wind,
 that in the morning is reaping bunches of the future!

[Regino Pedroso; Translation Mine]

[Appendix B]

PETROLEUM

A Poem to be written in the first days following the war.

With petroleum
fighter planes have been fed
and they launched fire into the air
over my large cities
and my little villages
with streets of dust and stone
and weak streetlights at each turn.
Over those and in the wheat fields, my love,
where thousands were no longer able
to take a single fistful of land, because
there was no land; and even if there were: without fingers,
it's impossible to take anything with your hands.
And that oil works for peace
and that because of their wealth in it,
the Allies won the war
in this way freeing the free world
(jointly with Communist Russia
allied of course to the free world)
of Adolf and of Benito,
let us admit it is true.
But if the Allies freed us
(and they say that they freed us)
of the terrible Axis of Rome-Berlin-Tokyo,
pray tell, who
will free us of the Allies?
[Beltrán Morales; Translation mine]

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