Imagined Islands: A Caribbean Tidalectics

by

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Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Imagined Islands: A Caribbean Tidalectics confronts islands—at once as a problem, a concept, and a historical and mythical fact and product—by generating a tidalectical encounter between some of the ways in which islands have been imagined and used from without, primarily in the interest of the advancement of western capitalist coloniality, and from within, as can be gathered from Caribbean literatures. The perspective from without, predominantly based on negation, is explored in Section 1 using examples of islands in the Mediterranean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, as well as a few canonical texts in various academic discourses. Section 2 discusses the perspective from within, an affirmative and creative counter-imagina­tion on/of islands. Emerging from literary work by Derek Walcott, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, Édouard Glissant, and Alejo Carpentier, the chapters in Section 2 are organized around three key concepts associated with insularity—tropical light, the coast, and the sea/ocean—and the ways in which they force a rearrangement of enduring philosophical concepts: respectively, vision and sense perception, time and space, and history.

Imagined Islands’ Introduction establishes, (1) the stakes of a project undertaken from an immanent perspective set in the Caribbean; (2) the method, inspired chiefly by Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectics; (3) the epistemological problems posed by islands; (4) an argument for a different understanding of history, imagination, and myth inspired by Caribbean texts; and, (5) an overview of the academic debates in which Imagined Islands might make a significant contribution. The first section, “Islands from Without,” comprising Chapter 1, provides an account of a few uses and imaginations of islands by capitalist coloniality as they manifest themselves both in the historical and the mythical imaginary realms. I focus on five uses and imaginations of islands (entrepôt island, sugar island, strategic island, paradise island, and laboratory island), with specific examples from the Mediterranean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, and from five canonical texts ascribed to different
disciplinary discourses: Plato’s “Atlantis,” Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species*, and Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. I argue, on the one hand, that a dominant idea of the island based on negation (lack, dependency, boundedness, isolation, smallness, remoteness, among other characteristics) has coalesced in the expansionist and exploitative interests of capitalist coloniality, despite the fundamental promiscuity of the concept of “island.” On the other hand, I find in the analyzed examples, especially in those of the mythical imaginary, residues in flight that remain open for creative reappropriation.

*Imagined Islands*’ second section, “Islands from Within,” encompassing Chapters 2 through 5, relocates the discussion within the Caribbean in order to argue that some of the region’s literatures have produced a counter-imagination concerning insularity. This counter-imagination, resulting from an immanent and affirmative engagement with Caribbean islands, amounts to a way of thinking about and living the region and its possibilities in terms other than those of the dominant idea of the island. Each chapter opens with a historical and conceptual discussion of the ways in which light (Chapter 2), the coast (Chapters 3 and 4), and the sea/ocean (Chapter 5) have been imagined and deployed by capitalist coloniality, before turning to Caribbean literary texts as instances of a re-conceptualization of the aforementioned insular features and their concomitant rearrangement of apparently familiar philosophical concepts. Chapter 2 focuses on tropical light, vision, sense perception, Walcott’s book-length poem *Tiepolo’s Hound*, and Rodríguez Juliá’s novel *El espíritu de la luz*. Chapter 3 turns to the insular coast, time, space, and the novels *El siglo de las luces* by Carpentier and *The Fourth Century* by Glissant. Chapter 5 goes out to sea and history with the help of Rodríguez Juliá’s chronicles “El cruce de la Bahía de Guánica y otras ternuras de la Medianía” and “Para llegar a Isla Verde,” as well as of sections from Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* and some of his poems from *The Restless Earth*. Finally, *Imagined Islands*’ Coda points to some of the ripples this project produces for future study, and defends the urgent need to “live differently” the Caribbean archipelagoes.
Dedication

To Lissette, the best character in our love story. To Andre, whose being there has changed everything. To islands and their dignity. “To every tortur {ed geography.”

Édouard Glissant, Riveted Blood 5

The noise my leaves make is my language. In it is tunneled the roar of seas of a lost ocean. It is a fresh sound. Let me not be ashamed to write like this, because it supports this thesis, that our only true apprehensions are through metaphor, that the old botanical names, the old processes cannot work for us. Let’s walk.

Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 57
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**Introduction: Tidalectical Islands**

**Living with the Impasse**

Es el lamentable saldo que ha dejado el colonialismo, la dependencia económica y el sistema de la plantación sobre un mundo insular de por sí afectado geográficamente por huracanes, inundaciones costeras, sequías, terremotos y erupciones volcánicas. En apenas dos siglos se han extinguido en las Antillas treinta y cuatro especies de mamíferos, diez de reptiles y seis de aves, para un total de cincuenta especies. Como contraste, dentro del mismo periodo la América del Norte ha perdido sólo ocho especies de animales vertebrados. Si tomamos como marco el periodo de cinco siglos que va entre el año 1500 y el 2000, tenemos que entre la tercera y cuarta parte de todas las extinciones de mamíferos han ocurrido en las Antillas. En proporción a su tamaño, estas islas han sufrido más pérdidas en su biodiversidad que cualquier otro lugar del planeta. Antonio Benítez Rojo, “Paraísos perdidos” 23

To write within an archipelago besieged by such crushing devastation… To write within extensively colonized and recolonized lands, seas, histories, peoples, thoughts, imaginations – (re)colonizations that, I might add, include the epistemic status itself of those very concepts: what they (could possibly) mean and what (could possibly) constitute them to begin with – such as what has come to be called “the Caribbean,” has produced a long, self-reflective, often tortured, tradition that need not be recounted but whose invocation, at least, cannot be avoided. The tradition is so profuse and the repetition of the “cannot be avoided” so overwhelming, that I have encountered in recent years and in many informal conversations, a sort of meta-anguish that manifests itself as an injunction not to declare the problem anymore because it is perceived as constituting either, (1) an *a priori* justification for the possible shortcomings of one’s project, which conveniently short-circuits in advance any sort of negative critique; (2) an enduring (masochistic?) bent on thinking under the sign of anxiety that, derived as it is from a dense history of exploitation, precludes any new, different idea of the present from manifesting itself; or, (3) a reproduction of all that “theory,” which, to tell at least

---

1 “It is the pitiful result of colonialism, economic dependency, and the plantation system in an insular world itself already geographically affected by hurricanes, coastal floods, draughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. In hardly two decades, thirty-four species of mammals, ten species of reptiles, and six species of birds, a total of fifty species, have been wiped out. In contrast, during the same period, North America has lost only eight species of vertebrate animals. If we take as our frame of reference the period of five centuries between 1500 and 2000, we can conclude that between one-third and one-fourth of all extinctions of mammals have occurred in the Antilles. In proportion to their size, these islands have suffered more losses in their biodiversity than any other place on the planet.” All translations from Spanish to English in _Imagined Islands_ are mine unless otherwise noted.
from the names and texts usually included and excluded in US universities’ courses on the subject, does not seem to “take place” in those (re)colonized amits to begin with, has overcome and, most especially, that demon of all theoretical “posts”—unproblematized binaries. This results, then, in a renewed instantiation of what Johannes Fabian called “the denial of coevalness.” (Re)colonized spaces, times, peoples, will always be behind, in some “not-yet” state that extends even to the the dimensions of imagination and thought themselves: (1) if we are unable to deal with negative critique, then we must not yet be sure enough of ourselves and of what we have to say; (2) we also seem to be stuck in the historical past and psychoanalytically incapable of overcoming our symptomatic anxiety; and, (3) we appear to be eternally behind in theoretical and philosophical debates.

To judge from the preceding exposition, that we might have overcome thinking about “poetics,” for instance, in a purely aristotelian register might seem to come as the result of some miracle. That we might have been thinking all the while about “poetics” in terms of some other, oral, so-called mythical, barely surviving register of a Taíno story or a Yoruba system might seem to come as the result of our past-bound ignorance of what philosophy and aesthetics really are. That we might have followed the changes in the concept of “poetics” throughout the West’s3 philosophical tradition, that we might have studied them closely, that we might have understood them clearly, that we might have even dared to use them, might seem to come as the result of our childish, immature nature as mere imitators. As is evident, we write with the acute consciousness of an impasse that, from whatever angle, seems irresolvable. Or is it?

2 As much as possible, I prefer to avoid using the concepts “western” and the “West” for what they mean is exceedingly equivocal. Furthermore, “western” and the “West” are geographical mystifications: their meaning, however confused, depends on historical productions of space and direction, supported and reproduced by our dominant modes of cartography. The idea that the “West” signals “western Europe” and the “United States” only makes sense under our dominant visual, cartographic representation of the world, its landmasses, and its oceans. If we pursue this dominant cartographic argument to its logical conclusions, then the “West” must also entail regions such as the Caribbean, the island of St. Helena, Central and South America, and the Galápagos Islands, but those are surely not meant to be implied when the “West” is invoked… That being said, the use of “western” and the “West” is so ubiquitous for naming a certain generalization within specificity that it is difficult to avoid them absolutely. My use of “western” is, more often than not, as an adjective to “European” in order to signal the difference between the imperial projects in the Americas—carried out primarily by Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, and the Netherlands—and other Europes not engaged directly in them.
Imagined Islands argues that there exists in the Caribbean a tradition of writing—primarily on 20th century writers, but this can surely be investigated in previous times—that overcomes the impasse without negating or suppressing it. It does so by exposing the extent to which the impasse, if still irrevocably true, works as another grip of that which we sought to break in the first place, insofar as it brings us to a place where we might feel like we have nothing to say or, even worse, like we cannot speak. Then, Imagined Islands proceeds to postulate—not necessarily explicitly on all occasions—that there are, once one investigates, thinks, and imagines, some concepts and some metaphors that are preferable to others (we have come to the conclusion, for instance, that if we are to metaphorize ourselves as Shakespearian characters, we might as well prefer to be Calibans than Prosperos!); that they must be meaningfully rearranged, which is another way of saying that they must be creatively produced; and that doing so will always be an entangled risk, but one we must take.

(Re)colonization and capitalism—a deadly combination that, as we shall see, I here choose to call “capitalist coloniality” tend to take away from us every concept and every metaphor because they are (or have the potential of becoming) “colonizing” or “capitalistic.” “Theory” cements the conceptual plundering—to echo Eduardo Galeano’s concept of Latin American history as the “historia del saqueo”—by insisting, for instance, that we mobilize “ocean” to our peril since it is already a capitalist and colonizing concept. The same (with the addition of the specter of nationalism) goes for “land.” “Territory” or “deterritory,” “vertical hierarchy” or “horizontal net,” just to provide a few other examples, are sure to be met with the same suspicion. As I will be at pains to demonstrate, particularly in the first chapter, the conceptual plundering is undeniably true. If capitalist coloniality were to have a code of arms, it would certainly be overcast with a big, bold, chameleon. But should we absolutely give up all concepts to it then? When we do, we not only hand capitalist coloniality an even greater triumph, but we are also forced to reduce our work to finding all

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3 See Las venas abiertas de América Latina.
the ways in which others succumb, naively, to capitalism’s lure by deploying concepts the latter always already controlled. We will never err, then, because we “know;” we become the godly, patronizing critic who refuses to become vulnerable and take risks—the risk of being co-opted or the risk of truly encountering the other. And, perhaps most tragically, we will never create anything.

In contrast, I find in the Caribbean texts by Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, Alejo Carpentier, and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá engaged with in the second section of this study, recurrent evidence of taking the risk of creation, affirmation, and re-conceptualization. Whatever the inconsistencies and difficulties, bound to take place anyway, in their texts, there is an affirmation of the insular Caribbean, and, with it, of the world and of the present; of the production of concepts from lived phenomena such as the tropical light, the coast, and the sea; and of the rearranging of old ones like space and time. In engaging with these texts, I strive, therefore, to perform a critical practice that also takes the risk of positing and producing, while it fights, when necessary, other postulations and productions.

Such critical practice, then, lives within the impasse, and responds somewhat like this to the previous injunctions: (1) if the argument is that we are unsure of ourselves, then that makes us modest, vulnerable, hesitant, which certainly makes for preferable modes of thought and imagination and for preferable relationships to the world than those of the immodest, invulnerable, and unhesitant; (2) if it is that we do not forget our historical past and do not shake ourselves entirely of the anxiety it produces, then that makes for a preferable position and proposition for and in the present and for a constant check on relentless, exploitative, omnipotent “progress” and “development;” (3) if it is that we are “behind” in theory and philosophy, then that makes for a preferable mode of analysis and imagination than the obsessive, often empty, focus on the “cutting-edge” and the “post-post.”
Method

There was a phrase from a Latin text at school. Quales est natura insulae? What is the nature of the island? It has stuck in here for over thirty-five years. I do not know if I am ready to answer it. Except by hints. Contradictions. Terrors. The opposite method to the explorer’s. Not by botany or by the journal that names today’s discoveries, today’s repetitions. Not by the dial or the pen or the compass. By a method not yet known to itself, appropriately. By a great deal of principled doubt, for this is not undertaken with any great spirit of faith. We lie—we know the island is known. Yet I must have that humility that knows that unless I triangulate my travels, my self as a poet, both I and the island are lost. It was not originally my island, but I came upon it and had to claim it by necessity, desperation even, and I’m webbed in its design. Who shakes it, however subtly, shakes me.

Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 52, emphasis added

Here is an unknown plant. Take the arrogance of an Old World botanist naming this plant then, this one on the grass verge of the beach that I do not even have a name for, and I now believe that my ignorance is more correct than his knowledge, that my privilege makes it correct as quietly as Adam’s, or Crusoe’s, and that what it reminds me of, its metaphor, is more important than the family it springs from.

Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 56

Living with the impasse requires, as implied in the previous discussion and as colonized peoples know well, a knowledge and an imagination that concerns discourses produced from within and from without. A crucial question on method emerges then: how to think and imagine with both discourses without being blind to the structures of power that perpetuate unequal conditions for their production and dissemination? To answer this question, which underlies Imagined Islands throughout, I take my inspiration from Walcott’s statements above, from Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectics, and from Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s approach to rhythm. Our method must depart from and retain both Walcott’s conviction that it must admit “hints. Contradictions. Terrors,” which makes it “the opposite method to the explorer’s [arrogant one]” and his hesitation and doubt when he adds, “a method not yet known to itself, appropriately.” Such requirements can be met if we proceed tidalectically.

In ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite refers to the image of an “old woman” sweeping sand in her “ole yard” in an impoverished region (not “a Jamaica North Coast bikini situatio(n)”) (29). The poet, who was staying in a house nearby, is deeply intrigued—indeed, he is “tirelessly tryin to” understand—this image, repeated every morning:
She’s going on like this every morning, sweeping this sand –of all things!– away from… sand from sand, seen?… And I say Now what’s she doing? What’s this labour involve with? Why’s she labouring in this way? . . . Because I get the understandin(g) that she somehow believes that if she don’t do this, the household –that ‘poverty-stricken’ household of which she’s part – probably head of– would have somehow collapse.” (30)

The image, Brathwaite claims, gives him the “on-going ‘answer’” to the “quest/ion,” “What is Caribbean/the Caribbean? What is this –this archipelago, these beautiful islands – yes – which are contrasted in their beauty with extreme poverty and a sense – a memory – of catastrophe What is the origen of this… this paradoxical and pluraradial situation?” (29) The answer comes one morning when, as he observes the woman, “it seems as if her feet, which all along I thought were walking on the sand… were really… walking on the water… and she was travelling across the middlepass age, constantly coming from where she had come from –in her case Africa– to this spot in North Coast Jamaica where she now lives…” (33).

To this constant and coastal back and forth movement –a repetition of the “coming out” of Africa and of the “arrival” on this “set of islands,” which is resonant with Carpentier’s “recuerdo del porvenir” (“remembrance of the future”) and with Glissant’s “prophetic vision of the past” Brathwaite attributes the quality of a *tidalectics*. The woman’s movement, moreover, is the same as that of the ocean she walks on, “coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(it) future…” (34).

Elizabeth DeLoughrey has usefully described tidalectics as a “geopoetic model of history” and as a “methodological tool that foregrounds how a dynamic model of geography can elucidate island history and cultural production, providing the framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots” (*Routes and Roots* 2). Furthermore, “Tidalectics engage what Brathwaite calls an ‘alter/native’ historiography to linear models of colonial progress. This ‘tidal dialectic’ resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel’s

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4 In Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos*.
5 In Édouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*. 

6
dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean. Tidalectics also foreground alter/native epistemologies to western colonialism and its linear and materialist biases” (2).

But it must be stressed that the movement of the tides is not exactly cyclical. What makes the concept of tidalectics fascinating is that, although the ocean appears to be engaged in an endless repetition of the same back and forth movement at every moment, the tide is, in fact, never exactly the same nor does it retreat or return to the same spot of “origin.” The movement of the tides to be experienced everyday on a given coast (low and high tides) is determined by several forces, themselves in constant movement and change: primarily, the gravitational effects of the moon and the sun in combination with the movement of the earth (these astral bodies do not rotate in a circular pattern but rather in an elliptical one); but also the constitution and shape of the particular coast one is concerned with (which is, itself, and at the same time, also produced by the tides themselves); and the pattern of tide movement in the deep ocean, which resonates, so to speak, all the way to the coast.

The fundamental differences in the movement of tides are exceedingly subtle and the more evident variations may take countless years to coalesce, but that is precisely the point: tidalectics signals a special attention to the constant and ever-changing production of the coast-space in a time much slower than that of capitalist coloniality. In contrast to the dialectic, the tides, furthermore, signal a type of change that, spatially, is not forward-oriented or perpendicularly constituted.

Tidalectics, then, insists on the need of the both… and rather than the either…or. The woman in Brathwaite’s image, positioned squarely on the sandy coast, illuminates the possibility of sweeping water; of combining territory with deterritory; History with history; history with imagination, myth and metaphor; that which comes from without and that which comes from within. From the concept of tidalectics we can also already grasp the recurrent affirmations of a

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6 For a further exploration of tidalectics as an ‘alter/native,’ see Brathwaite’s “Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms.”
7 For introductory material on tides, see <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/tides/tides01_intro.html>
rearrangement of time and space, and of a different perspective on light, the coast, and the sea that chapters 2 through 5 are concerned with. We can also perceive that tidalectics signals, *simultaneously*, the materiality of the sea, the waves, the coast, the woman, and the immateriality of their movement. In other words, the concept incorporates, at the same time, the physical phenomena and our imagination of it, as well as the history and the myth or metaphor that might be produced from it.

The immaterial, non-written movement that characterizes tidalectics also implies a particular *rhythm*, a concept that fascinated Antonio Benítez-Rojo throughout his work. Rhythm was for Benítez-Rojo a submarine connection of sorts, a “repetition with difference” he would probably say, between all Caribbean “Peoples of the Sea”: “¿Existen ritmos insulares que nos acerquen, ritmos que recojan el juego de las olas con el horizonte atlántico? Intuitivamente, diría que sí” (“Reflexiones sobre un archipiélago posible” 99). This project uses, always remembering that it is not “known to itself appropriately,” a tidalectical method “opposite to the explorer’s” –whose approach tends to be arrogant, vertically-constituted and arrow-like; whose itinerary goes from the ocean, through the coast, and to the island; and in whose process “hints, contradictions, terrors” are inadmissible– in order to illuminate the extent to which such method is already being produced, tidalectically, between the different Caribbean islands and their literary texts.

*Imagined Islands* deploys certain strategies so as to experiment with such tidalectical method: (1) an overarching counterpoint between discourses on insularity from without and from within; (2) an organization of the second section’s argument that travels from within the island (from within its tropical light), through the coast and, finally, out to sea, instead of the other way around; (3) a thematic approach that turns into problems for thought categories usually unquestioned in analyses of Caribbean literatures, such as the ocean, the sea, the coast, and tropical light; and (4) an approach

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8 “Do insular rhythms exist that would bring us closer, rhythms that would meld the play of the waves with the Atlantic horizon? Intuitively, I would say yes.”

9 Already since the 1970s and in a different register, Brathwaite was advocating for a critical “procedure” that would “establish a base in the inner plantation and proceed outwards: connection with the inner metropole, with the ancestors, with the outer plantation, and with the neglected maroons” (“Caribbean Man in Space and Time” 208).
to writing and reading that is akin to walking, an activity that forces us to consider a slower rhythm and an expansion of our sense perception (this will be especially developed in Chapter 3). The relevance of such strategies will become perceptible, hopefully, in the following chapters, but it should be kept in mind that they are—and perhaps should remain—an experimentation, “not yet known to itself, appropriately” and full of “hints, contradictions, terrors.”

**Imagined Islands**

Amply stated, *Imagined Islands* is concerned with questions related to insularity and Caribbean literatures. As will become evident, such questions cannot be justly considered by resorting to a strict chronological, national or disciplinarian approach. I have rather preferred to organize the dissertation dialectically around two main sections: (1) uses and imaginations of islands from without, mainly as this pertains to capitalist coloniality and as it emerges from a selection of, among myriad possibilities, a few key texts on islands and insularity from different disciplines and periods (Section 1, Chapter 1); and, (2) imaginations and uses of islands from within, with a focus on a few Caribbean literary texts (Section 2, Chapters 2-5).

The first section, “Insularity from Without,” studies in very general terms the uses and conceptualizations of islands from without, as well as the consolidation of a negation-laden dominant idea of insularity. Thus, Chapter 1 uses, first, historical examples from the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific regions as nodal points around which to explore the “entrepôt island,” the “sugar island,” and the “strategic island,” a few recurrent, but by no means exclusive, capitalist and colonial uses of islands. The historical sketch furnished in the chapter is, of necessity, rather general, highly selective, and limited in range. Nonetheless, it provides a picture of the production of the dominant idea of the island in the West roughly from the 15th through the 21st centuries, that long historical moment when the interests of capitalism and coloniality have been tightly bound through the different western European and U.S. imperial projects—one could call it the moment of
“capitalist coloniality.” Accordingly, the chapter discusses the central role of islands in the development of mercantilist capitalism, in the transition and consolidation of industrial capitalism, and, finally, in today’s “global capitalism,” seen especially through the lens of the tourist industry. Indeed, although the supreme importance of islands has been neglected in the most standard critiques of both capitalism and coloniality, DeLoughrey reminds us that:

in his analysis of European colonial documents of the Medieval and Renaissance era, Crosby concludes that experiments in the Canaries and Madeira taught the Europeans that they must seek lands that were: 1. remote enough to discourage European epidemiological susceptibility, 2. isolated from large mammals such as horses to ensure European military advantage, 3. distant enough to prevent native defence against introduced disease, 4. lands that were not inhabited by ocean-voyaging peoples. The repetitions of the words remote and isolated, presumed synonyms for island space, suggest that they are central to the ideological process of colonisation. The imposed concepts of remoteness and isolation are closely aligned to the colonial imperative to erase islanders’ migratory histories, particularly their maritime capacities. . . . Not surprisingly, there are a few if any historical testimonies from Pacific or Caribbean islanders bemoaning their isolation from Europe. (“Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures” 301)

Interlude: On Capitalist Coloniality

While the relationship between capitalism and coloniality is quite complex, one can be sure that the two are distinct although intricately connected. There have been colonial relations that were not under the auspices of a specifically capitalist economy (the medieval Mediterranean is one good example, but there are many others). Furthermore, it is historically clear that capitalism does not permanently require coloniality in order to perpetuate itself—indeed, when it has deemed “decolonization” useful, it has not gotten in the way of it. But even more, as my use of the concept “coloniality” – as opposed to “colonialism” – should make evident, I do not understand coloniality to be merely a historical moment in the development of capitalism that has since been superseded by “decolonization,” but rather a complex, interlocking system of domination that, chameleon-like,

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10 In addition to the sources cited in the Bibliography, a few as yet unpublished essays Richard Rosa has graciously shared with me have immensely aided my understanding of the tourist industry’s positioning in the Caribbean.

11 Eric Williams’ Capitalism and Slavery argues convincingly that both slavery and its abolition were in the interest of capitalism’s historical development and transformation.
traverses times, landscapes, and seascapes, and reaches not only the domains of economy and politics but also of epistemology, i.e. it reaches the very ways in which we understand and apprehend both the world and its histories. As should be clear by now, its manifestations are not permanently the same, but it is possible to trace continuities among them up until the present.

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Following the historical sketch, which, purely by itself, is insufficient and impossible for the task at hand, Chapter 1 moves to a discussion of the intensely interrelated yet distinct mythical imaginary concerning insularity. I use “mythical” to point to the ways in which “island” has not only been deployed repeatedly in discourses that tradition has already characterized as “myths,” such as Plato’s Atlantis, but also to stress how it has itself become a “myth,” which, of course, does not preclude it from being absolutely “real.” By “imaginary” I mean sets of ideas, commonplaces, signs, expectations, that highly influence, but never determine completely what “island” means. Indeed, an island “imaginary” also produces new meanings as much as it accounts for openings within dominant mythical constructions that are susceptible to re-appropriation.

In order to show the extent and enduring power of the mythical imaginary concerning insularity, I focus on the myths of the paradise island and the laboratory island. Given that the mythical imaginary is composed both of material already in circulation and of material produced

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12 I owe the concept “coloniality” to the work of a group of thinkers that includes Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and many others, which calls itself the “modernity/coloniality research program.” See Arturo Escobar’s essay for a description of the project.

13 A couple of anticipatory examples on this matter would be helpful. First, to consider the vast clearing of land in Atlantic islands as resulting only from a desire to submit them to plantation economies seems myopic. One must think, at the same time, of the clearing of land as the result of specific notions of “beauty” and of the imagined deadly effects that “tropical climates” had on European, temperate, bodies: “Clearing the land in the British Isles had long been associated with ‘improving’ it, and by the mid seventeenth century there was a widely held opinion that clearing and tilling the land brought beauty to the landscape as well as economic gain, a notion entirely contradictory, in practice, to the metaphor of the island as the location of an earthly paradise. . . . A further cultural construct which initially had the same effect related to contemporary medical theories about forests, climate and disease. Thus the supposed health risks posed by tropical forests provided a further reason for extensive clearing. A common explanation for illness among Europeans was that woodlands exuded harmful vapours which caused fevers and agues. It was thought by some that once the forest was removed the sun would dry out the harmful ‘miasmas’ that were thought to cause disease” (Grove 64-7). Second, the eighteenth-century European ethnographic descriptions of Pacific islanders as “noble savages” close to nature constitute a fantasy that cannot be divorced from the long tradition figuring islands as sites of Eden.
within different regimes of knowledge and aesthetics alongside the development of capitalist coloniality (i.e. political economy, natural sciences, geography, archaeology, anthropology, philosophy, painting, literature, film, among others), in the discussion of the second myth I will consider a few key texts from different discourses to make my case: Plato’s “Atlantis,” Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species*, and Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*.\(^{14}\)

The dissertation’s second section, “Islands from Within,” comprising Chapters 2 through 5, repositions the discussion within the Caribbean archipelagoes in order to study the ways in which several literary texts have produced a different imagination of insularity from that of the dominant idea of the island studied in Chapter 1 and repeatedly imposed on the region. I argue that the literary texts in question produce a different, creative, affirmative imagination of insularity mainly around three constantly and immanently lived phenomena that, in the process, become operative concepts: tropical light (Chapter 2), the coast (Chapters 3 and 4), and the sea (Chapter 5). In all cases, a comparative analysis of Caribbean literary texts from the different archipelagoes will both enable and support the conceptual and philosophical discussion on light, vision, and sense perception (Chapter 2); the coast, time and space (Chapters 3 and 4); and the sea (Chapter 5). Specifically, Chapter 2 studies Derek Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound* and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s *El espíritu de la luz*; Chapters 3 and 4 engage with Alejo Carpentier’s *El siglo de las luces* and Édouard Glissant’s *The Fourth Century*; and Chapter 5 revolves around Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, some of his poems, and two chronicles by Rodríguez Juliá.

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\(^{14}\) There are multiple other examples of the uses of islands in different regimes of knowledge. See, for instance, Bagini and Hoyle, Baldacchino, Constantakopoulou, Eriksen, Evans, Fosberg, Grant, Hintjens and Newitt, Keegan and Diamond, King, Kirch, MacArthur and Wilson, Nunn, Skinner, Waldren and Ensenyat, Williamson.
Notes on “Island” and Epistemology

Jamaica is one of the most beautiful places in the world, with wonderful people, music and joy. But there is also a darker, mysterious side to the place. You have to watch out. Jamaica has tried to kill me a few times; it’s something with the island, with the nature.

Grace Jones

Imagined Islands takes “island,” a particularly loaded yet insufficiently thought about concept, as its starting point. That being so, an epistemological set of questions is required: how does “island” operate in different contexts, discourses, times-spaces? What does “island” become in each of these instantiations? What relations does it produce and in relation to what is it mobilized? For if any definition is to be provided for “island,” then it is surely a particularly relational and repetitive one: “island” is a colossal “fix” not only because of the mythical fascination which, as we will see, they have been made to exercise, but also because of the addictive produce they have historically been exploited to yield, and to yield exclusively: sugar (and its derivatives for the preparation of rum), tobacco, coffee, spices, no-questions-asked drug traffic, voluptuous sun-tanned women, and sexually potent men.

Such structure of market-produced desires equally sanctioned and condemned by institutions of power is the same that operates with respect to islands in our thinking of the world: islands are at the heart of our histories and most elemental myths but nevertheless continue to figure very little in our attempts to account for those very discourses. An analogous configuration is at work on a more semantic level. From Greek antiquity to today’s Lost or the tourist industry, “island,” in structural anthropology fashion, has been a “floating signifier”: ubiquitous and inexistent, possible by virtue of

15 <http://www.theworldofgracejones.com/92.html>
16 The TV series, whose last season aired in 2010, has been remarkably popular. A cross between Robinson Crusoe and Jules Verne’s The Mysterious Island, and between fantasy and romance, it “was designed to be a peculiar hybrid: a mainstream cult show” (Dolan 149). Significantly, Dolan also argues that Lost’s creators were more interested in constructing “the island” as a (quite mysterious) setting than in the development of characters, many of which were more or less copies of some of Stephen King’s (150-1). The subjection of characters to the island is such that “as the series has continued, specific characters have waxed and waned in narrative importance, even if the overall narrative line of the series (concerning the island) has remained very close to the writers’ original plan” (152). The island works, as Dolan suggests, as a “purgatory that has been reconceived as a ‘microcosm of Western modernity’” where the impossible becomes possible, where the “story is true because it is fantastic” (155). Indeed, though I cannot discuss it in this context, the centrality of islands for the science fiction and fantasy genres is remarkable both in literature and film.
its impossibility, meaningful precisely because of its meaninglessness. Transported with ease from
geography to metaphor, from “a piece of land completely surrounded by water,” to “no man is an
island,”17 “island” activates a dizzying proliferation of binarisms: utopia/dystopia; land/sea;
isoation/connection; origins/endings; idyllic primitiveness/technological futurity;
timeliness/timelessness; containment/expansion; appearance/disappearance; paradise/hell;
possessed feminized element/possessor masculinized element; among so many others.

Furthermore, islands are made to constitute not only the fundamental antonym of
continents, but also the latter’s ancillary concept (“mainlands” vs. “islands”), and, without a doubt, as
Lewis and Wigen’s The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography shows, “continent” and its
attendant attributes dominate to no small extent our current thought. As we will see, if islands figure
at all in different kinds of studies it is usually as indistinguishable from such negation laden qualities
as smallness, lack, dependency, remoteness and isolation. But, as DeLoughrey writes, “nearly every
scientist, botanist, geologist, anthropologist, and travel writer has come to the conclusion that islands
are remote by travelling there. The material and ideological accessibility of tropical islands to Euro-
American colonialism suggests that perhaps they are not so remote after all” (“Island Ecologies”
300). The following argument is in part an attempt at meeting her consequent demand that “we have
to question who benefits from the persistent myth of island isolation” (300).

Within the preceding epistemological context, Chapter 1 will try to answer why, given the
bewildering variety of island’s semantic attachments, does the concept appear predominantly in the
terms of negation? The remaining chapters, on their part, will seek to answer the following questions:
what does it mean to live on an island, to remain rather than to be part of the millennia-long tradition
of roundtrips to and from islands (both historically in the case, for instance, of agents of empire and
tourists, and mythically, in the case of island utopias and dystopias)? How does one write as an

17 I reproduce the first quote from the OED’s definition of “island.” The second quote is part of John Donne’s famous
statement, in his Meditation XVII, which reads in full: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the
continent, a part of the main” (<http://www.online-literature.com/donne/409/>).
islander, besieged by everything else every “post”colonial writer must confront\textsuperscript{18} and also by the metaphorical and ideological dictums produced on the basis of the discipline of geography\textsuperscript{19}. How does one do so, moreover, without falling into the trap set by a long tradition of imperialist thought concerning geographical and climatic determinism?\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{History and Imagination}

... the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History.

Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” 79

While reading the work of, among others, Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, Alejo Carpentier, and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, I faced a particularly difficult problem: although their novels and poems are deeply historically-minded, these writers were at the same time engaged in what Edward Baugh calls a “quarrel with history.” The question of history is, as we have seen, always fraught in colonized scenarios. In the Caribbean it is especially so because, in the face of their brutal extermination, the possibilities for a consistent recuperation of “natives” and their “traditions” are slim.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, history’s usual need for “origins” cannot be met by resort to extensive “native” sources, which has resulted in turn in the imposition of a teleological historical narrative whereby the “origin” of the Caribbean corresponds to the European story of their “discovery.” History begins with the “discovery,” with western Europe’s “noble triumph,” with its “progress,” with its “civilizational project,” with the “march of its Spirit.” Nothing before this; everything after.

\textsuperscript{18} These strictures have been explored profusely, not least by islanders such as Frantz Fanon.
\textsuperscript{19} Within the discipline of geography and geopolitics, the aforementioned \textit{The Myth of Continents} has been particularly helpful. Through its questioning of the category “continent,” Lewis and Wigen’s text was instrumental for my own probing into the geographical category of “island.”
\textsuperscript{20} European speculations on the relationship between geography, climate, and the human condition can be traced from imperial travel writing through Montesquieu’s distinction between southern and northern Europe, passing through Staël, Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, among many others. See Dainotto for an analysis of this trajectory as regards the divide Northern/Southern Europe. The Caribbean has not been immune to such conclusions – Puerto Rico boasts Antonio Pedreira’s \textit{Insularismo} as one of its “foundational” texts.
\textsuperscript{21} Many devoted historians and archaeologists, I rush to add, have made great strides despite these limitations. Although it is not sufficiently known or publicized, there are also to this day some “reserves” of Caribs in the Lesser Antilles. On the matter, see Hulme’s \textit{Remnants of Conquest: The Island Caribs and Their Visitors, 1877-1998}. 
In such a context, the many attempts to recover silenced, eclipsed, mystified, histories had surely to be reckoned with. To declare, by means of the very same historical archives manipulated to negate this fact, that the Caribbean has been at the center of western history for multiple reasons seemed particularly pressing. But some Caribbean writers and philosophers were calling consistently for a change of direction, for a reorientation of the very premises according to which the “quarrel with history” was being fought, and for a rearrangement of the concept of “history” itself.22

Wilson Harris, for instance, believes Caribbean peoples should “become involved in perspectives of renascence which can bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history” (“History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas” 156). He also thinks that, “[a] historical stasis . . . afflicts the West Indian sensibility, . . . which may only be breached in complex creative perspectives for which the historical convention would appear to possess no criteria” (“History, Fable and Myth” 156). Édouard Glissant, on his part, argues that “the past to which we were subjected, which has not emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present” (Caribbean Discourse 63). Derek Walcott declares that “for every poet it is always morning in the world. History a forgotten, insomniac night; History and elemental awe are always our early beginning, because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History” (“The Antilles” 79). Even more forcefully, Walcott concludes that “in the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention” (“The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” 6). His defense of imagination is predicated on the belief that, “there is a memory of imagination in literature which has nothing to do with actual experience, which is, in fact, another life . . .” (“The Muse of

22 Furthermore, the second section’s chapters will discuss the important distinction between “History” and “history,” especially in Derek Walcott’s work.
Alejo Carpentier, finally, maintains in his well-known essay “De lo real maravilloso americano” that American reality must be apprehended with a kind of faith, a concept that seems, at first, at odds with a rigorous historical analysis in the materialist tradition to which he otherwise seemed to be adept.

The instances of this urge on the part of many Caribbean writers to think differently about the question of history kept repeating themselves in different texts, to a point where they could no longer be comfortably repressed. At the same time, I encountered some critics, even sympathetic ones, who dismissed these assertions as a hopeless (and, of course, politically suspect) attempt at negating history altogether and defending an “escapist” position. But those critics seemed to forget that these were the very same writers producing historical novels, poems with titles such as “The Sea is History,” essays where one could also find sentences like the following: “a prophetic vision of the past” (Glissant, Caribbean Discourse 64); “The common experience of the New World, even for its patrician writers whose veneration of the Old is read as idolatry of the mestizo, is colonialism” (Walcott, “The Muse of History” 36); “[there is a] buried philosophy of history in the region’s arts of the imagination” (Harris, “History, Fable and Myth” 156).

In light of those apparent contradictions, I wondered whether history could not come to operate like its own straitjacket, prison, even panopticon. If the method for approaching the question of history is always, and obsessively, that of a recovery that necessarily leads to the despairing conclusion that coloniality has managed to suppress almost everything, then doesn’t this indirectly buttress the idea that the history of coloniality reigns supreme? And isn’t such an idea structurally the same than the one we have been struggling all along to fight against that there is no history before or during coloniality?

23 In the context of an analysis of Chinua Achebe’s indictment of Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness, Wilson Harris makes an analogous claim concerning literature as summoning more than the “historical ego”: “…I began to sense a certain incomprehension in Achebe’s analysis of the pressures of form that engaged Conrad’s imagination to transform biases grounded in homogeneous premises. By form I mean the novel form as a medium of consciousness that has its deepest roots in an intuitive and much, much older self than the historical ego or the historical conditions of ego dignity that binds us to a particular decade or generation or century” (“The Frontier on which Heart of Darkness Stands” 86).

24 See, for instance, Strachan’s analysis of Walcott’s work and the concept of “Adamic man.”

25 I wish to thank especially Wahneema Lubiano for pointing this out to me towards the beginning of my investigations.
other than that of “the discovery”? Moreover, such an overwhelming historical consciousness became, I noticed, alternatively an excuse and an antidote for Caribbean politics. Finally, the unquestioned defense of an approach to (the production of) history that would “right the wrong” became increasingly questionable, as it seemed to operate, even if implicitly, under the same logic of “nobility,” “superiority,” “progress,” to which it was ostensibly opposed. At every turn, it seemed that the writers I was studying were struggling together with such problems in different islands, languages, and times…

At the same time, literary texts showed a recurrent fascination with landscapes and, more intensely, seascapes. What I had tended to dismiss as a residue of sorts of a metaphysical, romanticized (in the “bad” sense), version of nature, all of a sudden demanded another perspective, one that would take seriously the labors of the imagination with respect to the lived experience of the insular context, and that would ask what the relationship between such imagination and the struggle with history might be. The intuition emerged, then, that there exists a submarine, tidalectical, connection between these literatures, an imagination that has made itself through recourse to a different, affirmative, creative notion of the geographical constitution of the Caribbean from that of the dominant idea of the island that consigns it to negation (lack, isolation, barrenness, smallness, MIRAB economies…). The Caribbean writers’ “quarrel with history” becomes, on this reading, a simultaneously historical, epistemological, aesthetic, and political standpoint asserted against history’s hold, against its subjugation of the past in a narrative of “progress,” “development,” “modernization,” against the way it militates for the dominant idea of the island and, in so doing, legitimates and reproduces practices of intervention, oppression, and exploitation in and of the Caribbean.

26 Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy.

27 This is another way of saying that the materials I am in dialogue with make anyone who cares to pay them heed realize that history’s disturbing operation is to transform what it produced a posteriori (isolation, fragmentation, different kinds of lack, etc) into an a priori natural, even ontological condition that history, then, has merely to face.
Research Constellations

The following section provides a brief sketch of the positions I envisage *Imagined Islands* taking with respect to existing critical work. In order not to make the following pages wearisomely protracted, I shall focus exclusively on reviewing work that sustains a more or less direct connection with the questions of islands and insularity, and of Caribbean literatures within that frame. As we have seen, these are by no means the only problems *Imagined Islands* engages with, especially if we take in consideration the discussion of tropical light in Chapter 2 and of the coast in connection to time and space in Chapter 3. The chapters in the dissertation’s second section are also in conversation with useful secondary material on the literary texts in question, even if such critical work does not engage frontally with the questions of insularity, light, the coast, or the sea.

Among the very few academic works dealing directly with the concepts of island and insularity, Diana Loxley’s *Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands* stands out as a foundational text of sorts in the island-as-topos approach. Loxley provides a convincing analysis of the “island” as a literary topos of central importance to nineteenth-century British imperialism through an analysis of texts by Jules Verne, Daniel Defoe, Johann David Wyss, Frederick Marryat, R.M. Ballantyne, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Loxley describes the aim of her study thus:

This book examines the centrality of the topos of the island in nineteenth-century literature as it coincides with the era of high imperialism in Britain and its ideological consolidation within colonial, political, cultural and educational discourses of the age. . . . The significance of the island motif is examined at the level of its institutionalisation as an *ideal* discourse – guaranteed by the state and embedded in the educational apparatus– whose nuanced negotiation of the relationship between Britain and the outside world provides a model formula for the assimilation of the language of conquest, masculinity, supremacy and authority and also of the supposedly inherent, eternal values of that language. (xi)

Gillian Beer has added, again within the British context, an inspiring essay on the connections between literature and science through the motif of the island, and a couple of essays on the
centrality of islands for Darwin’s work and the emergence of evolutionary theory. Peter Conrad’s *Islands: A Trip through Time and Space*, a sweeping, if woefully superficial and disperse, account of islands everywhere he could find them is another example of the island-as-topos approach.

Two other texts employing the same method are of note. The collection of essays *Islands in History and Representation*, edited by Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, is a recent and immensely informative addition to the study of islands. As the title indicates, however, the essays collected in the volume are concerned with the uses to which different islands (although the book tilts towards islands colonized by the British) have been put historically, and with the ways in which islands have been deployed in representational discourses (the latter being more or less consistent with the island-as-topos approach). In the Spanish-speaking context generally speaking, but with special emphasis on the Canary Islands, Nilo Palenzuela’s *Encrucijadas de un insulario* surveys island representations while

28 Although I cannot discuss it extensively in the present project, the case of the British Empire is worth pointing out briefly. Surely the most maritime-driven of western European empires (especially after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, its power at sea was exceeded by none until the United States came along for its share), Britain, and more specifically England, boasts a long tradition of patriotic pride on the basis of its insularity, and has frequently imagined its “islandness” as a source of power and an impulse for imperialistic expansion: “England to the English tended then [19th century] (and at a less acknowledged level still tends now) to be seen as both an ideal and a normative island” (Beer, “Writing Darwin’s Islands” 126). This style of patriotism, whose apothecary is generally tied to the famous “sceptred Ile” passage in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, also manages to suppress that “England by no means occupies the whole extent of the geographical island: Scotland and Wales are suppressed in this description, and only part of Ireland can now be corralled even within that very different group, ’the British Isles’” (Beer 126). The example of England shows both the shifting values assigned to insularity and the ways in which the latter respond to the power structures in place at any given historical moment: no one would ever think of England as “insular,” “isolated,” “bounded,” “barren,” etc…

29 By no means are they, however, the only ones. A few other examples of this approach are Brun’s essay, as well as some of the texts in the collections edited by Françoise Létoublon and by Jean-Claude Marimoutou and Jean-Michel Racault. Also of note is Ileana Rodríguez’s study *Transatlantic Topographies: Islands, Highlands, Jungles*. In the relevant chapters on Caribbean islands, Rodríguez’s analysis is content with dealing with the tropes of paradise (inaugurated in Columbus’ diaries) and inferno (as seen through the 19th century plantations in the Anglophone Caribbean) as associated with islands. The same island-as-topos approach that does not question the dominant idea of the island per se is present in Jill Franks’ *Islands and the Modernists*, although this time the focus is on the idea of island-as-isolation. Such association is perpetuated through Franks’ argument that “given their bounded-ness and their distance from a mainland, islands suggest themselves as both controllable and paradisiacal” (1), a “fact” that attracted modernists insofar as isolation was, according to Frank, the connecting theme, dream and desire of modernism. Finally, essays in the *Cabinet* issue on “Islands,” especially those by Hernán Díaz (“A Topical Paradise”) and D. Graham Burnett (“On the Monstrosity of Islands”), also depend on the unquestioned island-as-topos approach. The first of these, particularly, should be singled out for its resolutely topical argument whereby islands are literature’s “literal metaphor” (79), an idea that assumes as given the dominant idea of the island: “What does literature find in islands that it does not find in other topos of confinement like, say, prison cells or mountaintops? What is literature free to say in isolation? What is insular literature? Perhaps the answer lies on the shore. An insular shore is always a critical edge, a line of resistance against the outer agents (natural or historical) constantly threatening the island with annihilation. Topical islands are figures of radical isolation with at least four shores that resist four different forms of continental inscription or graphs: spatial (geographs), historic (chronographs), linguistic (phonographs), and textual (paragraph)” (79). Despite not sharing Díaz’s approach, I remain sympathetic to its conclusion that literature uses islands for “opening up the possibility of another life, away from this one” (85).
sustaining the problematic idea of the “extrañeza metafísica del mundo insular” (“the insular world’s \textit{metaphysical strangeness}” 65), which only acquires its full importance when islands, assumed to be “absorbed” in themselves, are universalized: “las islas superan el ensimismamiento cuando se colocan bajo el signo de la universalidad” (15) (“islands overcome the absorption when they are put under the sign of universality”). Palenzuela will later claim that such universalization is “el único ángulo que tiene interés para mí” (“the only angle that interests me” 86).

The island-as-topos approach exemplified in the previous examples is problematic insofar as it takes islands as given phenomena, as something already understood, rather than as a problem for thought. Not only does the aforementioned approach tend to consign “island” purely to representation in a way that precludes thinking of it as a (relational, operative) concept, but it also focuses primarily on representations of the “island” in literatures written from the colonial metropolis. The literatures \textit{Imagined Islands} seeks to study require, on the contrary, imagining “island” as a relational concept, produced differently in different contexts, rather than merely as a literary, cultural, or ideological recurrence.

\textit{Imagined Islands} can also be situated with respect to other research constellations in the fields of history, literary studies and critical theory, despite the fact that these academic fields hardly ever devote dedicated attention to the centrality of “the island” for their respective projects.\textsuperscript{30} Within the more general historiographical output, John R. Gillis’ book \textit{Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World} must be singled out for its sustained attention to the “island” as an invention that has been accompanied by shifting historical connotations. The immensely helpful history he traces notwithstanding, Gillis’ islomania is so fervent that he even claims the “Western mind” operates by a process of “islanding” –in the sense that, in order to think, parts tend to be

\textsuperscript{30}A relatively new academic formation called “Island Studies” also seems to be taking hold in certain contexts (for instance, the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and the International Small Island Studies Association & Centre for South Pacific Studies at the University of South Wales, Australia). As of yet, however, I am unsure about what “Island Studies” entails exactly.
“isolated” rather than considered in connection with each other. I have no interest in such speculations, especially because they end up upholding the dominant idea of the island, which Gillis himself is otherwise so keen to insist is a historical construction…

Within the more specific field of maritime history, the work of Elizabeth Mancke in particular helps immensely in understanding that western European imperialism was a primarily maritime affair, that it was much more about the ocean than it was about the land. Such a feature gave precedence to the island for imperial expansion: as we will see more amply in Chapter 1, islands were the first to be colonized (the Caribbean) and were preferred spots for trade, temporary military outposts, places of rest, spaces to experiment new developments of mercantilist and, later, industrial capitalism, etc. On its part, the work of Marcus Rediker, both by himself and in the The Many-Headed Hydra, co-authored with Peter Linebaugh, is of capital importance for an understanding of the fundamentally international, polyglot, and politically-charged character of the imperial projects, especially as they developed at sea (in ships)\(^1\) and in port cities (many of which were located on islands). Especially in Chapter 5, I resort to maritime history given the deeply embedded connections of “the island” with the construction of ocean-space. Here I take my cue from Philip Steinberg’s compelling book The Social Construction of the Ocean about the different historical conceptions, uses, and territorializations of the ocean, as well as from two fundamental collections of essays which consider the centrality of the oceans for western history and for the colonialist projects imposed on the Americas: Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean and Maritime History as World History.\(^2\)

In literary studies, critical theory, and the relatively recent development that has come to be called “Atlantic Studies,” Cesare Casarino’s Modernity at Sea, a brilliant exploration of Melville, Marx, and Conrad (three canonical writers of/at (the) sea), has also aided me in more fully understanding

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\(^{1}\) Incidentally, the ship has been quite an attractive image for the study of the Atlantic. The heterotopia par excellence is the ship, according to Foucault; see also Casarino, Rediker and Linebaugh, Gilroy, among others.

\(^{2}\) Alain Corbin’s The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840 is of extreme importance for the field of maritime history, but it is amazingly able to trace the process described in its title without barely ever mentioning imperialism!
the oceanic connections both deployed and produced by western European imperialism. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* is another significant interlocutor due to its impassioned defense of an Atlantic perspective that would do justice to the complicated and nuanced exchanges between what we had habitually imagined in polarized terms, namely, the colonizers and the colonized. Travelling from the Canaries to the Caribbean and back, Francisco J. Hernández-Adrián’s essays—as well as our many conversations on the topic—have also been extremely valuable in helping me understand the stakes of “Atlantic Studies.”

Conceptually as well as politically, I have been compelled by Epeli Hau‘ofa’s refusal of the ideology of island isolation and by his love of islands and the sea, in particular concerning the Pacific archipelagoes, as well as by Franco Cassano’s ardent proposal of a “southern thought” situated squarely in what he calls the coastal dialectic of the Mediterranean (see Chapter 3). Such creative imaginaries within two fundamental archipelagoes for world history—whose research, as we shall see in Chapter 1, is crucial for understanding the Caribbean—have functioned as confirmation of Brathwaite’s dictum that “the unity is submarine” as well as of the many instances in Caribbean thought where a submarine connection with the rest of the world is fashioned.

Indeed, the idea in Alejo Carpentier’s *El siglo de las luces* (see Chapter 4) that the Caribbean is the American Mediterranean inspired me to look at the archipelagoes of that southern European sea as a previous historical model for “island hopping” imperialism as well as a site of another kind of archipelagic thinking. The Pacific archipelagoes also became a productive node to explore given the centrality they acquired, after the near-exhaustion of the Caribbean archipelagoes, for western European and U.S. imperialism during the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries. Their

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33 Other important works focusing on a historicization the ocean are those by Connery, Hamilton-Paterson, Parry, Raban, and Rice. For a study specifically concerned with the Mediterranean Sea, see also Horden and Purcell. For more on the Atlantic Ocean, see Armitage and Braddock, Butel, Cunliffe, and McNeill. For discussions on the institutionalization, characteristics and reach of “Atlantic Studies,” see Boelhower, Elliott, Gabaccia, Karras, and O’Reilly.

34 Greg Dening’s work, especially his *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880*, is another important node in the conversations regarding the Pacific. 
significance, like that of the Caribbean, was not reduced to historical and economic phenomena, but rather travelled to the realm of the mythical imaginary in aesthetic productions such as those of Melville, Conrad, and Gaughin and in anthropological foundational works such as those of Malinowski and Mead.

Within the field of Caribbean Studies, my project becomes at once an extension and a study of philosophies and theories of the Caribbean, especially those proposed in essay and fiction form by Caribbean thinkers themselves. Imagined Islands constitutes as well a dialogue with the surprisingly very scarce works within Caribbean Studies that have, to some extent, dealt with the question of insularity, namely Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective, Dara E. Goldman’s Out of Bounds: Islands and the Demarcation of Identity in the Hispanic Caribbean, and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower’s Empire Islands: Castaways, Cannibals, and Fantasies of Conquest. Benítez-Rojo’s affirmative view of the Caribbean and its “Peoples of the Sea” is greatly appreciated, but I remain unconvinced by his method of subjecting the materials he analyses to a totalizing theorization of the Caribbean by means of chaos theory and “postmodernity.” For its part, Goldman’s book, despite explicitly probing the category of insularity, remains committed to a reproduction of its dominant associations, so much so that the book’s study of “queer subjectivity, territorial disputes, and migration” (16) is used to exemplify a coming “out of [the] bounds” of insularity.

Weaver-Hightower’s work, finally, also deploys the island-as-topos approach discussed above, but adds a psychoanalytical twist. Castaways stories on islands are “psychological[ly] draw[ing],” and Weaver-Hightower wants to know “why the island?” (ix). Her answer depends to a

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35 For a useful sketch on the emergence, around mid-twentieth-century, of “the Caribbean” as an analytical category, see Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s “Reflexiones sobre un archipiélago posible.”
36 Despite its title, Chris Bongie’s Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature has very little to say about the question of islands per se. It focuses, instead, on the ways in which different texts (Caribbean and otherwise) deal with the question of creolization, which Bongie understands to be deeply bound up with so-called “identity politics” (see especially 10-11 for an exposition of the book’s aims).
37 Although not concerned with insularity, see Michele Praeger’s The Imaginary Caribbean and Caribbean Imaginary if interested in a rigorous study of the Caribbean (more specifically, of the Francophone Caribbean) under the lens of psychoanalysis.
great extent on a psychoanalytical understanding of the island-as-body that does not question or *de-naturalize* the concept of island itself, but rather reproduces one of its most enduring representations—that of a naturally bounded space: “These tales, this book [*Empire Islands*] demonstrates,
accomplished this feat [“made imperial expansion and control seem unproblematic and natural, like the innate processes of the human body”] by presenting stories in which castaways could control the *naturally bounded spaces of the island* as they control the naturally bounded space of their bodies” (ix-xi, emphasis added). Later in the introductory exposition of her argument—which, to be sure, provides compelling and original insights, such as the fact that the imperial control of the island-as-body does not manifest itself as a feminization (to control a female body), but rather as a masculinization of it (to control one’s own male body) (xvi), Weaver-Hightower is even more forceful about the deeply naturalizing and *territorial* argument on islands’ “natural boundedness” and “firm boundaries:”

Like the castaway body, the island is naturally bounded (often being observed in its entirety from that mountain-top vista). The island form exerts a psychological appeal important to stories of adventure and exploration. By its very nature and because of its firm boundaries and natural borders, the island could mirror perceptions of a human body bounded by skin and could thus *enable* writers and readers to fantasize about naturally ruling and owning land as one would one’s own body. (xix, emphasis added)

In her effort to *de-naturalize* imperialism as she maintains is manifested in castaways stories, Weaver-Hightower woefully re-naturalizes the island as a “firm” and “bounded” territory, so much so that it is said to actually *enable* the fantasies of ruling and controlling lands as if they were one’s own body.

Within studies of Caribbean literatures, perhaps the most pertinent exploration I have found into the questions I am most interested in is Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s recent *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* and several related essays. An ambitious and creative comparative study of Anglophone Caribbean and Pacific texts, *Routes and Roots* employs Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectics for different purposes than I do in the present project. Her aim is to explore the ways in which the texts she studies move constantly between “roots” and “routes,” concepts she borrows from the work of James Clifford. Insofar as such a movement has to do primarily with the
insular tidalectic between land and sea, DeLoughrey considers some of the main components of the
dominant idea of the island, especially those of isolation and remoteness. She argues convincingly
against such associations, and insists on the fundamental “worldliness” of islands.

An Intensification of the Labors of the Imagination

As we have seen, in a certain sense the thrust of this project radiates into many disciplinary
conversations already being held, even into some of which I am surely unaware. In another sense –
and I confess this to be the one I care most about– I hope *Imagined Islands* becomes a tidalectical
dialogue with the Caribbean texts I study. My desire is, thus, that the method for studying this project
experiments with becomes a process of creation, a situation in which there are no longer “objects of
study,” but instead instances of *Rélation* (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of Glissant’s concept). For if
these texts mean anything at all, they most definitely constitute a flaring up, an intensification, of the
labors of the imagination.
Section 1: Islands from Without

Chapter 1: Islands, Histories, Myths

“A cleavage exists in my opinion between the historical convention in the Caribbean and Guianas and the arts of the imagination. I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination,” writes Wilson Harris in his essay “History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas” (156). What Harris calls the “limbo-anancy (spider) syndrome” is one of several examples the writer provides to substantiate this claim. The popular limbo dance in many Caribbean countries, which is especially associated with carnival, constitutes much more than a local quirk. The “syndrome” can be “re-activated in the imagination as a limbo perspective when one dwells on the Middle Passage: a limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean;” it is a “threshold of a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles;” “it is . . . the archetypal sea-change stemming from Old Worlds” (157). Limbo is, then, a tidallectical phenomenon with which, continues Harris, “it is legitimate . . . to pun . . . as a kind of shared phantom limb which has become a subconscious variable in West Indian theater” (157). The “phantom limb” is that “of dismembered slave and god” (158). On Harris’s reading, thus, limbo becomes an instance of an inseparable conjugation of history and myth whereby a “renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures” takes place. The Guyanese writer concludes: “It is my view –a deeply considered one– that this ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence –pointing away from apartheid and ghetto fixations– is of the utmost importance and native to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole” (158, emphasis added).

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Positioned within Harris’ invitation to perceive the “art of creative coexistence” in/from the Caribbean, this chapter shall look outwards in order to explore some of the most recurrent historical
and mythical uses and conceptualizations of islands in the western world. The discussion will prove such continuity by: (1) considering examples of islands from the different stages of capitalism discussed in the Introduction (mercantilist, industrial, and, finally, “global” capitalism), and from the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Pacific archipelagic regions; and (2) briefly analyzing several key texts from various scientific and aesthetic discourses for which islands have been of the essence.¹

For the purposes of clarity given the profuse and wide-ranging nature of the materials considered below, the chapter is organized around two major sections: histories and what I call a mythical imaginary. I hasten to add, however, that despite their separation, these two sections crisscross each other and should be considered, again taking as inspiration Harris’ limbo and its tidal rhythmic, in an interrelated, overlapping fashion. The long historical accumulation, for instance, of different and ever-changing versions of myths concerning paradisiacal insularity—a matter discussed in more detail below—did not, of course, entirely determine the ensuing conquest and colonization of Atlantic islands, but neither did it play a minor, eccentric role in the process. Conquest and colonization not only responded to the economic and material demands of that supreme impersonal force called capitalism, even if the former's results should clearly be seen as crucial for the consolidation and evolution of the latter. Surely, Columbus’ diaries, the letters of many colonizers (Iberian or otherwise), the protracted search for El Dorado, the many voyages undertaken with the explicit aim of confirming or denying the existence of reputed islands, the maps full of monsters and islands whose shape and position change repeatedly, the ways in which “natives” were accounted for in altogether mythical registers, among so many other examples, demonstrate the power of myth as a historical force, even an historical agent. The same, I think, can be said in reverse, for history is also a mythical agent insofar as myths change (are added or subtracted to, disappear and appear, entangle themselves with others…) in relation to historical forces. The two domains are

¹ I invoke “discourse” in its Foucauldian sense, for it allows me to counterpoise these very different texts on the same plane in order to yield continuities that a docile disciplinarian respect makes thoroughly invisible.
distinct, but the relationship between them is intense and unshakable. The following argument is sparked by and situated in the midst of that relationship.

Throughout both sections, I will proceed thematically by focusing on five recurrent and, as we shall see, overlapping, uses and conceptualizations of the island: the first section on histories and islands discusses the entrepôt island, the sugar island, and the strategic island, while the second section on the mythical imaginary considers the paradise island and the laboratory island. All of these uses and conceptualizations, as might already be clear, correspond in some instances to either mercantilist, industrial or global capitalism, but studying them with the perspective of Ernst Bloch’s “synchronicity of the nonsynchronous” allows us to perceive the great extent to which they have also overlapped temporally and spatially.

**Islands and Histories**

**Entrepôt Island**

The island as entrepôt, whether in the function of transshipment site, storage facility, warehouse, duty-free importation and exportation port, or place for refreshment and rest from oceanic voyages, has had a long and crucial life for economic activity, capitalist or otherwise. Despite changes appropriate to the needs of a particular moment or a particular master, it is surely one of the oldest uses of islands in western history. It has enabled the interconnection of commerce on a global scale, for without such islands the ocean conceived as a connecting liquid expanse would have been entirely meaningless. In many cases, the island as entrepôt has been a laboratory for international and individual competition as well as for the creation of new, creole languages and cultures. It has also functioned as a site for experimentation on the longevity of products, on the chemical changes

\[2\] This methodological preference already hints at a discussion concerning time and insularity that I will have occasion to delve into in Chapter 3.

\[3\] St. Helena is a famous example of an island used as supplier of drinkable water (Grove 30, 44, 71).
required for preserving food commodities aboard ships during their world distribution, and on the
development of bureaucratic structures to oversee warehouses and all other commercial activities.

As Braudel’s work on Mediterranean prehistory testifies, the islands in that sea have
functioned as central spots for the development of commercial networks since the so-called times of
prehistory. One particularly striking example is Crete, which developed a strong and extensive
maritime trading network and which functioned as a: “staging post between Europe, Asia, and
Africa. To the north, the island faced countries which had become more backward than itself –
peninsular Greece and Argos with which it had maintained contact since the Achaean invasion–
while to the west lay the even more primitive regions of southern Italy and Sicily” (Braudel 137).
Horden and Purcell, on their part, insist that Mediterranean islands, “despite a malign tendency to see
[them] as isolated and remote, characterized principally by their lack of contamination and
interaction” (226), “lie at the heart of the medium of interdependence: they have all round
connectivity” (227). This connectivity was, argue Horden and Purcell, the reason why so many
islands in the Mediterranean were exploited intensely in a monoculture fashion, for islands “Are
uniquely accessible to the prime medium of communication and redistribution” (225). Here we can
already perceive a connection between the use of islands as entrepôts and as sites for
monocultivation, a matter discussed below.

Islands as entrepôts continued to be of central importance throughout the early centuries
AD. For instance, Fernández-Armesto provides a succinct picture of the House of Barcelona’s early
13th century awareness of the importance of possessing islands. Majorca’s case is particularly
illuminating:

Though many new products seem to have been introduced to Majorca by the conquerors,
the island’s role as an entrepôt or staging post of the western Mediterranean seems to have
been well established for generations, perhaps for centuries, before [King] Jaime’s conquest.
The entrenched position of Moorish traders, and of their privileged partners from Genoa
and Pisa in the early thirteenth century, adequately explains the jealous anxiety of the
Catalans and Provençals to break into the cartel, by force if necessary, on equal or
preferential terms. (17)
The historian goes on to show how Majorca, whose “conquest was determined and the subsequent colonization shaped by cupidity for commerce and land,” was used as a “crucible of colonial experiment.” Such use became part of a “pattern” that “remained influential throughout the history of the expansion of the Crown of Aragón –indeed, in some respects, throughout the history of western Mediterranean expansion generally.” (18)

A similar story can be told of many Caribbean islands. The Dutch, whom, as we will see, were more interested in profit than settlement, were perhaps the leaders in using their Caribbean possessions as entrepôts in increasingly interconnected contraband and trade networks. They took control of St. Martin for its salt, but also for commercial purposes: “Some ships laden with products badly needed in the Caribbean favored the island as a general depot for commercial ends” (Goslinga 261). Something as banal as storage for shoes was also a way in which the Dutch employed the island of Saba! (Goslinga 263). St. Eustatius (Statia), however, is a particularly revealing example:

Statia’s main function in the Caribbean, and the foundation of its wealth, was trade. During the seventeenth century, the island changed hands many times among the Dutch, French, and English. In the 1660s the Dutch dominated the illicit trade with the Spanish colonies, transporting the bulk of their goods to Europe and enjoying a large share of West Indian trade. They saw Statia as a valuable entrepôt from which to expand their contraband trade in the circum-Caribbean region. (Barka 224)

Indeed, Barka points out how St. Eustatius played a crucial role for the American Revolution as an illicit provider of gunpowder (“shipped in boxes labeled tea”), guns and ammunition, among other commodities, which the British government could not control (225). This little island, today barely known, was by 1781, “an international entrepôt with large amounts of commercial and mercantile traffic and an increasing immigrant population” (226).

John Appleby paints a telling picture of how English colonization of the Lesser Antilles was also initially characterized by a “sustained addiction to plunder, either as privateering or piracy” (86), which for a long time was a more or less individual pursuit lacking in official support and operating in a scenario of prolonged wars with Spain (87). But in the late 16th century, when the English were
engaged in intense plunder of Spanish possessions in the Caribbean, other two motives, besides profit, mobilized contact with the Lesser Antilles: “patriotism and Protestantism” (Appleby 87). The combination of these, which had managed to establish a loose, unofficial, form of colonization during the 16th century, was to prove crucial for the far-reaching consolidation of the British Empire in the Caribbean during the 17th century.

In order for that historical development to take place, however, the Caribbean islands had to be known, their geographies studied, their possibilities measured. Such was the accomplishment of English privateers, especially during the 16th century, when islands as entrepôts were of the essence:

The outbreak of war with Spain in 1585 brought more contact with the Lesser Antilles as English privateers often stopped at islands to take on fresh water and supplies. Sir Francis Drake spent Christmas 1585 on St. Kitts, then uninhabited, resting his sick and burying his dead. At Dominica his men engaged in some small trade with the natives. . . . Despite the apparent dangers, English privateers continued to call at the islands during the 1580s and 1590s to take in fresh supplies, rest sick crew members, carter with the natives, and capture the odd prize. This loose, irregular contact, in which privateering or piracy could be combined with some native trade, continued well into the seventeenth century . . . (Appleby 88)

The function of entrepôt and of place for rest and supplies was to prove crucial for the development of the English empire in the Caribbean, which brought about a fateful hybrid child – the mercantilist and industrialist plantation system, to be considered below.

In the Pacific in more recent history, many islands have functioned as trading posts for several products, such as whale oil, copra, fish, pearls, sandalwood, among others. For the whaling industry during the late 18th century and the early 19th century, different Pacific islands were crucial not only as trading posts but also as sites for rest and procurement of supplies: “New Zealand, subsequently replaced Tahiti and the Marquesas as the main station for whalers, and a large lively industry in oil rendering developed there. But few islands escaped altogether the visits of whalers.
Some, such as Tahiti, Samoa, the Marquesas, and Ponape, were especially popular partly because of the beauty and hospitality of their women (sic)” (Oliver 50).4

Today, islands continue to be used for structurally equivalent purposes, as is clear from the use of many islands as transshipment site and offshore banking related to drug trafficking:

The illegal drug smuggling into the United States . . . is vitally linked to the Caribbean region. Relatively little of the material is produced in the Caribbean itself, but the route from the source area of cocaine in northwestern South America and Miami is a straight line bisecting the Caribbean’s heart. . . . This smuggling often involves transshipments into the United States from, increasingly, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, although the principal zone for transshipment during the 1980s has been the Bahamas. . . . Besides the bribery and corruption in parts of the region that have together provided an illicit support system for drug smuggling, technically legal institutions also have profited and proliferated from the trade. Offshore banking in the Caribbean facilitates the laundering of drug-related money . . . (Richardson 128-9)

The entrepôt island also lingers in the tourist industry, where it is strikingly obvious in the popular niche of cruise ships. These bring together residues of the entrepôt structures that nurtured maritime empires and today sustain duty free (in more senses than one!) commerce as well as of the paradise island function to be discussed below. Also, insofar as the entrepôt function was generally a coastal phenomenon, such cities as were developed on its heels have largely become sites of intense tourism development.5 In Puerto Rico, for instance, the construction of hotels and resorts in the San Juan area has resulted in the privatization of many beaches and, therefore, in the effective reterritorialization of the coast for the tourists’ roundtrips. It seems that beaches can also be taken away.

But they remain.

4 The same equivalence between islands and “refreshment and rest” can be observed in the many current “escapades” of the “rich and famous” to islands all over the world, even to some which they themselves own. The tourist industry’s exploitation of the idea of a relaxed, laid-back “island life” is another pertinent example.

5 Felipe Fernández-Armesto provides the example of Majorca (27) in the Mediterranean, but Caribbean cities, many of which were to become capitals, attest to this phenomenon as well.
Sugar Island

Along with economic speculation, the desire for profit both on an individual as well as on a national level, and the climate suited for certain produce, the intimate relationship that has been fostered, as we saw in the Introduction, between insularity and boundedness surely had something to do with the unshakable conviction that islands are, by virtue of their very “nature,” ideal places for the submission to a one and only commodity. So many islands were violently submitted to monoculture, especially in the Atlantic and in the Caribbean, that it is tempting to speculate that along with the obvious economic forces at play (and we have seen how the possibility of easy transactions and redistributions by sea helped explain the exploitation of many small Mediterranean islands for one commodity), there was a more abstract force bent on suppressing multiplicity and establishing the supreme reign of the One—at once a mythical, metaphysical, and religious dictate—over the Many. The irony was, of course, that in order to do so, capitalists and colonists alike introduced bodies for labor from elsewhere—after “native” populations were, depending on the region, nearly exterminated by labor and disease or put to work under dubious contracts, and the metropolises’ own laborers (political prisoners, convicts, etc) proved insufficient, empires started importing enslaved labor from Africa as is well-known, and later, “indentured servants,” from countries such as India and China—thereby producing a multiplicity of human relations that survives, despite all historical tragedies, to this day.

The most recurrent instantiation of the monoculture island was surely the sugar island, especially in the Caribbean. Sugar islands sustained and propped up the different capitalist modes discussed in the Introduction, and the regime established to produce the substance we most readily associate with sweetness had nothing sweet about it. The plantation system became a hinge of sorts between mercantilist and industrial capitalism. Indeed, Mintz describes the plantations as “precocious cases of industrialization” (59), which even if not stemming from an industrial capitalism already entrenched in Europe, came about as a fundamentally new “complex” (Curtin) that acquired and
indeed came to foster many characteristics of industrial capitalism (discipline, organization of labor force, extensive use of machinery, time-consciousness, separation of production from consumption, and separation of workers from tools [Mintz 50-2]), while retaining others from mercantilist capitalism (especially enslaved or “indentured” labor, and the agricultural, despite highly mechanized, quality of the enterprise [Mintz 56-9]). Mintz goes so far as to argue for the industrial character of the plantation not only in terms of its structures of production, but also of consumption. The introduction of Caribbean sugar to England, although a product long known before then, not only “nourished certain capitalist classes at home as they were becoming more capitalistic” (61), but also became a mass phenomenon precisely as a result of its consumption by the industrial proletariat. Sugar became a crucial source of caloric input workers lacked under their exploitative work regimes (146). It also came to constitute, Mintz argues, part of a system of “legitimized population control:”

All over the world sugar has helped to fill the calorie gap for the laboring poor, and has become one of the first foods of the industrial work break. There is, moreover, at least some evidence that the culturally conventionalized pattern of intrafamily consumption—with the costly protein foods being largely monopolized by the adult male, and the sucrose being eaten in larger proportion by the wife and children—has wide applicability. Maldistribution of food within poor families may constitute a kind of culturally legitimized population control, since it systematically deprives the children of protein. (149)

In more recent history, the 20th century was still witnessing the “synchronicity of the nonsynchronous” when the nascent empire of the United States submitted newly acquired territories to sugar plantation regimes. Indeed, islands continue to be premier sources of sugar today and the economic dependency on foreign control persists: in the Caribbean, for instance, most companies in operation are U.S.-owned.

Sugar cane, believed by many to have been domesticated in Papua New Guinea, was first transported from the eastern Mediterranean by means of “island-hopping” (one of the most famous of which was Cyprus) to islands in the eastern and central Atlantic, where the plantation economy

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6 Indeed, C.L.R. James and Eric Williams insisted on the plantation’s industrial character long ago.
7 For more information on this, see Richardson and Mintz. See also the collection Sugarlandia Revisited.
was first established and experimented with: the Azores, especially Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands. It was in these islands that colonial plantation experiments were first developed that deeply resembled what was later to take place in the Caribbean. The questions of what to do with the “natives” – especially in the Canary Islands; the concern to make the land usable for economic exploitation; the experimentation with crops that would work best in tropical climates; the assumption that plantations were to be worked not by those who imposed and owned them, but by others more “suited” to the climate and the type of work; the introduction of enslaved peoples from Africa – especially in the Cape Verde islands; and the financial backing and technical skills of experienced Mediterranean merchants and seasoned technicians, were some of the many aspects that proved crucial for the transportation of these experiments to the Caribbean and for the conviction that significant continuities are to be found in the uses of islands for the development of capitalist coloniality.

From the eastern and central Atlantic, sugar cane was taken to the Caribbean, where Columbus introduced it during his second voyage. The first Iberian colonists did not manage to establish a significant sugar production enterprise in the Caribbean: the Portuguese concentrated in Brazil, where sugar production is still important today, and the Spanish, although they cultivated sugar cane especially in Hispaniola, seemed more interested in mineral, especially gold, extraction. But soon, leaving what seemed to be a bountiful Caribbean (both in its agricultural possibilities as well as in its strategic ones – more on this below) only to the Spanish seemed like a foolish proposition. With the inter-imperial competition unleashed in the 16th century, which responded to many and complex motives I cannot discuss here, the English, the French, and the Dutch vied for island territories in the Caribbean.

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See, especially, Fernández-Armesto, Verlinden, and Mintz.
The English and the French emerged as the most successful sugar planters, while the Dutch preferred the lucrative roles of privateers, merchants, traders, and investors (see Goslinga 260 and Appleby 91-101) that the Genoese and Venetians had performed in previous centuries in the eastern Atlantic. For the plantation economy to be established, the colonial agents abrogated the land to themselves while introducing the notion of private property; thereafter, they cleared immense amounts of land, sustained and reproduced slavery as labor source for such labor-intensive crop after the “native” population was almost extinguished, and generated in the long-term permanent ecological damage and changes in climate that still plague the region today.\(^9\)

Between the 16\(^{th}\) and the 18\(^{th}\) centuries, many inter-imperial rivalries, competitions, and wars ensued in the Caribbean, with many islands changing hands repeatedly. The English empire, however, managed to become the biggest and its sugar islands the most prominent in the 17\(^{th}\) century. It was then that full-blown plantation economies in the Caribbean islands based on sugar production consolidated, with Barbados leading the way and, later, Jamaica, which was seized from Spain in 1655.\(^{10}\) By the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century, however, France’s Saint Domingue had soared to the forefront of sugar production, only to be supplanted by Cuba in the 19\(^{th}\) century after the Haitian Revolution.

But sugar was much too powerful to disappear. In the 19\(^{th}\) century, the crop was taken, in a further leg of the island-hopping movement, to the Pacific. There, Hawai‘i and Fiji became significant producers,\(^{11}\) until, as has also happened in the Caribbean, the tourist industry overwhelmed their economies. But tourism, it should be clear, has remained part of the centuries-long plantation-machine logic Antonio Benítez Rojo considers to be the basic underlying structure in all Caribbean societies, whatever their official political status (see his “Paraísos Perdidos” and “Azúcar/Poder/Texto”). DeLoughrey has summarized such perverse historical continuity thus:

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\(^9\) For more on the relations between ecology and insularity, see Grove.

\(^{10}\) For more on these two islands, see Richardson, Dunn, Curtin, Williams, Mintz, and Appleby.

\(^{11}\) See Oliver for more on Pacific islands as sugar producers.
most Caribbean states, economically crippled by World Bank and IMF lending practices, are forced to maintain tourist and service sectors that are remarkably like exploitative plantation economies. In *Sun, Sex, and Gold*, Kempadoo points out that by 1996 ‘formal tourism employment’ (exempting the vast informal tourism network) represented over 25 per cent of the Caribbean region and was one of the fastest growing sectors. Alarming, between 70 and 90 per cent of foreign capital earned in the tourist industry is not invested in the Caribbean itself but rather is extracted through foreign goods and services. Like the plantation system, the tourist industry does little to sustain the local economy while fattening the wallets of industrialised Northern states and multinational corporations. In Mimi Sheller’s words, the ‘Caribbean island has become a global icon which encapsulates a deep history of relations of consumption, luxury, and privilege.’ . . . Sheller explains, ‘following in the footsteps of the explorers, the planters, and the armed forces, the tropical ‘holiday in the sun’ became a safe new means of consuming the Caribbean environment.’ (“Island Ecologies” 307-8)

**Strategic Island**

In a certain sense, all economic, political, and military uses of islands are strategic, insofar as they are part of larger capitalist and colonial maneuvers. But one can identify, among these frequent and extensive uses, a few salient ones. During the times of western European maritime empires, for instance, island possessions became, among other things, (1) a means to further imperial expansion, as was the case with the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean; (2) a way to create markets for the manufactured products from the metropolis and to obtain, simultaneously, producers of commodities that could be bought nationally under privileged circumstances; (3) a barter for inter-imperial competition; and (4) sites to use as military enclaves.12

Charles Verlinden and Felipe Fernández-Armesto have shown the extent to which the eastern Atlantic islands were used as strategic springboards for the voyages of “discovery” and as laboratories for “colonial techniques” (Verlinden) to be transported and used in the eventual conquest and colonization of the Americas. The same historians, along with Mintz and Curtin, amply document that the plantation experiments performed in the eastern Atlantic islands and discussed in the previous section also proved crucial for the establishment of a similar model of exploitation in

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12 Strategic islands have also been used as sites where to banish “undesirables”: penal colonies (such as Van Diemen’s Land [now Tasmania] and leper colonies (such as Chacachacare Island in Trinidad and Tobago) are particularly appalling examples.
the Caribbean. Indeed, Columbus—along with so many other imperial agents, including plantation technicians—took off from the Canary Islands. DeLoughrey indicates that “a growing body of scholarship has gestured to this complex creolisation process”—unleashed in the Caribbean, I might add, as a result of imperial “island hopping”—“to suggest that the Caribbean became the first site of modernity” (“Island Ecologies” 298) as well as the embodiment of “its contemporary global inequities” (308).

Within the region, the Dutch enterprise emerges as perhaps the premier example of the strategic use of island possessions. The so-called “ABC” islands were chosen by the Dutch to take away from Spain primarily because the former aimed at making the islands a “base from which they might perennially infest the West Indies” (Goslinga 265). The islands—Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao—were used, Goslinga insists, as “bases for highly rewarding and extremely damaging privateering. Colonizing aims in the Curaçao conquest, for instance, were of secondary importance. Furthermore, Dutch occupation usually went hand in hand with an increasing volume of trade, not only with other foreign colonies but also with Spanish settlements.” (275)

But other forces with strategic interests of their own were at play too in different regions and at different times. Religious interests, for instance, played a vital part in the fates of many islands. It is a notorious feature of Pacific history that missionaries used many islands as stepping-stones to further their search for pagan souls in need of conversion. Tahiti, whose first contact with missionaries was in 1797, is a case in point:

These Calvinistic pioneers [from the London Missionary Society] first applied their persuasions and good works to persons at the summit of social and political hierarchy in the district where they landed, assuming that conversion would follow a downward direction. After eighteen years and many vicissitudes the strategy paid off, and Christianity became the official religion of politically united Tahiti (and Moorea). The progress on Tahiti was

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13 I should add that these “contemporary global inequities” include today’s atrocious structure of forced labor migrations on a global scale, itself also inaugurated by the plantation regime. These migrations, which now take more frequently the reverse routes and recur to yolas instead of ships, constitute, as much as the tourist industry does, a chief component of the exploitation of island societies.

14 See also Richardson for more information on this.
interrupted from time to time by local strife, but by the 1830s the L.M.S. missionaries had built up strong positions there for themselves and their faith, and had branched out to the Leeward, the Cook, and the Samoan Islands. One of their leaders, John Williams, got as far as the New Hebrides –where he promptly acquired martyrdom. (Oliver 54).

Strategies of a more technological kind have also been significant in the Pacific in more recent history. Many islands, including atolls, which from the perspective of many capitalists were absolutely useless, suddenly were found to be extremely useful in the 20th century as coaling stations, ports of call for the construction of the Panama Canal, cable stations for the laying down of the telegraph, and airplane runways (Oliver 62, 79). These uses seem remarkably close to those we have already explored of islands as stopovers in oceanic voyages and imperial expansion.

Today, islands continue to be crucial as military bases for global powers. A recent popular struggle managed to repeal the presence of the U.S. Marine in the island of Vieques, which is part of the Puerto Rican archipelago. The devastation of land and many other resources, including the inhabitants’ compromised health, cannot, however, be made up for by the Marine’s exit. Other well-known and persistent cases in point are Pearl Harbor in Hawai’i, whose importance during World War Two cannot be overstated, and Guantánamo, Cuba for the U.S. military.

The Bikini Atoll in the Pacific provides a particularly devastating example of islands as strategic places for military maneuvers. The example constitutes also a fitting transition to the island paradise myth to be discussed presently. In the summer of 1946, Operation Crossroads, a “testing” of nuclear devices, was conducted in the Bikini Atoll, from where inhabitants were relocated (some would say, forcibly removed) on the assurance of being able to return. (This was, of course, another broken promise…) Within the next few weeks, Louis Réard named his new fashion creation “bikini” after the Pacific atoll. In July 2006, on the 60th birthday of the bikini, one of the most ubiquitous signs associated with the tourist industry on islands, a news article written in commemoration reads:

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15 The northern Atlantic is a particularly fascinating case of the connections between religion and islands. Many religious monasteries were established in northern Atlantic islands, and texts/myths such as The Voyage of Saint Brendan helped consolidate some of the mythical and monstrous qualities attributed by Europeans to Atlantic islands.
“It [the bikini] was debuted shortly after the first US post-war nuclear tests on the South Pacific Bikini atoll. Words like atomic were beginning to be used by the media to describe something sensational and, no doubt, Mr. Réard reasoned that the excitement the bikini would cause would equal that of the bomb.”…16

**Islands and the Mythical Imaginary**

*What must be recovered is the mythological life of the deserted island.*

Gilles Deleuze, “Desert Islands” 13

The previous discussion has amply proven the neglected centrality of islands for the development and expansion of capitalism and coloniality. It has done so by examining three of the most recurrent historical conceptualizations and uses of islands in the western world, through which we have also perceived the traces of a mythical imaginary concerning insularity: the entrepôt island anticipated the following discussion of the island as ideal laboratory; in the sugar island we saw the experimentation with and ensuing power of the regime of the One over that of the Many; the strategic island showed the entanglement of tourism, exoticized names, female bodies, and military devastation.

We now turn to a more sustained focus on the mythical imaginary concerning insularity. Two particularly powerful myths, themselves also constituting significant conceptualizations and uses of the island, shall be explored: as paradise and as laboratory. After an overview of the former’s power and endurance especially with respect to the idea of worklessness, I move to a discussion of the latter through an analysis of five key texts in their respective aesthetic or scientific fields: the Atlantis myth in Plato’s *Timaeus and Critias*, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*,

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16 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/5130460.stm> Teresia Teiawa has also written a compelling essay where she develops the concept of “militourism” in the Pacific and which is partly related to these events. The island as a strategic possession remains crucial for international relations in many other regions of the world. For instance, territorial disputes between different Latin American countries have often been related to island possessions; the case of the Malvinas is well-known and still provoking nationalist death rattles; the recent conflict between North and South Korea has an island at its center.
Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* and Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Throughout these texts, the common denominator of the island as laboratory can be observed despite the different scientific and aesthetic realms that provoke them and despite the significant differences in their historical production – the last five centuries. As was broached in the Introduction, the analyses of the aforementioned texts enable us to perceive the ways in which island has been imagined mythically beyond materials that tradition has already categorized as “myth,” since the mythical imaginary surrounding insularity maintains a long relationship not only with capitalism and coloniality – phenomena we tend to imagine as historical – but also with many academic and aesthetic productions.

A word on “mythical imaginary” is in order first, however. Roland Barthes’ reflections on the continued relevance of myth in his “Myth Today,” a reflective, longer essay included at the end of his collection of writings on myths in French bourgeois culture, is a useful starting point. Barthes begins his essay insisting on a semiological approach to myth (111) insofar as “myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (109) and, furthermore, since “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (109). In other words, the defining characteristic of myth is its form, not its content, since any content can be transformed into myth.

However, as the essay unfolds, one encounters statements that seem to belie Barthes’ commitment to a purely semiological approach:

Semiology, once its limits are settled, is not a metaphysical trap: it is a science among others, necessary but not sufficient. The important thing is to see that the unity of an explanation cannot be based on the amputation of one or other of its approaches, but, as Engels said, on the dialectical co-ordination of the particular sciences it makes use of. This is the case with mythology: it is a part of both semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form. (112)

Later, he proceeds to define the enterprise of any “mythologist” as follows: “The ideal of course would be to combine these two types of criticism; the mistake which is constantly made is to confuse
them: ideology has its methods, and so has semiology” (137). Furthermore, an acknowledgement of a “concept of myth” ensues:

In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulos condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function. In this sense, we can say that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated . . . (119)

But, bafflingly, this fundamental “open character” of the concept of myth, Barthes does not characterize as anything else but “impoverishment” (117, 118), “distortion” (122), “deformation” (122), and “alienation” (123) of meaning. In a word, “It is now possible to complete the semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society: myth is depoliticized speech” (143). And not only is it a particularly pervasive and fastidious way in which history becomes nature, but it is also seemingly all-powerful:

Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it. So that the more the language-object resists at first, the greater its final prostitution; whoever here resists completely yields completely . . . Myth . . . is a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses. (132-133)

Such a thoroughly negative characterization of myth is undoubtedly useful for analyses of discourses that naturalize history, one of which, as we saw in the Introduction, is that of the dominant idea of island. The latter consolidated an enduring association of insularity with lack, smallness, boundedness, and isolation out of a historical record that, to the contrary, repeatedly shows that islands have constituted points of connection, interaction, mixture, and change. Even the myth of the island paradise, which is prominent within the dominant idea of the island to this day and which seems to be a “positive” instantiation of insularity, more often than not turns out to: (1) operate in terms of an exclusionary and exploitative logic; (2) depend on quite hellish demands; and, (3) be based on the familiar negative associations between insularity, boundedness and isolation. Such foundational paradox concerning insularity, furthermore, was aided significantly by the laboratory
island myth, as can be perceived in, (1) the rise of an insular, utopic tradition whose epitome is surely Thomas More’s *Utopia*, (2) the popularization of a literature of shipwreck in desert islands whose originary impulse is continually attributed to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*; and (3) the consolidation of several “natural” and “human” sciences in the nineteenth century, which relied fundamentally, as we will see, on insular voyages.

Still, as was anticipated in the Introduction, my argument seeks to show that there is much more to myth than Barthes’ approach allows for. Perhaps Barthes was much too concerned with “myth in (French) bourgeois society” to realize the potential of his own description of the concept of myth as fundamentally open to appropriation and of his claim that “the major power of myth [is] its recurrence” (135). If we move beyond the contextual specificity of Barthes’ claims, it becomes possible to explode the negativity of myth; to consider the ways in which it does indeed create meanings, rather than just deform them; to find the openings within its stories through which elements escape and can consequently be re-purposed; to explore its obstinate recurrence as a phenomenon capable of telling us something about history, instead of only producing its depoliticization. In a word, it becomes possible to envision a mythical imaginary.

**Paradise Island**

Today, the island-as-paradise is perhaps the most easily identifiable image thanks to a tourism-saturated world. It is also the most obvious theme with which to argue for the connections between history and myth, for the identification of insularity and paradise is long and deeply established. Indeed, Jean Delumeau’s *History of Paradise* accounts for many medieval texts directly related to a tradition going back to Greek antiquity where “island” functions as equivalent to “paradise:” Giovanni Marignolli’s and Jordan of Séverac’s trips to Ceylon (Sri Lanka); Dante’s characterization of paradise as an island; Sir John Mandeville’s travel story; among others. He quotes Claude Kappler approvingly on islands’ appeal:
‘If there are any places that have a special appeal for the imagination, it is islands.’ Unlike a continent, which represents a closed universe, an island ‘is by its nature a place where marvels exist for their own sake outside the laws that generally prevail… Ever since Greek antiquity, islands have been favorite places for the most astounding human and divine adventures.’ It is not surprising, then, that ‘medieval travelers were led to make use of this mythology once again when they came upon many islands of the Indian ocean.’ Celtic legends likewise had a great attachment to strange islands. . . . Distance lends enchantment, and isolation preserves things in existence. Later on, many ‘utopias,’ among them that of Thomas More, would be located on islands. (98)

Delumeau then proceeds to single out for comment the myth of the Happy Isles and of Saint Brendan’s Island. The first of these is particularly important for our discussion, since it constitutes a complex example concerning mythical imagination—even metaphysical aspiration—and the historical possibility that travelers long before Columbus’ time had gone beyond the Pillars of Hercules and had made contact with islands in the eastern Atlantic. Indeed, the myth of the Happy Isles has been consistently related to the Canary Islands. Delumeau writes:

The Happy Isles stand in a Greco-Roman poetic tradition that is based on passages in Homer, Hesiod, and Plutarch. According to this tradition, beyond the towering Atlas there lie islands with enchanted gardens, a constant temperate climate, and fragrant breezes, where human beings have no need to work. In the Christian era Isidore of Seville gave this belief a new popularity by assigning it a place in his geography, which then exerted a lasting influence on Western culture. (99, emphasis added)

He then goes on to list the many more texts in which the myth of the Happy Isles was to be found, including its identification with the island of Avalon in Celtic literature. Consequently, medieval “maps . . . made room for the Happy Isles,” (100) and in these the identification of the Isles with the Canary Islands was firmly established. Later, the Happy Isles traveled north and were related to “islands of Ireland,” a development Delumeau contends must be “linked to the success of the story of St. Brendan’s voyage” (103). This traveling and promiscuous myth of islands as earthly paradise had a long life after the so-called Middle Ages, and informed a great deal of imperial agents coming to the Americas, including, of course, Columbus himself (Delumeau 105-15).

17 See, for instance, Fernández-Armesto, Butel, and Gillis.
Delumeau’s account hints at perhaps the most salient aspect of the island paradise myth, namely the idea of the needlessness of work. Exploring it will help to further the discussion of myth and history that opens this chapter. The persistent desire not to have to work is surely thoroughly historical: if humans had not devised systems whereby work was constructed as an essential need, there would be no point in wanting not to work. But this historical desire is immediately caught up with the mythical idea of endless bounty apparently not forestalled by the “enclosed nature” of islands long represented in fictional texts. The enduring associations between isolation, remoteness and insularity surely provide a further mythical milieu for the resolutely improbable notion of perfect conditions and eternal provisions.

Insularity as an ambit of worklessness was part of the mythical patchwork – although this is of course difficult to substantiate with written record – having to do with tropical environments and the body, with climate and disease, with types of work and race, which influenced in various ways and to varying degrees the historical manner in which regimes of exploitation were designed and implemented on colonized islands. The historical tragedy has been, of course, that in order for this old mythical equivalence of insularity and worklessness to persist, an unspeakable regime of forced – overtly or not – labor has been exercised within. The paradise island myth has been forced to become another private property of only some. A couple of schematics will prove the point: 17th century quickly enriched and opulent planters leading a “die hard” kind of life = millions of slaves; 18th 21st century tourists in “Hawaiian” shirts and bikinis lounging on a pristine beach with a sophisticated drink at hand = millions of islanders staffing the hotels.

But many slaves and, later, wage laborers have resisted their exploitation by re-appropriating the association between islands and worklessness. Profuse recorded examples of enslaved or wage laborers, either on an individual basis or collectively organized, purposely refusing to work, slowing

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18 Dunn’s text establishes this relation quite forcefully.
down their work rhythm, or feigning slow-wittedness, for instance, attest to this. This audacious idea that myths (and utopias) are for everyone has, there is no denying it, cost them dearly, both on a physical level as well as on the more psychoanalytical one that consists in the frequent adscription of “laziness” and “indolence” to their ontology. Still, from the mythical imaginary of an island paradise escape possibilities of different relations and new creations: in the specific case we have been discussing, for instance, pretending to assume indolence as a matter of “nature” and proceeding to mobilize it for resisting exploitation, effectively manages to re-politicize “nature.” Marronage, a more formalized and collective version of the kind of resistance we have been discussing, constitutes perhaps the most compelling phenomenon of the refusal to work under the colonialist terms, the re-territorialization of island space, and the creation of new relations and communities.

Let us finally consider a more concrete example from the Caribbean concerning the ways in which the current notions of “earthly paradise,” although no longer as agricultural as those of the Happy Isles, are nonetheless based on an idea of worklessness that can only be fragilely sustained by tragedy. The island of St. Vincent had, as many other Caribbean islands, a history of changing imperial hands and a fraught record of colonial and “native” relations. It is, however, one of the very few islands in the Caribbean that managed to retain “native” population to a significant degree—until the end of the 18th century, that is. Michael Craton provides a useful summary:

In St. Vincent, regarded as the most promising of the ceded islands [from France to Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris], the new colonists treated the natives with simplistic pragmatism on long-established principles. The French authorities in 1700 had divided the island longitudinally. French colonists settled on the hillier Caribbean half, interspersed with a minority of semi-assimilated Caribs; the more fertile windward Atlantic side was assigned exclusively to the far less friendly Carib majority. Because of prolonged miscegenation with shipwrecked and runaway African slaves, these ‘wild’ windward Caribs were referred to as Black Caribs, whereas the more acculturated friendlies (who were, ironically, said to be purer descendants of the natives once regarded as implacable enemies by the Europeans) were styled the Red or Yellow Caribs. (72)

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19 This kind of resistance is studied, with examples from multiple places, in James C. Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Scott describes “squatting,” “desertion,” “evasion,” and “foot-dragging” as one of many “forms of disguised, low profile, undisclosed resistance, infrapolitics” (qtd. in Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette, eds. *Slavery* 367).

20 Dominica still has, to this day, Carib reserves. For more on this, see Hulme’s *Remnants of Conquest*. 47
“Negotiations” ensued between the English and the Black Caribs concerning the “opening up” of the Caribs’ “side of the island” (74). The motives, according to Craton, were threefold: the colonists wanted to offer the land to “would-be sugar planters who promised to make St. Vincent second only to Jamaica among British sugar colonies;” they also desired to use it as a “safeguard against the French who could reach it [St. Vincent] more easily from St. Lucia;” and, finally, they feared “the ease with which the Black Caribs could communicate with the French – no more distant than a night’s paddling by canoe” (74). The imperial government proposed land “reallocations” that the Caribs rejected as, rightly, a “proposed removal into virtual native reserves” (75). Battles followed, with the British deciding that the best option was to drive the Black Caribs out of the island entirely – even if gradually – and supplant them by the more “friendly” Yellow or Red Caribs. But the island was taken over by the French again in 1779, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, and Britain regained it only with the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Again war ensued, and the Caribs resisted for well over a year: “They surrendered only after the landing of a huge expeditionary force under General Abercromby, many guerrilla skirmishes, a scorched-earth policy on the part of the British, and the threat of starvation” (83). The defeated Caribs were rounded up and detained in infrahuman conditions on Balliceaux Island in 1796, from where the last survivors were finally deported to Roatán Island in 1797. From there, they have traveled to several countries in Central America and their descendants call themselves today the Garifuna people.

In 2008, Balliceaux appeared to have been sold to British investors: “Documents lodged by J. Barnard, Realtors (on behalf of Balliceaux Development) with the Physical Planning and Development Board of SVG to construct a new residential/commercial building on Balliceaux, point to the sale of the island since a ‘contract for purchase agreement was made in March 2008’.”

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21 <http://indigenousreview.blogspot.com/search?q=balliceaux>
building plan is described as no less than “Paradise Regained” and the “Caribbean Nirvana.” Paul Lewis describes the project thus:

It involves the sale of both Balliceaux and Battowia for an unconfirmed price of EC $400 million for 191 hectares (471.96 acres) of land. The project, according to the said documents, calls for an investment of US $750 million over a five year period. . . . The glossy presentation by Richard Hywell Evans, Architectural and Design Limited of England presents a futuristic look for the new Nirvana of the eastern Caribbean, a project reminiscent of designs currently employed in the Gulf States. Balliceaux will accommodate 45 luxury condominiums with private jetties, 2 mega villas, Owner’s Club, two beach bars in North Bay and Landing Bay, and a “Carib Indian Monument.” Linking Balliceaux to Battowia will be an extensive marine development that will accommodate 350 yachts, a clubhouse for 200, 80 village apartments, 25 marine houses, 118 marine duplexes and 131 wharf houses. Battowia will be the site of a huge luxury resort hotel, 35 cliff villas, 15 hillside villas and a summit restaurant. The government has agreed to lease Church Island to the developers - to make the project more realistic. Church Island will be the location of a destination spa and treatment room with medical facilities. This three-phase plan involves the construction of swimming pools; facilities for machinery, diesel fuel storage, sail loft, chandler, shipwright, and a customs house and police station. . . . It will be built to accommodate as many as 1000 persons, but because of peaks and lows in the tourist season they expect an average of 300 guests.

For reasons I have been unable to uncover, the sale did not take place, for the island is listed, under the category of “Private Island,” in Barnard’s Realty’s webpage. A “Vincentian family” who is selling it for 30 million U.S. dollars now owns it along with Battowia. The sale includes “development plans, a draft act, the Balliceaux Act that outlines the conditions between the developers and the Government of St. Vincent & the Grenadines,” which seem remarkably similar to the plans outlined above.

As has been anticipated, the design of paradise—a revealing example of Lefebvre’s “illusion of transparency” with respect to space (more on this in Chapter 3)—is, indeed, hellish: “at the height of the process of altering and damaging island landscapes, tropical islands were interpellated in Edenic terms, removed in space and time from the urbanisation of Western Europe, which of course had been constituted by the labour of the colonies” (DeLoughrey “Island Ecologies” 305). It is,

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likewise, consistent with the dominant idea of the island based on negation. The submission of the island to the paradisiacal myth that the dominant idea of the island dictates, a priori, it should be consistent with,\textsuperscript{23} even considers, in the case of St. Vincent, a “Carib Indian Monument” that would effectively perform the most dangerous depoliticization of history.

But the fact that the “development” project seems to have subsided—at least for now—might constitute a small triumph against such depoliticizing operation. In the meantime, the Caribs have become a new people in the world. No matter how much capitalist coloniality seeks to privatize it, a paradise, after all, can be imagined by everyone, and in an infinite number of other ways…

**Laboratory Island**

As we will see throughout our brief textual analyses, the main assumptions of the laboratory island myth revolve around the guiding—and insistently unquestioned—idea of insular easiness: to explain the difficult multiplicity of life, the simplicity of island life; to explain the difficult diversity of species, the simplicity of insular genetic pools; to explain the vastness of the natural world, the bounded insular space; to explain the dizzying interconnections of life, the isolated island… Islands are, apparently, easy to come by, easy to colonize, easy to submit to inquiry.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, with an ease that is nonetheless quite paradoxical, it becomes possible to transport an observation made on an island, the space one has made to be lacking, bounded, and isolated, to the whole world. It is a microcosm where one can study processes of the macrocosm; a particular where one can understand the general.\textsuperscript{25} And if, when considered as a totality, “nature” is

\textsuperscript{23} And when this fails, as is bound to, or when there are no more real islands to satisfy the imperial delirium, artificial islands might do the trick: consider, for instance, the phenomenon of the Artificial Offshore Islands (AOIs), which are “large platforms or filled areas designed to support such industrial activities as storage, transportation, resource-processing, and waste disposal” (Frankel “The Call of Islands” 374); “The World” in Dubai (<http://www.theworld.ae/>); or the many private islands and island resorts.

\textsuperscript{24} Here, one can readily see the underlying connections with tourism’s insistence on the “laid-back,” “easy” nature of “island life.”

\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, the philosophical problem of the particular and the general is of premier importance in many disciplinary uses of islands. Concerning a passage in Lévi-Strauss’ _Tristes Tropiques_, Gillian Beer writes: “Lévi-Strauss needs particularity, above all. The single instance can then become the whole, not merely stand in for the whole. He needs it here, it would seem, for
obscure, threatening, impenetrable, impossible to contain or explain fully, unyielding in its “essence,” it becomes a miraculous “open book,” a yielding, containable, explainable phenomenon, even a willing participant, when confronted on an island. Indeed, “nature” is prodigal when it comes to islands: it almost seems like it provides them to the scientific mind – another drifting creature after the shipwreck of knowledge – to ease its misery. A foundational text of evolutionary biology such as the collection *Evolution on Islands* begins thus:

> A major problem in evolutionary biology is to understand why the organic world is as diverse as it is, both in terms of its extraordinary variety in structures, functions, and life histories, and its sheer numbers. One of many approaches to a problem as broad as this is to seek an understanding of a small and simplified part of it. For example, inspired by this philosophy many investigators re-create a simple version of part of a complex world in the laboratory or in a computer, the better to gain a precise understanding of the workings of its parts. This is the essence of experimentation. Islands provide that simplicity, *naturally*, because they are discrete pieces of the environment and often very small. (v, emphasis added)

Assumptions such as these also inform, not surprisingly, the discipline of geography, in great part responsible for the establishment and popularization of categories of land made to become meaningful with respect to humanity and its relationship with the environment. Russell King provides a succinct and equally mystifying statement on the importance of islands for geography: “The essential qualities of insularity – and often too of isolation – pose common problems for the thousands of inhabited islands the world over. Their existence as ready-made spatial models makes them ideal for the study of the interaction between population and territory which lies at the core of geography as a discipline” (15).
The conviction of insular simplicity has also found its way into the “human” sciences, especially anthropology. Some of its most well known founding texts, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, were conducted in Pacific archipelagoes, making them direct descendants of the nineteenth century scientific expeditions to the Pacific islands by both naturalists and ethnologists and of the war-plagued world of the twentieth century. By exploring insular societies—a category usually collapsed with “native”—one can make claims about worldwide social processes, especially about how communities come to be constituted, or so the argument goes. By studying a “simpler” (and, therefore, “savage” and somehow “back in time”) way of life, one can trace the evolution of more “complex” (and, therefore, “civilized” and “contemporary”) ones. The paradoxical results of the laboratory island myth are equivalent to those we explored above in different semantic registers: islands must be, at once, exotic and familiar, different and the same, peculiar and standard, particular and general.

The effects of the laboratory island myth have also trickled into the apparently less scientific realms of literature and philosophy. After all, the utopian genre, so fond of insularity, depends to a great extent on a parallel assumption of the island-as-laboratory. As will be demonstrated in the following analysis of More’s *Utopia*, the imagination of an “ideal society” in a small, territorially “bounded” space becomes a commentary on the larger world, or, at least, the vehicle for a hope that, somehow, it can be replicated beyond the island. Once again, the idea of perfection seems to be “easier” to represent within the confines of an insular space. As we will see, it is also as a laboratory that Defoe deploys the island in *Robinson Crusoe*. There, too, it will be a laboratory for a certain kind of utopia, but this time concerning the apotheosis of individualistic, capitalist enterprise.

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26 Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes: “just as in the case of biology, islands and insularity are first and foremost strong metaphors of isolation and the boundedness of systems in anthropology” (134). Beer has also remarked on the importance of islands for anthropology insofar as the discipline has tended to play out in them its primary dilemma concerning observation and habitation (“Discourses of the Island” 21-2). For the extent to which the related “myth of the primitive isolate” has been at the center of anthropological inquiry, see Terrell, Hunt and Gosden.
Nevertheless, precisely as a result of its emphasis on *experimentation*—at different levels, with all kinds of motivations and (usually unforeseen and unintended) effects—we shall see that it is possible to find in the myth of the laboratory island residues in flight, an imaginary, that might be re-appropriated and used for different purposes than the Barthian naturalization of history.

**“Atlantis”**

Insofar as Plato’s Atlantis is a well-known Greek myth that has traveled extensively, it affords a good place to start. According to the platonic story, Poseidon, the god of the seas, created the island of Atlantis to protect (read, possess) Cleito, the woman with whom he was in love. The island was thus created on the basis of desire, which, in Plato’s hierarchical value system, pertains to the dimension of the “real,” to the world of the image, three times removed from that of the Forms. While the opulent and complex constitution of Atlantis initially appears to grant it a utopian character, Plato employs it as a lesson in bad design and bad government. The island quickly turns into a dystopia in contrast to ancient Athens, which having successfully resisted Atlantis’ imperialist advance, more closely resembles the ideal platonic Republic.

One of the more salient characteristics of Atlantis is its system of walls, designed by Poseidon for the “protection” of Cleito. The island is circular and the walls succeed one another concentrically towards the center, where Cleito is hidden. But in order to survive, the island requires trade, for which a series of openings in the walls facing the sea were devised—effectively turning the island into a port. Atlantis’ subsequent vulnerability to the corruptive influences of the ocean was, according to Plato, one of the primary reasons for the island’s downfall. An oceanic cataclysm provoked by the wrath of Zeus would forever sink Atlantis from the surface to the depths of the...

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27 A quick Internet search readily gives an idea of the range of the myth’s transmutations, from Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* to Edgar Cayce’s psychic reveries. My account of the Atlantis myth is based on the relevant passages in *Timaeus* and *Critias*.

28 In the wake of the recent earthquake in the island Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic, I can’t help but note that Poseidon was also the “Earth-Shaker,” the god of earthquakes...
ocean. Atlantis, according to Plato, was responsible for the fact that the Atlantic Ocean was impossible to navigate!\footnote{The name “Atlantic” is a reference to Atlas, Poseidon and Cleito’s first son and Atlantis’ first king. The island itself took its name from Atlas as well. It is no trifle that Atlas would also be the god of cartography. Islands and mapmaking have a long history (indeed the phenomenon of insularism has been described as a precursor of cartography’s formalization [see Conley]). Walter Mignolo’s \textit{The Darker Side of the Renaissance} is especially helpful in historicizing and thereby defamiliarizing cartography and its products, particularly as regards their connections with imperialist projects in the Americas.}

As with every myth, Plato’s Atlantis has acquired a sort of independent life, an “imaginary” all its own that makes many aspects of it, nevertheless, constitutive of “reality.” Through it and its travels, one can appreciate the ways in which islands have been historically perceived and understood, as well as how they have been \textit{produced} as sites of intervention for outside powers. In this respect, it is important to stress that Atlantis’ downfall is the result, according to the platonic myth, of a double and interrelated cause: both its entrance into international trade and the desire for possession (both of land and of Cleito) that informed its original foundation. Although Plato’s use of Atlantis is clearly marked by a wish to counterpoise its characteristics with those of Athens, one can already perceive in the myth the double specter of the colonialist desire for possession\footnote{The island as private property lingers on today in virtual businesses (Dell and other companies have their own “virtual islands”), in the tourist industry, and in the phenomenon of rich people actually owning entire islands. It is also strongly suggested, along with a related fantasy of island-as-self, in D.H. Lawrence’s short story “The Man Who Loved Islands,” concerning a man who moves to and claims possession of three consequent islands, each one smaller than the preceding one, with a desire “to make it a world of his own,” “to fill it with [his] own personality” (151).} and the capitalist desire for the opening up of markets. As we have seen, these have been recurrent uses to which islands have been subjected. Atlantis therefore constitutes a sort of anticipatory myth, a “recuerdo del porvenir,” concerning the paths of history.\footnote{The myth is also suggestive on the question of insularity and isolation, which, as we will see in our discussion of \textit{Robinson Crusoe}, is, rather than the result of geography, an all too human invention.} Its enduring symbols are, not surprisingly, an island and a woman.

\textit{Utopia}

Published in 1516, barely over two decades after the first of Columbus’ famed voyages, Thomas More’s \textit{Utopia} inaugurates and consummates—for there were of course significant previous texts with an equivalent impulse— with its naming a tradition that was to prove exceptionally
powerful. Via Louis Marin’s *Utopiques: Jeux d’espaces*, Fredric Jameson provides an analysis of *Utopia* – and with it, of all Utopian discourse as such—revolving around two main ideas: (1) that utopian discourse produces a “union of the twin contradictories of the initial opposition . . . which, virtually a double cancellation of the initial contradiction itself, may be said to effect the latter’s neutralization and to produce a new term, the so-called neuter” (5; the terminology here is taken from Algirdas Greimas’ “semiotic rectangle”); and (2) that utopian discourse, in contrast to travel narrative, its close generic relative, is characterized by the absorption of narrative into description precisely as a result of its necessary figuration of an unconceptualizable “blank or gap” (18). The result of the interaction between these ideas is that one ought to look at utopian discourse as a “determinate type of praxis, rather than as a specific mode of representation” (6) whose “ultimate subject-matter . . . would then turn out to be its own conditions of possibility as discourse” (21).

Again via Marin, Jameson identifies in More’s text a few crucial contradictions that *Utopia* sets out to neutralize by means of a figuration of that “gap” that separates the two terms of the contradiction to begin with, but the one that emerges as the most fundamental is, of course, that between feudalism and capitalism. In a way, Jameson seems to suggest that *Utopia* emerges as the figuration of something that is, at the time of the text’s publication, as yet impossible to formulate, namely an alternative to both these regimes. Such figuration is, crucially, then, anticipatory. Marin writes: “Utopian discourse is the one form of ideological discourse that has anticipatory value of a theoretical kind: but it is a value which can only appear as such after theory itself has been elaborated, that is to say, subsequent to the emergence of material conditions for the new productive forces” (qtd. in Jameson 18).

This situation unleashes, therefore, a proliferation of levels of contradictions on a temporal plane that is not of the present, whereby the contradictions that More’s text seeks to deal with are only neutralized by the constitution of more, anticipated contradictions: an economy without money that nevertheless uses money for warfare and “intelligence” work against enemies; a radically equal
society that nevertheless unquestionably admits slavery and strong distinctions by gender; a happy land whereby absolutely every imaginable sphere is strictly regulated; among others. This is seen more intensely in the “discrepancy . . . between the verbal account of the island given by Hythloday and its possibilities of geometrical realization,” which Marin identifies in “the three fundamental areas of Utopian social structure, political organization, and economic activity” (17).

But it is striking that Jameson, despite the title of his essay, barely pays attention to the question of insularity. The main reference comes towards the end of the analysis, where he contrasts the utopia of the Polylerites (who created an insulated space in the continent and whose society was still much related to history) with the utopia of Utopia, which, to be possible as such must be a deeply ahistorical construction. The requirement of ahistoricity is met by the proliferation of boundaries, the ultimate of which is “the great trench which King Utopus causes to be dug to sunder from the mainland that promontory thereby transformed into the island of Utopia” (20). Jameson identifies this as an operation of both disjunction and exclusion:

the trampling arrogance of the feudal retinues and mercenaries on the one hand, the silent and invisible solvent of the market system on the other as it corrodes the older social forms—twin evils now externally negated by geographical fiat just as their inner principles have been structurally neutralized by the order of Utopian discourse itself. (20)

Here, the suggestion must be followed through, for it is my contention that the island is precisely the anticipatory figuration that enables Utopia to emerge as a neutralization of the “gap.” Insularity is here produced, as we will discuss more amply in Chapter 3, as the privileged domain whereby the construction of a temporal plane not of the present, but rather of anticipation and of deferral, is performed. The island is, also, as we have extensively seen, the space allowing for the habitual and wildly diverse neutralization of contradictions. As much as historical islands “bridged the gap” from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, from the Atlantic to the Caribbean, from the Caribbean to the Pacific, it is a mythic, symbolic island that “bridges the gap” between contradictions of all
persuasions. That is the reason why an “island” in the continent, such as that of the Polylerites, was not enough. King Utopus had to perform the ultimate disjunction/exclusion by putting water between his conquered land and the rest.

But this move is never complete and never enough. It has become consolidated in many discourses, as we have been discussing, but it has always and systematically been challenged by the possibility that what is being used as the instantiation of only a negative term (disjunction/exclusion) becomes in itself a “new term,” a positive, third one. After all, the island of Utopia had nothing “unconnected” about it, neither in commerce nor in warfare. The “geographical fiat” itself proves as much:

Between its horns [the island has the shape of a crescent] the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbour, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce. But the entry into the bay, occasioned by rocks on the one hand and shallows on the other, is very dangerous. In the middle of it there is one single rock which appears above water, and may, therefore, easily be avoided; and on the top of it there is a tower, in which a garrison is kept; the other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous. The channel is known only to the natives; so that is any stranger should enter into the bay without one of their pilots he would run great danger of shipwreck. . . . On the other side of the island there are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art, that a small number of mean can hinder the descent of a great army. (31-32)

Such is perhaps one of More’s most enduring contributions: exposing insularity as a figuration of the “gap” between different terms, the least of which is not history and myth.

In Utopia, the question of insularity is pressing in another respect. Both Marin and Jameson identify a penchant of utopian discourse for creating its own sub-text, in this case, the island of England. This would be “the real” island behind the island of Utopia, but as Jameson and Marin insist, this “real” must be seen as being constituted in the very praxis of utopian discourse in order to be then neutralized (7-9). But there is still another “real” which seems to replicate the one just

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32 The same operation seems to be at work in José Saramago’s novel La balsa de piedra, where the Iberian Peninsula is sundered from the rest of the Europe.
mentioned, namely that of the first narrator (More) as a monarchical mediator and that of Raphael (a Portuguese traveling with Amerigo Vespucci) as a sort of imperial/intellectual traveler. What these two levels of “the real” constituted and neutralized in Utopia reveal is, indeed, the idea that the mythic island serves as an experiment in certain differences not for their own sake, but for the potential application to “the real” island of England: “As he told us of many things that were amiss in those new—discovered countries, so he reckoned up not a few things, from which patterns might be taken for correcting the errors of these nations among whom we live” (7).33 Such potential application becomes viable as soon as one can extract knowledge of the island by means of an agent who has traveled there and has returned: “I should never have left them [the utopians] if it had not been to make the discovery of that new world to the Europeans” (30)! The condition of an imperial/intellectual traveler to islands, who always engages in a roundtrip whereby the knowledge obtained can be used “at home,” is therefore the other image in Utopia that, as we will see, recurs repeatedly through time and across different discourses.

Robinson Crusoe

In a brief essay entitled “Desert Islands,” Gilles Deleuze departs from geography’s distinction between “oceanic” and “continental” islands to argue that islands, insofar as they constitute an invariable reminder of the fact that the struggle between land and water rages on, must philosophically remain deserted, even if inhabited, as a result of our “need” to forget such a strife (9). Indeed, Deleuze continues, “that England is populated will always come as a surprise; humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents” (9). Furthermore, the quality of

33 Perhaps religion is the most vulgarly obvious example of the fact that the differences in the Utopian society were good only insofar as they could be collapsed into sameness: although ostensibly Utopians practiced different religions, “Yet the greater and wiser sort of them worship none of these, but adore one eternal, invisible, infinite, and incomprehensible Deity” (84, emphasis added) and “Though there are many different forms of religion among them, yet all these, how various soever, agree in one main point, which is the worshipping the Divine Essence; and, therefore, there is nothing to be seen or heard in their temples in which the several persuasions among them may not agree” (92). Indeed, the sameness underlying the apparent difference is so strong that “many of them [Utopians] came over to our religion, and were initiated into it by baptism” (85). After all, isn’t precisely this impossibility to think radical difference what characterized many missionaries of all persuasions when dealing with many “savages”?

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continental islands as “break away” lands in contrast to oceanic islands as “originary” ones, further serves Deleuze to posit that humanity’s relationship with islands is marked, precisely, by this double movement: “starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew” and “the island is also the origin, radical and absolute” (10). In the words of our previous discussion of Utopia, the island is a figuration that neutralizes the “gap” between those movements.

It is significant and quite revealing that in Deleuze’s account, the sole example of a “real” island is England, for he then proceeds to describe Robinson Crusoe as an attempt in literature to deal with an “originary” island. It is literature, also, what is born out of this relationship from the outside to the island. For it is no longer possible, as it was in mythology, for humanity’s imagination and its double movement to be one and the same:

> It is at this very moment that literature begins. Literature is the attempt to interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand, at the moment we no longer understand them, since we no longer know how to dream them or reproduce them. . . . Robinson Crusoe, the creative aspect, the beginning anew. (12)

But it soon becomes obvious that Crusoe’s deserted island is not the occasion for an absolutely new, radical beginning. The distance between the movement for origin and the imagination is abysmal. Therefore, Crusoe’s “Island of Despair” is quick to become a reconstruction of that which has been lost –the quest for survival on a desert island is, indeed, the quest for a repetition of capitalist society.

> Robinson’s vision of the world resides exclusively in property; never have we seen an owner more ready to preach. The mythical recreation of the world from the deserted island gives way to the reconstitution of everyday bourgeois life from a reserve of capital. Everything is taken from the ship. Nothing is invented. It is all painstakingly applied on the island. Time is nothing but the time necessary for capital to produce a benefit as the outcome of work. And the providential function of God is to guarantee a return. . . . The novel develops the failure and the death of mythology in Puritanism. (12)

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34 Deleuze also points this out in an essay on Michel Tournier’s re-elaboration of the Crusoe myth: “Related to origins, Robinson must necessarily reproduce our world, but, related to aims, he of necessity deviates” (“Tournier and the World Without Others” 54).
It becomes clear, with *Robinson Crusoe*, that myth has been systematically pushed to the side, hidden, controlled. It is a novel of the “facts,” the “common sense,” the “reality” of England’s “middle station.” Virginia Woolf puts it beautifully in “Robinson Crusoe:”

So he proses on, drawing little by little, his own portrait, so that we never forget it – imprinting upon us indelibly, for he never forgets it either, his shrewdness, his caution, his love of order and comfort and respectability; until by whatever means, we find ourselves at sea, in a storm; and, peering out, everything is seen precisely as it appears to Robinson Crusoe. The waves, the seamen, the sky, the ship—all are seen through those shrewd, middle-class, unimaginative eyes. There is no escaping him. Everything appears as it would appear to that naturally cautious, apprehensive, conventional, and solidly matter-of-fact intelligence.35

The fact that the quest for origins ends up becoming the same as that which was escaped from, is considered by Deleuze a second origin that provides the “law of repetition” and, in so doing, is of extreme importance for the figuration of the island – “the material of this something immemorial, this something most profound” (14).36

Gillian Beer has also remarked on the peculiarity of a novel whose plot seems to provide the perfect pretext for another version of *Utopia* but which remains steadfast in its attachments to the known: “In Defoe, the island is an experimental site on which we watch the hero reformulate just such a bourgeois culture as he has sought to flee. The setting becomes not only the place but the condition of the experiment. . . . Robinson Crusoe, for all his earlier rebellion, has no counter-imagination” (“Discourses” 10).37 So many examples from the novel could be provided to substantiate this claim, that the activity, marked as it is by surveying and describing, sounds too close to the Crusoe character to be of any interest. Still, there is one aspect I wish to focus on: the recurrent obsession with the “savage.”

36 The temporal undercurrent so intensely associated with insularity in Deleuze’s essay will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.
37 Anthony Purdy adds: “Far from revealing the ‘natural man’ and his ‘basic needs,’ Crusoe’s survival depends on a painstaking reconstruction of the civilization from which he is exiled and which continues to determine his ‘needs.’ In fact, if Defoe’s hero does embody economic man, it is at a level at which Marx failed to theorize and Watt neglects to spell out: the level at which the desires created by the social and economic system are ‘naturalized’ and justified by the myth of use-value and the philosophy of individual needs” (220-221).
Crusoe’s island might have ended up being a laboratory to produce sameness instead of difference in terms of its social and economic tenets—a matter shared with both *Utopia*, whose reference, as we have seen, is always England, and *Coming of Age in Samoa*, whose reference, as we will see, is always the United States— but in order to do so, it had recourse to a concept that was slowly becoming the catch-all of every possible difference—the savage. *Robinson Crusoe* is obsessed to such degree with the possibility of the savage’s existence, that the latter’s presence in the novel is altogether overwhelming. Before Crusoe can think of anything else, he thinks of savages: how to build fortifications, walls, and caves to protect himself from their appearance; how to find weapons to defend himself against them; how to produce plans to overcome them; how to preserve his flesh against them: “My thoughts were now wholly employ’d about securing my self against either savages, if any should appear, or wild beasts, if any were in the island” (47).

Therefore, it is the savage, the possibility of encountering radical difference on the island, that which leads Crusoe to reproduce, almost point by point, all that is known under capitalism. The island must be submitted to sameness in order to manage and control the anxiety over the possibility of difference. This process comes to a head with the appearance of Friday, a “savage” who turns out to be, quite conveniently, entirely containable, controllable, and manageable; in a word, tame, like island species:

But I need none of all this precaution; for never man had a more faithful, loving, sincere servant than Friday was to me; without passions, sullenness, or designs, perfectly oblig’d and engag’d; his very affections were ty’d to me, like those of a child to a father; and I dare say, he would have sacrific’d his life for the saving mine . . . (165)

The submission to sameness becomes remarkably clear when Crusoe is able to re-narrativize the island not as a site entirely hostile to his presence, but as *his own kingdom*, as a place that can be compared to the social organization of England:

I descended a little on the side of that delicious vale, surveying it with a secret kind of pleasure, (tho’ mixt with my other afflicting thoughts) to think that this was all my own, that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession; and if I
could convey it, I might have it in inheritance, as compleatly as any lord of a manor in England. (80)

But let us remember that the anxiety over the insular “savage,” who might, at any moment, come from the sea, as Friday’s group did, never ceases…

The much-discussed Robinson Crusoe is pertinent for our argument in yet another respect, namely in its implicit questioning of the isolation so persistently associated with an island’s “natural” environment. The novel provides a site where to follow Lucien Febvre’s old admonition concerning insularity: “How are we to explain the contradiction [of isolation/connection]? We may say at once that there is nothing to explain; all we have to do is to attack the contradiction, and to try, as a beginning, to explain how the idea of insular isolation arose” (219). Crusoe insists that the storm the ship encountered at sea, “drove us so out of the very way of all human commerce, that had all our lives been saved, as to the sea, we were rather in danger of being devoured by savages than ever returning to our own country” (35), and, later, “I had a dismal prospect of my condition, for as I was not cast away upon that island without being driven, as is said, by a violent storm quite out of the course of our intended voyage, and a great way, viz. some hundreds of leagues out of the ordinary course of the trade of mankind . . .” (51). The isolation of the deserted island where Crusoe is cast away is therefore the product of the time’s maritime capitalism: only when a piece of land is out of the way of “the ordinary course of the trade of mankind,” when it has not been considered useful for the expansion of the economic system and thus integrated into its trade routes, is it “isolated.”

This is, indeed, a remarkable insight of the insular mythical imaginary: with Robinson Crusoe – otherwise a particularly powerful example of the mystification (i.e. naturalization) of insularity– one is afforded, too, a crucial denaturalization and a powerful historicization of the dominant idea of the island’s isolationism. This will find a much more headstrong formulation, many years later, in a text by Lucien Febvre, a historian deeply interested in geography:

But that there is any type of land to which it [isolation] is peculiar, that it depends especially on the mountain which encloses, or on the desert which interposes its arid sands, and its
slabs of stone cracked by the heat, or on the ocean which surrounds with its waves, is still an illusion; for there are plains which isolate every whit as much as mountains. . . . Isolation is a human fact, but not a geographical one, where men are concerned. By sea, in the case of islands, it depends on navigation, which is certainly not a natural fact. (234-5)

The Origin of the Species

Charles Darwin’s most famous text is a product of the nineteenth century, the time when imperial voyages had changed significantly—they were now inextricably mixed with the experimentation efforts of naturalists, botanists, ethnologists, and scientists of all kinds. Those were also the times when the “South Seas” and its thousands of islands rose to worldwide prominence. In a word, it was the moment when what had been taking place in over three centuries of global imperialism came to a head and was made to become an apparently obvious truth: that there was no normalcy without abnormality; that there was no civilization without primitiveness; that there were no men without beasts; that studying life required killing it. Darwin’s theory appeared posed to become the supreme crowning of this dialectic of knowledge, and in many respects, it did: his scientific method relied on countless dead bodies to understand life and on captured specimens to understand the free. But, as we will see, such imperialistic, exploitative method of acquiring knowledge was, at least, disrupted—not, to be sure, eclipsed completely—by islands.

“The study of islands,” Gillian Beer indicates, “has been of the greatest importance in the development of evolutionary theory” not only in the case of Darwin but also in that of some of his contemporary scientists (“Discourses” 10), most notably Alfred Russell Wallace. It is primarily on islands that Darwin’s method was practiced and his theory produced. Despite the fact that this is never discussed explicitly, The Origin of the Species establishes from very early on the centrality of islands and archipelagoes, for Darwin’s explanations tend to “drift” into examples of islands in a matter-of-fact fashion (see for instance the chapters “Geographical Distribution” 1 & 2; 829-30; 864). Although islands are also, and at the same time, assumed to be in correlation with ideas such as isolation, distance, geological discontinuity, and smallness, and in opposition to what Darwin, quite
fittingly, calls the “empire of the large” (618-21), his examples more invariably display an acute observation of insular diversity. Such observation enables the very possibility of a kind of scientific knowledge that far from reproducing and cementing an imperialistic gaze, tends to disrupt it in favor of a more modest approach:

But as he went on, that base [England as his “island-base for comparison with the many islands that he visited”] changed from being always foundational to being an instance among many. One of the most important discoveries that Darwin made on the voyage of the Beagle was that islands are *systems of difference*: they are extraordinarily different from each other and they harbor difference within their economy. Indeed, extinction is the inevitable consequence where insufficient difference is maintained among the population. (Beer “Writing Darwin’s Islands” 125)

Islands, then, forced Darwin to question—in ways that neither More’s nor Defoe’s texts did—England’s imperialistic ideology and practice: “But further, an awakened cultural relativism, natural historical comparisons, and a sense simply of the variety of possible life-forms, possible social groupings, meant that Darwin henceforth could never be sanguine about the centrality or the permanence of his own society, nor the efficacy of its hierarchies or laws” (139).

As the most recurrent sites where his work took place, islands also provided Darwin’s thought and theory with a sense of scale and perspective that, as we shall see in upcoming chapters, is of utmost importance in the Caribbean literary texts’ re-conceptualization of insularity: “One thing that such a journey teaches you, he wrote in the conclusion to *The Journal of Researches*, is that ‘the map of the world ceases to be a blank; it becomes a picture full of the most varied and animated figures. Each part assumes its proper dimensions: continents are not looked at in the light of islands, or islands considered as mere specks, which are, in truth, larger than many kingdoms of Europe’” (Beer 137). Such perspective extended not only to the questioning of his background, but also to the undermining of long-established scientific assumptions, especially the fundamental one of a stark opposition between wilderness and civilization. When encountering the proverbial tameness of species living on islands, a matter on which many observers afterwards have commented, Darwin “discerned for the first time” that tameness “is not a concept confined to culture; rather than being
an outcome of domestication, it may imply the absence of the human. Wildness *may be produced* by the intrusion of new forms . . .” (Beer 125, emphasis added).

On its part, islands’ close relationship with the ocean is a constant concern in *The Origin of the Species*. The ocean, an under-theorized but constant presence in Darwin’s text, is at once a barrier for the movement of species (601) and something assumed to be much more continuous than land (788-9), which would lead to the conclusion that it actually allows for an easier spread of species. Islands, I submit, solve this impasse, insofar as they, “of course,” function as halting places for species emigration (806). Since islands have been made to hold the same function for imperial expansion, I would be, like Elizabeth DeLoughrey, hard-pressed to deny that such history is infiltrated in Darwin’s work as well as in the sciences concerned with insularity more generally: “The language [of “migrant colonists and the endemic”] of island biogeography is thus strikingly symbolic of the process of European colonisation of island spaces” (“Island Ecologies” 303). Indeed, in Darwin’s text the old puzzle of non-maritime species managing to appear in lands quite apart from each other finds an immediately available hypothesis in the idea of an “island-hopping” movement such as that which has been recorded in human history for centuries. But, again as Beer notes, this hypothesis also meant that Darwin more or less implicitly ended up questioning the negative association of insularity with smallness and boundedness: “the boundaries of islands are in ecological terms never as determined as the land form may suggest” (138).

Finally, I wish to dwell briefly on the question of insularity and time in *The Origin of the Species*, especially in anticipation of our discussion in Chapters 3 and 4. “On the Imperfection of the Geological Record” is instructive on the connection between islands and time, insofar as the discussions on geological time that take place especially in the section “On the Lapse of Time,” have to do primarily with the sea, its coasts and its islands. The fundamentally ungraspable, even unthinkable, geological time is unshakably related to the sea (an oceanic time?), and its bare traces can mainly be found on the coasts.
Such geological evidence is framed within a description of the composition of both ocean and land: Darwin describes the oceans as a matter of subsidence, in contrast with the continents, which are a matter of elevation. But archipelagoes, clusters of islands, are not so easily assigned to either subsidence or elevation, as they are not so easily assigned to either land or water. Darwin describes this situation, in a brilliant turn of phrase, as the subject of “oscillations of level” (776). These “oscillations” of the insular land are also observable in insular species themselves, where “monstrosities” inexistent elsewhere and with rudimentary, useless, aborted organs survive (884–8). Islands and their species become, for Darwin and the notion of evolution, an intensely suggestive and powerful imaginary, for in them one can observe more fully than anywhere else a certain “synchronicity of the nonsynchronous:”

The harboring of early life forms within the island ecosystem emphasized the aboriginal. The island can accommodate slow change, diversification, and ‘improvement,’ while still sustaining the early history of life on earth. The island thus becomes an originary image, bearing the force of Darwin’s particular use of the word ‘origins’ to signify process rather than stasis. Its continuity and its physical enclosure preserve a full history of life forms into the present day. (Beer, “Discourses” 11)

An unfortunately much neglected perspective on islands can be gathered, then, from Darwin’s theory. It is a perspective that deeply questions, even if The Origin of Species itself does not display it explicitly, the scientific regime described at the beginning of this section, a regime that acquired hegemony precisely during Darwin’s time. Islands emerge, in Darwin’s work, as enablers of scientific knowledge about the entire world precisely as a result of their fundamental diversity, evidence that, furthermore, forces a constant relativization of the knowledge thus produced. Contrary to the assumption of the dominant idea of the island, insular boundaries may have nothing to do with a strict attachment to land, an insight that questions the definition of “boundary” itself. Islands constitute, finally, sites where, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian would put it, “coevalness” can be observed with most intensity; where time has much more to do with simultaneity than it does with discrete periods of “pasts;” where “evolution” becomes a concept that
names not an inexorable overcoming and suppression of the past but rather a present coexistence of moments of change.

Coming of Age in Samoa

Much like Utopia, although with a different approach, method, and style, Margaret Mead’s work utilizes the island (this time a “real” one in the Pacific – Taū, in the Manu’a archipelago) as a figuration for the “gap” between “primitive” or “savage” societies and “modern” “Western” societies (xxiv-xxv; 11). This use of islands had become so entrenched by 1927, the year Mead publishes her most famous book, that there seems to be no need for an explicit methodological exposition concerning the choice of a Pacific island for her study. The only recurring justification is, not surprisingly, the “simplicity” of “island life” (7-8). In that sense, the island affords the possibility of establishing a radical difference with respect to the anthropologist’s location, which is assumed to be more “complex” and “advanced” – and, granted, the preceding words describe a foundational study of a kind of anthropology much more sympathetic, and, in some instances, even admiring, toward its “object of study.”

The overwhelming easiness of island life is not only to be found in its social and political arrangements, but it also is the result of “nature” itself. Coming of Age in Samoa opens with a description of dawn on the island:

The life of the day begins at dawn, or if the moon has shown until daylight, the shouts of the young men may be heard before dawn from the hillside. Uneasy in the night, populous with ghosts, they shout lustily to one another as they hasten with their work. As the dawn begins to fall among the soft brown roofs and the slender palm trees stand out against a colourless, gleaming sea, lovers slip home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in the shadow of beached canoes, that the light may find each sleeper in his appointed place. Cocks crow, negligently, and a shrill-voiced bird cries from the breadfruit trees. The insistent roar of the reef seems muted to an undertone for the sounds of the waking village. (12)

Subsequently, the text continues its remarkable, precisely for unassuming, subjection and mystification of island life to simplicity with the following description of dusk: “The village is dazzling and dead; any sound seems oddly loud and out of place. Words have to cut through the
solid heat slowly. And then the sun gradually sinks over the sea.” (14) The first word on islanders is that they are scared of ghosts at night; the first word on the island is a stereotypical coast of sea and palm trees, but the sea is colorless, the crocks are negligent, an ocean roar is actually muted. At the end of the day, the village is dead although dazzling (!), and language travels slowly in the heat of the island’s climate –“the slower pace dictated by the climate . . .” (154).

The methodological assumption concerning insularity implies that the island provides for an anthropologist what a closed laboratory does for a natural scientist: the island’s geography is assumed to be closed and its population controllable (in all senses of the word, including that of becoming the control of an experiment). The island also poses an apparently limited amount of variables for the experiment, instead of the many to be found in “more complex societies” (7-8). Furthermore, the laboratory island is deployed not for its own sake, but in an effort to find, by virtue of contrast, knowledge that serves to apply to the observer’s society –in Mead’s case, the production of some kind of public policy that would account for and deal with adolescence differently in the United States. The island society has an exemplary function that can only be judged by the criteria of “usefulness” for “our” society: “The usefulness of this account of how life could be, on one small group of faraway islands, is still and perhaps more urgently, relevant” (xxv-xxvi) and “We have been comparing point for point, our civilisation and the simpler civilisation of Samoa, in order to illuminate our own methods of education” (161). The roundtrip logic, the perspective of the island from without, which is practically the same as in the other texts heretofore considered, is consummated once more.

But Mead’s efforts to produce island simplicity betray the obvious fact of the complexity of native social structures: only a glance at the chapter entitled “The Samoan Household,” where a description of a system of rank, nobility and strongly coded interpersonal relations, attests to this. The moments when the anthropologist is faced with a phenomenon that clearly challenges her own preconceptions and for which no frame of knowledge seems to be available, illuminate strongly the
intractability of the radical differences she encounters. Often, the narrating voice will submit the difference to the violence its control over language can achieve:

The friendship between these two girls [Ela and Talo] was one of the really important friendships in the whole group. Both girls definitely proclaimed their preference, and their homosexual practices were undoubtedly instrumental in producing Talo’s precocity and solacing Ela for the stricter régime of the pastor’s household [Talo’s caregiver, significantly, was an aunt who “shrugged her shoulders in the face of Talo’s obvious sophistication and winning charm and made no attempt to control her”]. These casual homosexual relations between girls never assumed any long-time importance. (102-3)

It is proclaimed that the girls were openly engaged in “homosexual practices” without any of the burdens related to structures of “confessions,” “coming outs,” and assumptions of “one’s identity,” without anything more than a “shrug of the shoulders” on the part of the caregiver (the pastor was of course another story, but then again, he was not only a pastor but also a foreigner!); and, crucially, without any secrecy about it. But, immediately, it must also be proclaimed, in a move reminiscent of the taming of savages in Robinson Crusoe, that these relationships “never assumed any long-time importance,” although a few lines before Ela and Talo’s relationship was characterized as “one of the really important friendships in the whole group”! An unexpected correlation between the anthropological narrating voice and the strict pastor suddenly comes to the fore. It becomes possible to see how they are both part of the recurrent logic that mystifies the island from without.

The myth of the laboratory island often appears to operate as a naturalization of historical forces, but it can never seal the process entirely. The insular mythical imaginary is always open for re-appropriation, and through those openings residues escape: slaves and workers refusing the regime that ensures their exploitation; the apparition of a new people in the world; a submerged island and a woman named Cleito; an island figuration called Utopia; the “savages” and an island that questions the naturalization of isolation; the abnormal creatures in the Galápagos and the islands that question England’s hegemonic status; Ela and Talo, two women islanders in radically different love… These residues, more often than not while remaining on the island, will always pose questions, relativize
imperialistic thought and practice, provide opposition and resistance, heighten the possibility of the mythical imaginary as a productive, creative force that might change the course of history.

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From Wilson Harris’ tidalectic approach to the limbo dance, we learn to refuse an absolute opposition between history and myth. The limbo creates a dance that dismembers the body as a result of the dancer’s will and in attunement to musical rhythm, that miracle of the unseen. It therefore deeply re-signifies the unspeakable Middle Passage and the regime of slavery. From the standpoint of the Caribbean, as we shall see more clearly in the following chapters, refusing the either/or logic embedded in so many discourses concerning “history” and “myth,” “history” and “metaphor,” “land” and “sea,” among so many others, allows us to understand cultural manifestations assailed by all manners of tragedy as historical affirmations of the imagination against history. It also allows us to consider insularity not from the perspective of without: that of the colonialist and capitalist interests that have made islands a virtual synonym of isolation, lack, dependency, smallness, boundedness, remoteness, and paradise (the latter term not being, as was demonstrated above, altogether different from the previous ones), and have then left them. Rather, it affords us an angle that obstinately seeks to create new concepts and, at the same time, to find within those very dominant discourses other openings and possibilities of and for creation. Such a position is the result of a commitment to limbo, to the tidalectic, against either side; to the apparently impossible third term; to the island and to an imagination launched from it.
Section 2: Islands from Within

Chapter 2: A Blinding Light: *Tiepolo’s Hound* and *El espíritu de la luz*

*It relates to a misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls.*

Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” 76

*The sun fled south. Damp soaking his soul.*

*The island blazed at the back of his mind*

*like the black stove, a dilating coal*

*before it turned emerald in the evening wind.*

Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo’s Hound* 48

*Me fui a Francia a descubrir otra luz que no fuera la de mi trópico radiante; entonces, allá, añoré la de mi Caribe ardiente . . .*

Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, *El espíritu de la luz* 169

*. . . toda la pintura del mundo es incapaz de calmar la sed de luz . . .*

Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, *El espíritu de la luz* 179

**Yellow**

Gabriel García Márquez –by his own account, a Caribbean writer– has declared yellow to be not only his favorite color but also a harbinger of good luck (13). Although he has kept fresh yellow flowers on his desk for decades, these fall short of the perfect manifestation of the color, associated by the writer with the “yellow of the Caribbean Sea at three in the afternoon, as seen from Jamaica.” That there are many variations of color, to which equally variant meanings can be ascribed, is an implicit conclusion contained in this rather remarkable statement. The yellow of gold, for instance, has for García Márquez nothing to do with good luck. In fact, gold is the foremost object among

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1 “I went to France to discover a light other than that of my radiant tropics; then, once there, I longed for the light of my burning Caribbean . . .”

2 “. . . all the painting in the world is incapable of quenching the thirst for light . . .”
those he considers “pavosos” (causing bad luck). Gold, says García Márquez (as does one of the characters in his *Cien años de soledad*) is equivalent to shit: “Para mí el oro está identificado con la mierda.”

Olive Senior, a Jamaican writer, used García Márquez’s remark on the three o’clock yellow of the Caribbean Sea as the epigraph to her poem “Meditation on Yellow.” In it, a first-person poetic voice representing, first, a Caribbean native at the time of the arrival of European colonists and, later, a Caribbean native at the time of the arrival of tourists, weaves together two historical moments marked by “yellow.” The juxtaposition of these moments reveals one of the historical continuities this project is at pains to demonstrate, namely the continuity between the first European explorers in search of yellow-as-gold and the more recent tourists in search of yellow-as-sun: “But it was gold / on your mind / gold the light / in your eyes,” and later, “a new set of people / arrive / to lie bare-assed in the sun / wanting gold on their bodies.” Even colors, apparently, are turned into commodities.

But the first-person poetic voice introduces the possibility of rupturing the seemingly continuous process in at least two senses: first, by refusing the homogenization of the color in the name of “I like to feel alive / to the possibilities / of yellow // lightning striking,” and, later, by insisting that no matter all that, historically, “I give you,” “I want to feel / you cannot take away // the sun dropping by every day / for a chat.” Just as gold is shit and thus can never be the perfect yellow of the Caribbean Sea at three in the afternoon for García Márquez, so the sun desired by tourists will never become gold-qua-shit, will never completely allow its commodification for the interests of without, since, from within, the sun can be something else, something as subtle and slow-timed, as feeling mellow:

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4 The poem can be found at <http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw_cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=603>. I was first amazed by this poem when reading Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s analysis of it in “Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures.”
I want to feel mellow
in that three o’clock yellow

I want to feel
though you own
the silver tea service
the communion plate
you don’t own
the tropics anymore

I want to feel
you cannot take away

the sun dropping by every day
for a chat

I want to feel
you cannot stop
Yellow Macca bursting through
the soil reminding us
of what’s buried there

.................

You cannot reverse
Bob Marley wailing

making me feel
so mellow

in that Caribbean yellow
at three o’clock

any day now.

The desire for this yellow produced by the sun at three in the afternoon on the Caribbean Sea, as against the yellow of both imperial agents and tourists, condenses the main problems the following argument shall deal with: light, its different iterations, and its relationship with vision in the context of the specifically tropical Caribbean archipelagoes. In order to confront such problems, I will consider, first, how the phenomenon of light has been understood by physics in terms that are relevant for our discussion; second, how and in which terms it has been tied to vision in western philosophy and art; and, finally, how capitalism has attempted to capture light much in the same
fashion as it has, as we will see in the following chapters, attempted to do the same with respect to
time, space, and the ocean. Such initial discussion will allow us to better perceive the dominant
paradigm concerning light and vision that the two Caribbean texts studied afterwards, Derek
Walcott’s poem *Tiepolo’s Hound* and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s novel *El espíritu de la luz*, significantly
undermine. In the process, an expansion of sensory perception and a new type of vision will emerge
that are resolutely situated in the light of the insular tropics.

**Light**

Making light a problem for thought immediately poses serious challenges. Unlike the coast
and the sea we will study in subsequent chapters, which, to a certain extent, one can easily imagine as
spaces, light is a phenomenon whose existence permeates all chronotopes but that cannot be aptly
conceptualized as either a space, a time, an object, or a body. In a sense, it can and cannot be all of
these. Light further puts thought adrift insofar as it enables vision but is, in itself, impossible to see.
What is more, as David Grandy suggests in his essay “The Otherness of Light: Einstein and
Levinas,” light seems to “clear or open space for the appearance of other things” precisely “by
retreating or failing to dawn as a freestanding entity” (1). Light as a fundamentally opaque
phenomenon is, therefore, the paradoxical result: “There is in light an inscrutability or darkness—an
inaccessibility—borne of the necessity of seeing distant bodies by some unseen agency that touches the
eye” (2). In other words, light

strikes the retina and if it is to make any statement at all, must announce the existence—the
distant presence—of something other than itself. Thus, the local presence of light implies its
absence: it is here striking the eye but affording us visual witness of what lies beyond by
absenting itself as a local entity to be seen. (5)

Such enabling withdrawal compels Grandy to argue for the fundamental *otherness* of light “in
two interrelated ways. First, it is the other in the sense that it is unfamiliar and inscrutable; second,
that inscrutability arises from light’s capacity to receive and announce other things while retreating
from view as an independent entity” (3). Light’s double movement, moreover, necessarily entails that
its otherness is maintained even with respect to the dimensions of time and space. Light does not
“participate in the space-time gap between here and there. . . . Physically absent, they [distant objects]
become perceptually present, while light, physically present, becomes perceptually absent” (8). These
insights are gathered both from modern physics, which postulates that light has preeminence over
the chronotopes it makes visible (10), and from Einstein’s theory on light’s “infinitely great velocity”
(13) as the only constant or universal absolute, for only if it is unconstrained by time and space, if it is
“an opening without recovery or bounds” (13), can light be a constant velocity.

Thus, light produces space, objects in space, and our perception of them; it produces the
notion of distance and a sense of the position of our bodies with respect to others; it generates the
possibility of experiencing, simultaneously in time, otherness in space. Furthermore, light is
fundamental for life and harbors its elemental diversity. It carries within its apparently uniformly
colorless trajectory, the range of all possible colors, which our eyes perceive always subjectively and
which manifest themselves in any object as a result, not of any inherent quality of the latter, but of its
capacity to absorb or reflect the different colors carried invisibly by light. Crucially, light does all of
this by subtracting itself, by appearing not to do it, by producing distance precisely as it travels at a
velocity so quick that the moment of opening our eyes and the instant of capturing a given object
seem simultaneous, although “what we receive through our visual senses represents the past by the
time it reaches our retina” (DeLoughrey, “Radiation Ecologies” 481).

Against capitalism’s perpetual deferral of the present (a matter that will be amply discussed
in Chapter 3), light’s effects, its “otherness,” seem to force us to consider that every instant of seeing
as well as the phenomena we grasp as more or less distant in space, is resolutely a present instant.
According to the argument we have been advancing, that is, every instant of vision as enabled by
light is a resolute affirmation of the present insofar as it makes moments that, theoretically, occur at
different times—that is, have a differentiated before and after—become simultaneous. Upon first
inspection, the prominence of light’s speed looks remarkably similar to what we will discuss in the
following chapter as the tremendous acceleration of time under capitalism. But, although light’s “perpetual movement . . . means that it is a time traveler” (DeLoughrey, “Radiation Ecologies” 481), the kind of its remarkable velocity, as opposed to capitalism’s speed, seems to produce an affirmation rather than a suppression of the present.

In order to further understand the alluded difference, one might productively examine the historical relationship between capitalism and light. By doing so, we foreground the possibility that capitalism’s acceleration might be an attempt to acquire the extreme velocity of light, insofar as it has historically tried to capture light and to render homogeneous its effects, which are, necessarily, heterogeneous. In so doing and inevitably failing, capitalism manages to defer the present and to produce both Benjamin’s “empty, homogeneous time” (261) and Lefebvre’s “abstract space” (see Chapter 3). Light’s velocity might be constant, but precisely for this reason, it is insuperable. In contrast, capitalism’s speed is always susceptible to being overcome (one only needs to think, for instance, of ship, train, and airplane; of internet connections and cell phones), according to the very logic that keeps the system alive.

**Vision**

So far, we have sketched some of the main paradoxes concerning the phenomenon of light with the help of physics. We have also anticipated light’s relationship with vision, which brings us immediately to the arena of western philosophy where, despite multiple hesitations and contradictions, an intimate connection has been forged between light, vision, and knowledge. In Chapter 3, with the help of Lefebvre’s “optical (or visual) formant,” we will remark upon the supreme dominance of sight in western thought and practice concerning space. Now, we are concerned with exploring how such dominance is dependent on a specific conceptualization of light itself.

Both Martin Jay and Hans Blumenberg, although unwavering in their qualifications, diversifications and problematizations of such tradition, conclude, respectively, that vision (or
“scopic regimes” in Jay’s terms) has been of supreme importance in western philosophy and art, and that light has served as a remarkably powerful and recurrent metaphor for truth and knowledge. In his essay “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” Martin Jay traces a much more complicated terrain of “modern scopic regimes” than what the generalized idea of modernity as “resolutely ocularcentric” (3) allows us to see. In Jay’s estimation, at least three scopic regimes have been historically in dispute in western religious, philosophical and artistic traditions: Cartesian perspectivism, Dutch descriptive art, and the Baroque. Despite his insistence on “differentiating visual subcultures” (4), Jay ends up admitting that the second may be much closer to the first than his initial description seems to warrant (16). The problematization of the usual monolithic view on modern ocularcentrism also does not preclude Jay from providing a description of Cartesian perspectivism, which “is normally claimed to be the dominant, even totally hegemonic, visual model of the modern era” (4).

The description is useful for our purposes since it succinctly contains the conceptualization of vision that has for centuries been dominant — although not solitary, as Jay’s essay amply demonstrates — in philosophical and artistic traditions, while also maintaining a strong relationship to a certain metaphorics of light.5 As Jay notes, Cartesian perspectivism can be identified “with Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy” (4). Furthermore, Cartesian perspectivism is especially attached to light and to a very peculiar conceptualization of the human eye:

Growing out of the late medieval fascination with the metaphysical implications of light — light as divine lux rather than perceived lumen— linear perspective came to symbolize a harmony between the mathematical regularities in optics and God’s will. Even after the religious underpinnings of this equation were eroded, the favorable connotations surrounding the allegedly objective optical order remained powerfully in place. . . . This new concept of space was geometrically isotropic, rectilinear, abstract, and uniform. . . . The three-dimensional, rationalized space of perspectival vision could be rendered on a two-dimensional surface . . . the transparent window that was the canvas . . . Significantly, [the spectator’s] eye was singular, rather than the two eyes of normal binocular vision. It was conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it.

5 A discussion of light as metaphor ensues below.
Such an eye, moreover, was understood to be static, unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic. It followed the logic of the Gaze rather than the Glance, thus producing a visual take that was eternalized, reduced to one ‘point of view,’ and disembodied. (5-7)

The relationship between light and human eyes studied in optics and the well-established position of light in metaphysics were the ground in which this strict, disembodied, harmonized, regularized, abstract, uniformed concept of vision and, subsequently, of art was cultivated. The vision of the one, powerful, immobile, eternal, Eye seems quite close to a transcendent godly vision whose mission was never to encounter confusion, hesitation, darkness, opacity, blindness. It is an omniscient Eye that wants to see everything and, in the process, to produce everything as regularized, pasteurized, and synchronized. It is the Eye of the so-called “voyages of discovery” and the subsequent processes of conquest and colonization. It is the Eye that will culminate in Foucault’s society of surveillance, control, and punishment. As we shall discuss presently, in order for this kind of Eye to be attempted, however, light itself had to be made controllable, containable, regularizable, just as the same attempt has been made by capitalism with respect to time, space, and the ocean.

In his essay “Light as a Metaphor for Truth,” Hans Blumenberg shows the paramount role light has been forced to play in the peculiar conceptualization of vision we have been describing. According to Blumenberg, “metaphors of light” have been overwhelmingly present in religious and philosophical traditions since Antiquity, serving as “model” for fundamental philosophical problems:

In their expressive power and subtle capacity to change, metaphors of light are incomparable. From its beginnings, the history of metaphysics has made use of these characteristics in order to give an appropriate reference to its ultimate subject matter, which

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6 Notice, also, that such a concept of vision became, at once, the concept of the space to be represented, which, not coincidentally, is analogous to Lefebvre’s description of capitalist space we will have occasion to discuss in Chapter 3.
7 Although he inexplicably does not allude to European imperial projects directly, Paul Virilio makes clear the connection between the monocular, homogenizing, perpendicular vision associated by Jay with “Cartesian perspectivism” and the ship at sea: “But a number of good, solid European philosophers, on the other hand, have pretty much forgotten the fundamental relationship that exists between tekne (know-how) and poiein (doing). They have forgotten that the gaze of the West was once also the gaze of the ancient mariner fleeing the non-refractive and non-directional surface of geometry for the open sea, in quest of unknown optical surfaces, of the sight-vane of environments of uneven transparency, sea and sky apparently without limits, the ideal of an essentially different, essentially singular world, as the initial foundation of the formation of meaning. The ship, being fast, was in fact the great technical and scientific carrier of the West. At the same time, it was a mix in which two absolute forms of human power, poiein and tekne, found themselves working together” (The Vision Machine 27-8).
can no longer be grasped in material terms. Again and again, this cipher has been used in attempting to show that there is more to the concept of Being [des Seins] than an empty abstraction which one could extract from beings [dem Seienden] as their most general real predicate. The relation of unity to plurality, of the absolute to the conditional, of origin to descent—all found a ‘model’ of sorts here. (31)

Light as a metaphor is expressive, continues Blumenberg, because its different manifestations can be made to signify a multiplicity of aspects of knowledge, truth, and even Being. As we have discussed, light is “the ‘letting-appear’ that does not itself appear, the inaccessible accessibility of things” (31). Among other things, light is also “consumption without loss,” and, even more, “produces space, distance, orientation, calm contemplation; it is the gift that makes no demands, the illumination capable of conquering without force” (31). The slippage in Blumenberg’s writing from the statement of his purpose of elucidating the ways in which, historically, light has been used as a metaphor for truth in and for philosophical method, to the manifestation of his own metaphor-producing statements on the apparently absolute generosity of light and even on its capacity to “conquer without force” is significant. It reveals the extent to which the very idea of light as truth and its attendant manifestations have been tied in the western cultural and intellectual milieu with the conviction of light’s power and of its capacity to enable the systematically privileged human vision.

**Light and Capitalism**

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Susana Oliveira and Elizabeth DeLoughrey have each produced chilling accounts, albeit with different focuses, of the ways in which capitalism has attempted to capture, domesticate, homogenize, light. Both Schivelbusch, in his book *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, and Oliveira, in her essay “New Light and Old Shadows: Industrial Illumination and its Imaginaire,” focus on the nineteenth century’s industrialization of light in western Europe. The process of industrialization entailed the transition from the “ever-changing flame” (Oliveira 243) of fire and oil lamps to public gas lighting (at first, a development made in and for the industrial factories in England [Schivelbusch 16-20]), and,
eventually, to public electric lighting, which produced “the new centralized illumination system” that “could instantly fill a space with bright, homogeneous, and intense light” (Oliveira 243).

As can be observed in absolutist states such as the France of Louis XIV, even before the regime of electricity the spread of public gas lighting was already a powerful symbol of the extension of State control to the private sphere, for new laws were enacted that homogenized the aspect of lamps posted outside houses and enrolled agents of the State to control their use, rather than, as before, have the residents be responsible for the task (Schivelbusch 83-7). Indeed, a measure of the supreme importance of controlling light can be found, Schivelbusch notes, in “lantern smashing,” a widely practiced symbolic gesture of resistance to the ancien régime, as well as a strategy in street fighting and a signal of the attempted installment of popular rule during the French Revolution (97-114).

The eventual development of electrical lighting echoes, as Schivelbusch goes on to remark, the first symptoms of the transformation of industrial to financial capitalism:

The transformation of free competition into corporate monopoly capitalism confirmed in economic terms what electrification had anticipated technically: the end of individual enterprise and an autonomous energy supply. It is well known that the electrical industry was a significant factor in bringing about these changes. An analogy between electrical power and finance capital springs to mind. The concentration and centralization of energy in high-capacity power stations corresponded to the concentration of economic power in the big banks. (74)

Electricity was further exploited for the purposes of homogenizing space and time, of extending the workday, of centralizing the control of what could and could not be seen both publicly and privately, of developing unprecedented surveillance mechanisms, and of controlling the fundamentally unstable effects, both bright and dark, of light.

The changing technologies of artificial lighting also nurtured the increasing desire within certain scientific and political quarters to suppress shadows altogether, a move that was, of course, associated with knowing what everyone was doing at any given moment so that morality would be improved and crimes would be avoided. Although impossible to fulfill, this wish took hold strongly,
as can be gathered from a series of technological inventions whose apotheosis was the 1899 Paris World Exhibition. The plan for the Eiffel Tower, an enduring symbol of “the city of lights” whose designer originally “considered putting an arc lighting system [a novel technology at that time using gas lighting] on top” (Schivelbusch 128), was eventually chosen for construction (Oliveira 244; Schivelbusch 128-32). The close competitor, however, was Sébillot and Bourdais’ “Colonne-Soleil, Projet de Phare électrique de 360 mètres de hauteur destiné à éclairer tout Paris, Construction monumentale,” which lost the competition “not because it was thought to be impossible to light Paris centrally from the Sun Tower, but because it seemed too expensive, impractical and dangerous” (Schivelbusch 128).

Both Schivelbusch and Oliveira trace the history of these “sun-towers,” characterized by Paul Virilio as “sun worship” (The Vision Machine 20), back to a figure, Dondey-Dupré, who in 1799 presented to Napoleon his plan for “a series of towers that reflected and cast light around a ‘mother-tower’ fed by an unknown fuel that only a future technology could supply” (Oliveira 244; see also Schivelbusch 121-4 for a more detailed account). The plan would, according to its creator, “overflow Paris with light ‘just like an artificial meteor . . . so that no shadows will remain’” (244). Although this and most of the other “sun tower” plans of which we have record were impracticable or, if installed, were rather quickly superseded because of their inefficacy and the expensive maintenance they required (Schivelbusch documents also the installment of many “sun towers” using arc lighting in towns of the mid-west and west of the United States [124-7]), the logic of surveillance and control attached to their conceptualization of light was to remain remarkably present in artistic manifestations and in the development of public lighting:

Those illumination projects, in a way, intended to replace the light sources with vantage points. The sun-towers acted like gigantic watching Cyclops from whom the only possible escape were the shadowy areas out of their reach: I light you so I see you. Under this logic of light as sight, of the source of light as an eye, spectacular devices were created, with a positive or negative charge, which still inform literary descriptions, stage lighting, and cinematographic mise en scène of harassment nightmares, futuristic totalitarianism, prison vigilance, alien invasions, and police inquiries. . . . It was precisely under the argument of
security that light had become a powerful mean of surveillance. The progressive institutionalization of public lighting wiped away, little by little, the medieval regulations by which someone without a light was at once considered suspect, as it was more important to be seen and identified than to see. (Oliveira 246-7)

In our discussion of El espíritu de la luz, we will see the extent to which this mad desire for total illumination belatedly reverberated in the Caribbean under the twentieth-century regime of another dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, and his wish to build a massive “Faro a Colón” (“Lighthouse in honor of Columbus”) in the Dominican Republic.

Focusing on the more recent development of radiation technology (for war, medicine, and surveillance) and the attendant invention of visual media such as photography, Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s essay “Radiation Ecologies and the Wars of Light” explores the latest avatar of Adorno and Horkheimer’s “fully enlightened earth” that “radiates disaster triumphant” (468).

Crucially for my argument, she contextualizes these developments firmly on Pacific tropical islands, where the “wars of light” were invented, tested, and suffered: “Overtly using the islands as laboratories and spaces for radiological experiment, British, American, and French militaries configured those spaces deemed by Euro-American travelers as isolated and utopian into a constitutive locus of a dystopian nuclear modernity” (469). Following Virilio’s proposals concerning the connection between vision and war, DeLoughrey argues convincingly that twentieth-century nuclear experiments in Pacific archipelagoes, intimately tied to new technologies of visual media, were the direct descendants of the previously discussed industrialization of light:

Combined with technologies of surveillance such as the camera and the sniper’s lens, to sight was to target, producing ‘a deadly harmony between the functions of the eye and the weapon.’ As such, the modern conquest of space is synonymous with the conquest of the image; long before nuclearization, light and militarism were mutually constitutive. With this shift to the technologies of optical representation, the landscape of war has been increasingly understood as the visual media used to perpetuate and represent it. (475)8

8 See also Teaiwa’s for an account of the intimate connections between militarization and tourism in the Pacific.
DeLoughrey’s analysis foregrounds the necessity of *situating* the discussion of light and vision, as well as of capitalism’s uses of the former and conceptualization of the latter. Using her essay on the insular Pacific as spearhead, but extending its reach by engaging the question of light and the tropics per se, I will now turn our discussion to the specific context of the tropical Caribbean.

**Light and the Tropics**

Me sorprendió como siempre el sol de Puerto Rico cuando me bajé del avión. Me sorprendió que tanto azul se me parara al frente como si fuera un paisaje de Oller.  
Manuel Ramos Otero, “Descuento”

Much has been written on or around the concept of the “tropics,” which names at once a region of the globe, an imaginative realm associated with ancient myths of Eden, paradise, or hell, and a metaphor for a multiplicity of physical and moral attributes and defects. For our purposes, however, we mobilize the concept insofar as it concerns a zone that has a peculiar relationship to (sun)light. In “Views and Visions of the Tropical World,” Felix Driver and Luciana Martins’s introduction to the collection *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, they explain that:

The modern cartographic definition of the tropics is rooted in the astronomical, climatic, and moral geographies of antiquity, in which the habitable earth or *oecumene* is identified as that portion of the globe lying between the torrid and frigid realms. The torrid or tropical zone is bounded by two parallels of latitude stretching around the earth, one 23º27’ north of the equator [Tropic of Cancer] and the other 23º27’ south [Tropic of Capricorn], together marking the limits of the region in which the sun shines directly overhead. In this cosmographical vision, the circles of Capricorn and Cancer define both a natural and a moral limit: the intertropical zone is imagined as a realm of otherness, beyond humanity. The genealogy of the ‘monstrous races’ at the ends of the earth as represented in *mappae mundi* and the medieval encyclopedias, as Denis Cosgrove has shown, owes much to this classical vision.  

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9 “The Puerto Rican sun surprised me, as always, when I stepped down from the plane. That so much blue would stand before me as if it was an Oller landscape surprised me.”
10 In the context of the British Empire, see Beth Fowkes Tobin’s *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820*; for European imperial travelers beyond Britain, see the collection *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*. For primary sources of visitors to “the tropics” with varying interests, see, for example, Christopher Columbus’, Captain Cook’s, Charles Darwin’s, Alfred Russel Wallace’s and Alexander von Humboldt’s logs and diaries, Robert Louis Stevenson’s and Herman Melville’s accounts of Pacific islands, as well as the early twentieth-century’s pseudo-scientific tract entitled *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men* (the entire book can be downloaded here: [https://www.archive.org/details/cu31924029901208](https://www.archive.org/details/cu31924029901208)) and, of course, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ travel journal, *Tristes Tropiques*. More recent travelogues to tropical islands include Antonio Escohotado’s *Seisenta semanas en el trópico* and J. Maarten Troost’s *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* and *Getting Stoned with Saviors.*
Driver and Martins’ account of the “tropical zone” shows the intimate and long-standing tradition in western thought that associates “the tropics” with a realm of moral depravity, of “otherness, beyond humanity,” and of the “monstrous races.” That “the region [between the two parallels of latitude] in which the sun shines directly overhead” is the only actual description of “the tropics” reveals the extent to which the aforementioned western tradition has made such a peculiarly intense relationship to light a key determinant of tropical depravation, otherness, and monstrosity.

Besides humidity, heat, and general primitiveness, a recurrent cry on the part of visitors of all kinds to the tropics concerns, precisely, the blinding quality of tropical light. In the context of our initial discussion on light, such blinding light generates the peculiar situation of both a light that, in itself, humans are blind to and a light that actively produces human blindness rather than enabling vision. This constitutes an especially troubling problem for a dominant tradition of thought that, as we have seen, has a very specific, knowledge-bound notion of vision dependant upon light as an enabling agent, and a concomitant disdain for opacity and blindness, despite the fact that light itself is an opaque phenomenon. Furthermore, to feel “blinded by light” puts travelers in a peculiarly paradoxical situation, for “the tropics,” as Driver and Martins go on to demonstrate, have been overwhelmingly represented by Europeans “as something to be seen—a view to be had or a vision to be experienced” (5). So, if in the tropics, light, rather than eliciting a sharpening, a clearing, of vision, produces its negation, the impossibility of seeing, and if, at the same time, the zone has been consistently construed by agents of empire as something “to be seen,” it is tempting to conclude that “the tropics” will never quite be able to be “seen” under the imperial, perpendicular, homogenizing

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11 I should note that, within western traditions (specifically, Romanticism and the Baroque), there have been some important exceptions to the disdain for opacity and blindness. These have had, and this is a significant fact, a particular resonance in the Caribbean (in the Baroque, see Jay’s essay and recall our discussion in Section 3 above). It is also worthwhile to ponder the importance of the figure of the blind soothsayer in Greek tragedy as being the repository of a specifically prophetic kind of vision.
vision we discussed above. A different, more modest (to use a Walcott-inspired formulation), vision will have to be invented…

If light enables vision only by being itself invisible, it might be worthwhile to consider the possibilities of blindness for imaginable visions other than the one tacitly implied in Cartesian perspectivism. In other words, if, as we have seen, light can be fruitfully conceptualized as “other,” the relationship between light and dark, between vision and blindness, might turn out to be much more about a tidalectics than a dialectics of binary opposites. Indeed, we should remember that Brathwaite is explicit in recognizing that he needed multiple inspections before realizing that the woman sweeping sand was not only standing on it but also and at the same time on water. His vision, so to speak, had to be liberated in order to realize what, upon first gaze, seemed impossible. Only then could he conclude that the woman’s activity and its repetitive quality had an intimate connection with a particular history being reinvented.

There are other moving instances in tropical, Caribbean texts that call for the need to complicate our perceptive range:

In serious cities, in grey, militant winter with its short afternoons, the days seem to pass by in buttoned overcoats, every building appears as a barracks with lights on in its windows, and when snow comes, one has the illusion of living in a Russian novel, in the nineteenth century, because of the literature of winter. So visitors to the Caribbean must feel that they are inhabiting a succession of postcards. Both climates are shaped by what we have read of them. For tourists, the sunshine cannot be serious. . . . Sadly, to sell itself, the Caribbean encourages the delights of mindlessness, of brilliant vacuity, as a place to flee not only winter but that seriousness that comes only out of culture with four seasons. So how can there be a people there, in the true sense of the word? They know nothing about seasons in which leaves let go of the year, in which spires fade in blizzards and streets whiten, of the erasures of whole cities by fog, of reflection in fireplaces; instead, they inhabit a geography whose rhythm, like their music, is limited to two stresses: hot and wet, sun and rain, light and shadow, day and night, the limitations of an incomplete metre, and are therefore a people incapable of the subtleties of contradiction, of imaginative complexity. So be it. We cannot change contempt. Ours are not cities in the accepted sense, but no one wants them to be. They dictate their own proportions, their own definitions in particular places and in a prose equal to that of their detractors . . . (Walcott, “The Antilles” 71-3)

12 We shall discuss in Chapter 4 the insistence of Carpentier’s and Glissant’s novels on the expansion of perception to senses beyond vision and, crucially, on the expansion—one is tempted to say, the liberation—of vision itself.
So much for what, apparently, can be seen: “postcards.” What about putting into question, as Walcott does above, the constraints—provincial though they parade as universal—that determine our vision? What about finding hope in a tidalectics of light and dark that allows us to see differently; that allows the sun itself to be amazed?:

There’s nothing here this early; cold sand cold churning ocean, the Atlantic, no visible history,

except this strand of twisted, coppery, sea-almond trees their shining postures surely bent as metal, and one foam-haired, salt-grizzled fisherman, his mongrel growling, whirling on the stick he pitches him; its spinning rays “no visible history” until their lengthened shapes amaze the sun.

Aged trees and oiled limbs share a common colour!

Welded in one flame, huddling naked, stripped of their name, for Greek or Roman tags, they were lashed raw by wind, washed out with salt and fire-dried, bitterly nourished where their branches died,

their leaves’ broad dialect a coarse, enduring sound they shared together. (Walcott, “The Almond Trees,” Selected Poems 31-2)

13 I should also insist on the necessity of activating differently the range of our sense perception beyond vision. What about that which cannot be seen? What about that which takes place in small places (“I believe in the future of ‘small countries.’” [Glissant, Caribbean Discourse 255])? What about listening to the “scream of the world” (Glissant, Tratado del Todo-Mundo 21)? What about smelling what has been lost and what remains (“The land has lost its smells. Like almost everywhere else in the world. . . . It can be seen but not smelt” [Glissant, Caribbean Discourse 52])?
There is apparently no history to be seen on the beach Walcott writes about. The poetic voice, presumptuously, sets out to write off the beach, for history and whatever it looks like are nowhere to be found. But the almond trees and the fisherman so humble the poetic voice that it is forced to quote itself against itself, for history is “found” as soon as assumptions on what it looks or should look like are shed. The epiphany takes place when the poetic voice is able to encounter history in a heretofore unseen connection: when the almond trees are perceived to share their color with the fisherman’s; when the leaves become (are) the fisherman’s –and, with/in him, the whole ascendancy of enslaved peoples “stripped of their name” and, in the same stroke, the poetic voice’s– language. Notice that this is resolutely not a naïve idealization of nature, but rather an alternative knowledge production that takes tropical insular space seriously by complicating the dominant qualities of human vision, by “weld[ing] in one flame” from the “amazed sun” the color of leaves and of skin.

Walcott’s passages reveal that, in the tropical context, the persistent complaint regarding its blinding light can instead be positively mobilized –against the grain of implicit associations between extreme brightness and lack of change (seasonal and otherwise) and of subtlety– for the production of a different, “awed” kind of vision, for the intensification of other senses, and for a reformulation of the metaphorical attachment between vision and truth.

Together, Tiepolo’s Hound and El espíritu de la luz invite us to consider seriously light’s fundamental otherness and the possibility of generating knowledge and, indeed, art from blinding light, if only we are willing to consider a more “modest” conceptualization of vision. Furthermore, these texts’ study of the multiple manifestations of light in the tropics –what Blumenberg would call light’s “expressivity”– actively seeks to dismantle the monochromatic and, certainly, myopic perception that tropical light is pure, unbearable brilliance, an idea that can only be sustained by the eternal, immobile, unblinking Eye.
Tiepolo’s Hound

By 2000, the year Derek Walcott published *Tiepolo’s Hound*, the St. Lucian writer was a Nobel-laureate poet who had shown in his *Another Life* (1973) and *Omeros* (1990) a remarkable skill for epic, book-length poetry. Walcott has himself described his literary work, mainly poetry and drama, as manifestations of an “adamic imagination;” that is, as ways of naming the Caribbean as if experienced, in awe, for the first time. George Handley’s wide-ranging study of the writer’s concept and project, where he compares it with the work of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda, and of its relationship with “History,” describes “adamic imagination” aptly:

History must be acknowledged, but, as Walcott insists, it must not determine a writer’s choices. New World history tends to reduce those choices to ‘an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and a melancholy at the new, and this can go as deep as a rejection of the untamed landscape’ (Walcott, *What the Twilight* 42). . . . This adamic sensibility ‘will survive the malaria of nostalgia and the delirium of revenge’ . . . A return to the elemental task of the poet to name the world in elation is to begin again the process of building a culture of possibility, even if the poet must pretend that it happens *as if* for the first time. (3)

Walcott has remained convinced, throughout his work, that there is a specific “newness” to the Caribbean—and, perhaps, to the Americas as a whole—that has been consistently elided from view, suppressed, by “History,” either because its devastating character has forced us all to lose our “awe” or because it has construed the concept of “newness” in prelapsarian, Edenic terms.

Walcott has repeatedly characterized the relationship between art—particularly painting—and light as fundamental. 14 As I see it, such relationship articulates, through Walcott’s work with language, the production of the aforementioned “adamic” vision. *Tiepolo’s Hound* is the literary text in which this articulation reaches its apotheosis: “. . . as undeniable as instinct, the brushstroke’s rhyme / and page and canvas know one empire only: light” (58); “. . . in landscapes with no tenses, views that know / that now, as always, light is all we have” (161). As a result, the poem manages to adumbrate, through a study of the St. Thomasian Camille Pissarro and of Impressionism as a

14 See the interview with the writer by George Handley and Natasha Saję. 88
Caribbean art, the different vision Walcott requests of us. *Tiepolo’s Hound* constitutes, in a word, a sustained study on Caribbean light against History.

Throughout *Tiepolo’s Hound* “History” is systematically differentiated not only from “history,” but more importantly, from “Time.” “What Walcott means by this term [“History”] is a discourse of Western civilization that establishes patrimonial claims of inheritance, that aligns cultural figures and geographical areas in relationships of center and margin, authority and dependence, by means of affiliation and chronology” (Handley 321). “Time,” meanwhile, is related to the “ekphrastic seeing” performed in *Tiepolo’s Hound*: “it is a temporal equalizer that frees the artistic imagination before a present landscape from the chronological constraints and demands of History” (323).

Indeed, *Tiepolo’s Hound*’s fascination with Impressionism can be explained precisely as a result of the movement’s obsession with light. Impressionism, and the philosophical and aesthetic pulsations it eventually unleashed, freed painting from the constraints of narrative, and, more specifically, of narrative History, insofar as it focused on producing a new vision of light, and, thus, an art engaged with Time rather than History. As we have seen, light can be understood as a constant affirmation of the present, of “Time” with “its one tense” much like the landscapes and seascapes that spark painting and literature (133, 137):

> Time, in its teaching, will provide the bliss of precision, not botanic truth

or museum postcards but the beat of a brush reaching into its creamy palette, oranges, ochres; but youth

feels it has the measure of Time, that there is a plot and metre to Time, structured as if it were fiction,

with a beginning, a middle, and an end, except Time is not narrative, triumph resolved by ambition,

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15 For instance: “Because they measure evil by the seasons, the clear / death of October, its massacre of leaves, // my monodic climate has no history. I hear / their bright applause for one another’s lives. // My fault was ignorance of their History / and my contempt for it, they are my Old Masters, // sunlight and pastures, a tireless sea / with its one tense, one crest where the last was” (137).
and Time continues its process even for the masters
whose triumph astonishes us, but they are still learning

with arthritic fingers and shovel-wide beards, their disasters
our masterpieces: Van Gogh and Cézanne. . . . (94)

Interlude: On Impressionism

Although it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss the subject of Impressionism at
length, a few notes on the movement are nevertheless necessary for our discussion of Tiepolo’s Hound.

Impressionism congealed in the last third of the nineteenth century around the work of a group of
mainly French painters such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Armand
Guillaumin, and the St. Thomasian Camille Pissarro. The artists, colluding for frequent discussions in
a Parisian café, were generally unsatisfied and critical of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the French ruling
authority on visual aesthetics. The Académie held an annual, juried show called the Salon de Paris to
which any painter wishing to publicize her work at a national and international level aspired to enter.
The Salon’s preferences, as can be derived from its annual selections of paintings and the prizes
awarded, were for a thoroughly realistic style of painting with specific historical, religious or
mythological subject matter.

Camille Pissarro, the eldest member of the group, suggested they should create their own
Société to hold exhibitions independently of the Académie. Consequently, in 1873, Pissarro, Monet,
Renoir, and Sisley organized the Société Anonyme Coopérative des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs,
which went on to hold, with a shifting membership, eight exhibitions between 1874 and 1886 in the
studio of Félix Nadar, a well-known photographer at the time. Pissarro, whose lifelong work shows
constant stylistic transformations but a consistent preoccupation with the working class and with
women,16 was the only painter to have exhibited works at all eight exhibitions.

16 See Ralph E. Shikes’s essay for a discussion of Pissarro’s political trajectory, starting with the surviving sketches, drawings
and paintings of St. Thomas’s and Venezuela’s working classes, through his sustained and militant anarchism during the
second half of his life, a matter on which he clashed deeply with several of his fellow Impressionists, most notably Renoir.
Although these were never systematized into an aesthetic doctrine, nor did the artists themselves share the same ideological and aesthetic positions, art historians have identified several common characteristics throughout the various artists’ work. According to Moshe Barasch in his *Theories of Art 3: From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, Impressionism was inspired by the following simultaneous phenomena: (1) the turn-of-the century philosophical “crisis of realism” (11); (2) the re-conceptualization of “looking and contemplation” as “a kind of primordial experience sufficient unto themselves” and “not a means to an end” (17-8); and, (3) the scientific study of optics that demonstrated “reality itself will never be grasped by human perception” (43). Impressionist works, in general, can thus be characterized as: (1) giving predominance to sense perception over a clear, defined, subject matter (47-50); (2) lacking “composition” in the conventional sense of the word as “imposed by the artist on what he sees” (51); (3) giving precedence to color (more specifically, to bright shades of color and to its “vibrations” [57] or interactions rather than to monolithic “local colors” [58-9]) over line to create forms (54-61), a preference that resulted in “depicting something that was between subject and object without fully corresponding to either” (59); and (4) rejecting the conventional notion of a “finished” work as equivalent to the smoothing out of its surface, and being created *en plein air* (62-66).

Painting outdoors was emphasized, of course, because Impressionists “attempt[ed] to capture the ever changing conditions of light” (54) and what such conditions produced, a matter Barasch significantly ties to the movement’s relationship with time. Impressionism preferred the “isolated moment” or the “instant” (54) (“the now,” I would say) to traditional painting’s attempt at representing the “progression of time” (54). Finally, the four aspects Barasch singles out, illustrate an aesthetic based on the affirmation of human perception as source for art rather than on the regime of narrative-based aesthetics. Again, in Walcott’s words, it is a movement about Time rather than History.

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91
In *Tiepolo's Hound*, the intimate relationship between the frames of painting and Time, which now we are equipped to relate to the concept of the untimely to be discussed in Chapter 3, goes even further. Framing and being framed, a method of sorts for the study of light in the poem, saturates *Tiepolo's Hound*, and Time, rather than History, is responsible for much of the framing. Here, the poetic voice insists that art and so-called tradition is best understood within the “frames of Time:”

“Vessel, apprentice and interpreter, / my own delight, before the frames of Time, // was innocent, ignorant and corruptible, / monodic as our climate in its sublime // indifference to seasonal modulations, / to schools, to epochs; I had read them, yes, // but art was not an index of elations; / . . . it trusted its own eyes” (132). Furthermore, unlike “History” –as we have seen, and as Glissant also reminds us, a phenomenon that privileges some species, peoples, histories, spaces through its hereditary, chronological and lineally constituted trajectories, “Time swung its pendulum’s axe through any weather . . .” (128) without distinction. As we will discuss more amply, Camille Pissarro, to whom the poem pays homage, produced a visual work inaugurating this kind of relationship with Time, against narrative: “Narrative excess / had made theatrical melodrama of great art, // but no Pissarro landscape has some rain-whipped wretch / huddling under an oak; he has a balanced heart // without the rhetoric of Delacroix or Turner . . .” (64-5).

The result of what he calls in *Tiepolo’s Hound* “the empire of naming,” which “colonised even the trees, / referred our leaves to their originals” (92), has been so successful that the construction of a new kind of vision (and, indeed, of a new kind of sensory perception), more attuned with “Time” than with “History,” is required so that we are all “awed” again at the beauty of the Caribbean. In literature, this requirement is exacted from language itself, which has to name the Caribbean anew.

Only when, through such process, we have related differently to the tropical light in the Caribbean, only when we experience its blinding quality as a “wide benediction” (24), will we be able to see
otherwise, to find utter beauty, always in the present, always untimely, in environments ravaged by
“History.”

Light, then, is that which forces language and literature to *see* differently, and if light is, according to Walcott, the fundamental concern of painting, then an approach to the latter becomes a possibility for experiencing adamically, as if for the first time, the light of the Caribbean. If, as Paola Loreto notes in her chapter “The Fulfillment of the Aesthetic of Light in the Achievement of the Metaphor of Light,” *Tiepolo’s Hound* is “the final formulation and the clearest exemplification of Walcott’s aesthetic of the island artist” (91), then this is the result of the text’s resolute positioning within the Caribbean and its light, despite (or perhaps because of) the Atlantic circuits all its characters are engaged in (as we will see, *El espíritu de la luz* is also positioned thus).

In addition to the method of framing and being framed, which includes the insertion of Walcott’s own paintings in the book, the text’s study of light unfolds by means of a constant tidalectical counterpoint between, among others, the (light of the) Caribbean and (the light of) Europe, between the biographies and work of both Camille Pissarro and Derek Walcott, between the white hound and the black mongrel, and between writing and painting. These counterpoints work as intersecting planes; thus, although they have different iterations, they systematically converge at different moments in the poem and, particularly, in the last of its four books.

The counterpoints are established from the poem’s very onset, so I will begin by considering the first three “sections” of Book One’s first “chapter.” The initial framing of Caribbean landscape and seascapes sheds light, furthermore, on how the method enables the poem to produce a different vision of the Caribbean:

> They stroll on Sundays down Dronningens Street, passing the bank and the small island shops

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17 In Chapter 3, I discuss at length the connections I see between “the present” and “the untimely.”
18 The poem is composed of Four Books. Book One has five “chapters,” Book Two has six, Book Three has seven, and Book Four has eight. Furthermore, each chapter throughout the entire poem has four “sections.” Thus, the poem consists of twenty-six chapters and a hundred and four sections.
quiet as drawings, keeping from the heat
through Danish arches until the street stops

at the blue, gusting harbour, where like commas
in a shop ledger gulls tick the lined waves.

Sea-light on the cod barrels writes: *St. Thomas,*
the salt breeze brings the sound of Mission slaves

chanting deliverance from all their sins
in tidal couplets of lament and answer,

the horizon underlines their origins—
Pissarros from the ghetto of Braganza

who fled the white hoods of the Inquisition
for the bay’s whitecaps, for the folding cross

of a white herring gull over the Mission
droning its passages from Exodus. (3)

The passage is evidently a written framing (or painting? – throughout the entire poem this hesitation
should be maintained) of Charlotte Amalie’s (St. Thomas’ capital) main street, a coastal city that stops
with the sea. But the scene’s quality as “reality,” in being described in the art of Walcott’s poem,
seems, at the same time, to be always already art, both visual and written: “quiet as drawings;” “like
commas.” Furthermore, a visual element within the image, a certain “sea-light,” is capable of writing
the sign that gives us the clue to where we are positioned: “*St. Thomas.*”

After the empire names the island using the patron-saint of doubt,¹⁹ that is, after the island is
submitted to “History,” the latter immediately comes rushing in: “the salt breeze brings the sound of
Mission slaves.” And the juxtaposition of the “Pissarros” (Sephardic Jews with Portuguese
ascendancy, thus the reference to “Braganza”) and the Mission slaves invites us to consider their
common “origins underlined by the horizon,” by “Exodus.”²⁰ This “History” appearing as a result of

¹⁹ This is a matter on which, coincidentally, Walcott will play when accounting for Pissarro’s and his own doubts regarding
their work (23, 39).
²⁰ This commonality will be echoed further when the poem deals with Pissarro’s “Jewishness” while in France, especially at
the time of the Dreyfus Affair (103).
“sea-light,” “salt breeze,” “the horizon” and of formal aspects such as the rhyme between “slaves” and “waves” (Hannan 567) and “Inquisition” and “Mission,” is manifested by the slaves in “tidal couplets,” a comparison that refers us back to Brathwaite’s tidalectics.

But through Walcott’s peculiar use of poetic language, the chronological narrative of this “History” is overturned in the name of an untimely image that contains it all – enslavement, religious missions, Jewish diaspora, the ocean itself – in one tense, that is, in “Time.” We are asked, furthermore, to read Tiepolo’s Hound as a maritime text adumbrated by “sea-light,” and to reflect on the Caribbean while resolutely situated within its ambit. We are also asked to see around us as if every detail was art, both written and visual, and vice versa, and, more importantly, to allow a heightened sense perception (the image of tropical light, the feeling and taste of salt breeze, the sound of slaves chanting religious couplets) to write, or to constitute, history.

The following section of the poem establishes, by means of another explicit framing, the counterpoint between Pissarro’s and Walcott’s biographies, which will be consistent throughout the text: “My wooden window frames the Sunday street / which a black dog crosses into Woodford Square. // From a stone church, tribal voices repeat / the tidal couplets of lament and prayer” (4-5).

The poetic voice in the first person enters the poem for the first time, and the “black dog” (which was following the “they” in the inaugural section of the poem and whose importance we will discuss below) as well as the replication of the “voices repeat[ing] the tidal couplets,” immediately establish the visual and historical connections between Pissarro and the image of Charlotte Amalie, and Walcott and the image he sees from his window in Port-of-Spain. At the end of this second section, 

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21 The entire poem is constructed in couplets with alternating rhyme that “hover around the pentameter” (Hannan 564) in the structure ab ab cd cd etcetera. For a compelling analysis on the formal aspects of Tiepolo’s Hound that also contextualizes it within the tradition of epic poetry and the conventions regarding the form of the couplet and the rhyme Walcott employs, see Hannan’s “Crossing Couplets.”

22 Throughout Tiepolo’s Hound “I” signals the poetic voice, which one would be hard-pressed to deny is Walcott himself (in fact, none of the poem’s critics I have encountered even makes a distinction on this matter), and the third person (or, less frequently, the second person) signals Pissarro. Thus, although their biographies are attached on many accounts and the two figures collide in several instances, this distinction, maintained throughout the entire poem, indicates that the poetic voice never becomes Pissarro or vice versa.
which has performed comparisons such as “A silent city, blest with emptiness / like an engraving” (5) and “like a Pissarro canvas” (6), the poem forces us to consider a new vision on Impressionism as a Caribbean art: “. . . the turbulent paradise of bright rotundas / over aisles of cane, and censer-carried mists, // then, blazing from the ridges of Maracas— / the croton hues of the Impressionists” (7). By the end of the poem, this initial hint at a radical reconsideration of a fully canonized-as-European aesthetic movement will have become a convincing idea through the poetic exploration of the figure of Camille Pissarro.

The third section reveals the initial inspiration for the writing of the poem:

On my first trip to the Modern I turned a corner, rooted before the ridged linen of a Cézanne.

A still life. I thought how clean his brushes were! Across that distance light was my first lesson.

I remember stairs in couplets. The Metropolitan’s marble authority, I remember being

stunned as I studied the exact expanse
of a Renaissance feast, the art of seeing.

Then I caught a slash of pink on the inner thigh
of a white hound entering the cave of a table,

so exact in its lucency at The Feast of Levi,
I felt my heart halt. (7)

Although we are told initially that the dog is a figure in The Feast of Levi, the subsequent books in Walcott’s poem will make clear that both the dog and the slash of pink in the writer’s memory do not correspond to this painting or to any other he has been able to track down either physically or in catalogues. He will remain forever uncertain about the painter: Tiepolo, Veronese, someone else?

The doubtful source, the lack of definitive origin, and, eventually, the uncertainty about the existence of the dog itself—“. . . until I doubt the very beast’s existence / as much as mine sometimes . . .”

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23 “. . . any of the / two names might have done it; who painted it best // was not at issue . . .” (123).
conflicting power of memory, but also to the downright necessity of what the poem describes as “faith” rather than “research.” When Walcott finds himself, after many years of searching, in Venice, where he cannot find the fresco either, he muses:

Venice was both itself and a catalogue of reproductions, but I had lost the page

in that book of Craven’s where the spectral dog haunted dark hose, and I felt the old rage

at my stubborn uncertainty. Research could prove the hound Tiepolo’s or Veronese’s

but I refused. Faith was a closed church like my old TREASURY OF ART MASTERPIECES. (117)

Walcott professes a secular faith in that stroke, which he remembers as the perfect manifestation of light “made by the sun’s hand” (131). Whatever the specific source or the status of the dog itself, the epiphany of this light takes place in a Venetian, Mediterranean painting, a detail Walcott finds crucial as, for him, it bears an intense and close relationship to the Caribbean light he has devoted his life to studying. It is as though the poem itself is an attempt on Walcott’s part to produce that same stroke, to render, like the Venetian painting does for Mediterranean light, Caribbean light.25

Throughout these three first sections, another crucial counterpoint has been drawn between the white hound in Walcott’s remembered fresco and a black dog that was seen following the “they”
down Dronningens Street and crossing Woodford Square. Both dogs appear repeatedly throughout the poem, intersecting with the juxtaposition between Pissarro and Walcott, and between European and Caribbean light. However, the two dogs’ status in the text is quite different. First, the white hound, endlessly described as “spectral,” obsesses Walcott insofar as, according to him, the simplicity of the slash of pink on it manages to render light perfectly, an achievement that, coincidentally, he desires for his “craft” as a poet:

It seems to me to be increasingly difficult . . . to render light, and by light, to render lineaments. That is one of the toughest things in the world, and it looks like one of the easiest. Because, why is it that a prose passage by Hemingway next to a prose passage of another writer using almost the same words, almost in the same order, doesn’t catch? Why is it Steinbeck does not ignite or illuminate the same way that Hemingway did? . . . It’s not magic; it is real. . . . That’s what I consider to be the peak of effort: not to render things as they are exactly, but to somehow illuminate them by the simplicity of what the vocabulary may be, or the thought may be. The simplicity I am talking about is a striving . . . and it’s the same principal actually of the Adamic idea of renaming. That is a poetic principal. To name something. (“Interview with Derek Walcott” 98-9)

The white dog, a “pure breed,” courtly hound, “ignites or illuminates” in this way for it has been painted, and insofar as it has, it unleashes a dizzying proliferation of semantic associations that lead the poetic voice to ask, in exhaustion, “What did the dog mean?” (135). In contrast to the white hound, the “black mongrels,” whose only commonality with the white dog is the uncertainty concerning their source, are never described as “spectral” and have also never been painted. These black dogs—they are never One, like the white hound— are encountered in settings not glorified by “History,” as opposed to being found in a Renaissance masterpiece: as we have seen, they are encountered crossing Woodford Square in Trinidad; along with Pissarro, crossing a corner in Paris with “screening trees and the dome / of an unnamed chapel” (an image, by the way, condensed with the words, “He was home” [38]); with Walcott in Alcalá where the “black mongrel” is “nosing around a bright boat, / is chased, then chased again, but has returned // without any shame . . .”

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26 Some of these are: “the shadow that stretches” over every piece of art like “a medieval memento mori” (50), a guardian of memory (120), “old age or only a long-wished / for death, or simply the transparent soul” (124), or, even, “my fear, my self, my craft” (127).
(110-11); on the St. Lucian coast (138); on a street with Walcott “toward Kennedy,” where we are told that, “And then I turned and saw, racing the taxi, / through crossed twigs, billboards, a shrouding underpass, // with stalled, jerking traffic, the shadowy ecstasy / of a black mongrel loping behind glass” (153). How to make these black dogs “ignite,” too?

Furthermore, the “mongrels” are always mestizo, creole, stray dogs, never the pure, courtly white hound in the Venetian fresco. The sight of these dogs moves Walcott deeply, and forces a crucial relativization concerning the matrix of race and coloniality and its relationship with art. He is led to ask, concerning Feast in the House of Levi: “Painting releases our benign surprise / at a coal face, while we take a white hound // for granted, but what if among Three Magis / in the rush manger one lifts a black hand?” (122). Indeed, the frequent appearance of black dogs throughout the poem is apparently an insignificant occurrence until, towards the end of the book, Walcott suddenly experiences an epiphany, worth quoting at length:

Then one noon where acacias shade the beach
I saw the parody of Tiepolo’s hound

in the short salt grass, requiring no research,
but something still unpainted, on its own ground.

I had seen wolfhounds straining on the leash,
their haunches taut on tapestries of Spring;

now I had found, whose azure was a beach,
this tottering, abandoned, houseless thing.

A starved pup trembling by the hard sea,
far from the back yards of a village street.

She cried out in compassion. This was not the cosseted lapdog in its satin seat,

not even Goya’s mutt peering from a fissure
of that infernal chasm in the Prado,

but one that shook with local terror, unsure

27 Significantly, the black dog also appears as a haunting, unfinished outline in Walcott’s painting “Baiting the Hook” (63).
of everything, even its shadow.

Its swollen belly was shivering from the heat of starvation; she moaned and picked it up,

this was the mongrel’s heir, not in a great fresco, but bastardy, abandonment, and hope

and love enough perhaps to help it live
like all its breed, and charity, and care,

we set it down in the village to survive
like all my ancestry. The hound was here. (138-9)

Thus, the “mongrels” are finally “ignited or illuminated” through the black dog Walcott sees on the St. Lucian coast: “this tottering, abandoned, houseless thing” is the poet’s ancestry, the poet’s place.

We now turn to a more sustained discussion of the poetic counterpoint between Walcott and Pissarro, the nineteenth-century painter Walcott wishes to remind us was St. Thomasian rather than French (although he spent most of his life in France, where he became a founding figure of the Impressionist movement). *Tiepolo’s Hound’s* homage to Pissarro is inspired on the latter’s utter, but always “modest,”28 devotion to his craft (painting), and to light, within the specific historical, geographical, and racial conditions he lived in.

Formally, the poem includes entire sections on Pissarro, whose life is covered from his early years in St. Thomas until his death in 1903, and who is always referred to either in the third or second person, and on Walcott, which are written in the first person. There are also multiple other sections where the figures intersect explicitly in their shared commonalities, perhaps the most memorable of which is when Walcott, while in St. Thomas, imagines being framed by Pissarro in one of his landscape paintings: “...him and Fritz Melbye sketching in the shade...I felt a line enclose my lineaments / and those of other shapes around me too, //...I shrank into the posture they had chosen for me...” (140-1). Within the painted frame, Walcott and Pissarro have their first, and only,
explicit dialogue where the former reproaches the latter thus: “You could have been our pioneer. / Treacherous Gauguin judged you a second-rater. // Yours could have been his archipelago, where / hues are primal, red trees, green shade, blue water”,29 and Pissarro retorts: “My history veins backwards / to the black soil of my birthplace, whose trees // are a hallowed forest; its leaf-words / uttering the language of my ancestors . . .” (142). Walcott finally sees this implicit presence in a moving passage on Pissarro’s work towards the end of the poem: “Camille Pissarro must have heard the noise / of loss-lamenting slaves, and if he did, // they tremble in the poplars of Pontoise, / the trembling, elegiac tongues he painted” (157-8).

From the counterpoint between both artists’ biographies and work, there emerges a shared obsession with light and the enduring presence of their tropical environment (“Our characters are blent / not by talent but by climate and calling” [135]). Still, there are also fundamental differences within these shared concerns, differences that are studied throughout the poem with deep complexity as part of a lifelong process of struggle on the part of both artists with their work. Although Tiepolo’s Hound is saturated with passages that movingly describe European landscapes, and despite the fact that Walcott claims for Pissarro’s work the status of a deeply personal manifestation that becomes collective (“These little strokes whose syllables confirm / an altering reality for vision // on the blank page, or the imagined frame / of a crisp canvas, are not just his own” [70]), only the former always “returns to islands,” to the worldly-infused islands of the Caribbean. Those are what the poem describes as “our” (rather than European) landscapes:

We inherit the dirt,

the ground dove’s cooing on stones, the acacia’s thorns, and the agave’s daggers, they are all ours,

.....................................................

29 For Gauguin, both poetry and painting show the utmost admiration in Tiepolo’s Hound. There are two Walcott paintings whose subject is Gauguin, including one where he appears with a halo. The poet, indeed, calls him “St. Paul” “. . . until the light of redemption came with Gauguin, // our creole painter of anies, mornes, and savannes, // of olive hills, immortelles. He made us seek / what we knew and loved . . . Our martyr. Unique. He died for our sins. // He, Saint Paul . . .” (16-7).
We are History’s afterthought, as the mongoose races
ahead of its time; in drought we discover our shadows,
our origins that range from the most disparate places,
from the dugouts of Guinea to the Nile’s canted dhows. (96-7)

Pissarro, on his part, “despite the wide benediction / of light” and “Despite mornings of continuous
generosity / in inlets, on hills, on harbours . . .,” would as a young man “long for a city,” “long for
the centre” (24). In 1855, he moved to France and was never to return.

Moreover, Pissarro related to tropical light, while living within it, rather negatively: “the
climate mimicking winter, without cold, in heatless // clouds with their somber presumption of
wisdom/over this superficial sunshine, the tiring bliss // of perpetual summer . . .” (29), and thought
the island seascapes were “a brochure’s remarks” (29). As soon as he reaches longed-for Paris,
however, he realizes that, “There was no fury in this light, no glare / no exultation like his island sky;
// instead, its very pigment was the air, as soft in exhalation as a sigh” (33). Perhaps even in spite of
himself, the island and its light stayed with Pissarro, so much so that many years later, at a moment
of deep doubt about his work, Walcott has him desiring to “banish the island” and even considering
the possibility that, “The slaves still practised obeah. Was he cursed / for abandoning the island . . .?”
(80).

Inevitably, “our” landscape was also “his,” the “dialect” in which he painted, “like an
islander” (53). What’s more, according to Walcott’s poem, tropical light is in great part responsible
for the genius of Pissarro’s work and for the development of Impressionism’s obsession with light.
Walcott’s poem also attributes to Caribbean light a significant role in the eventual magnificence of
Cézanne, who was a student, as Gaughin briefly also was, of Pissarro’s:30

30 On these relationships, Linda Nochlin writes: “The finished work reveals that Pissarro’s self-effacement before the motif
was at times truly remarkable. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, with a modesty matched only by that of his first master,
Corot, he produced a series of landscapes so disarming in their unassailable visual rectitude, so unforced in execution and
composition, that Cézanne said of them in later years: ‘If he had continued to paint as he did in 1870, he would have been
the strongest of us all.’ Cézanne’s remark reminds us that Pissarro was not only endowed with the gift of seeing, but with
Cézanne stayed close to two years in Pontoise, attentive to his older friend’s advice to change his dingy palette to colours brightened by his tutor’s tropical eyes, a different language for a different light, more crystalline, more broken like the sea on island afternoons, scorchingly bright and built in prisms. He should learn to see (56).

As represented and recounted in Tiepolo’s Hound, Pissarro’s struggle – akin to that of the colonized subject – was also intensified by the fact that the painter was not part of “them;” while in France, he became, inevitably, a Jewish islander. The Salon rejected him repeatedly, for “what was he but a backward, colonised Jew?” (60), and although the ruling institution on aesthetic quality also rejected other painters wanting a “change of vision,”31 they “were still,” unlike Pissarro, “French citizens, / Frenchmen, for all their mockery of the centre, // . . . who shared an intimacy he could not enter . . .” (46). In this struggle we are to find, the alluded differences notwithstanding, the other important element that ties Pissarro to Walcott, who judges the painter magnanimously: “What would have been his future had he stayed? / He was Art’s subject as much as any empire’s . . .” (29). After recounting Pissarro’s old age, his failing eyesight, and his eventual death, Walcott asks, “What was his sin? // Where there’s no trust there is no treachery” (162).

Let us now turn more directly to the question of light and Impressionism in Walcott’s poem. As was established above, the obsession with light, with its different iterations at different times of the even rarer ability to make other artists see for themselves: Cézanne, Gaughin and Van Gogh bear witness to the effectiveness of Pissarro as a teacher, or rather, one whose very presence in the vicinity of the chosen motif might serve as a catalyst, a liberating agent for the act of visual response, freed both from traditional ponce and subjective distortion. Nor was his role forgotten: Gaughin hotly defended his former master’s ‘intuitive, purebred’ art against charges of derivativeness as late as 1902, and the old, already venerated Cézanne, in an exhibition at Aix in 1906, the year before his death, had himself listed in the catalogue as ‘Paul Cézanne, pupil of Pissarro’” (1).
the day and at different seasons, with the way it shapes and produces bodies, objects, realities, was
one of Impressionism’s ruling principles. Walcott’s poem condenses the movement’s “chronicle of
light” (62) thus:

Since light was simply particles in air,
and shadow shared the spectrum, strokes of paint

are phrases that haphazardly cohere
around a point to build an argument,

vision was not the concentrated gaze
that took in every detail at a glance.

Now sunlight is splintered and even shade is entered
as part of the prism, and except for its defiant

use in Manet, black is a coiled tube drying
from neglect, the classical drama of painting is interred

with Courbet’s *The Funeral*. Landscape as theatre,
shadow as melodrama without damnation,

buried with the painter’s belief in a Creator
who balanced evil and light in one dimension,

shade lost its moral contrast, doubt disappears
in the moment’s exaltations, in flowers and loaves

They were heretical in their delight,
there was no deity outdoors, no altar,

in the rose window of the iris, light
was their faith, a shaft in an atelier. (43-5)

As is clear from this passage, Impressionism amounted to a “change of vision” that had nothing to
do with the “concentrated gaze” associated with “classical drama,” where shadow was “melodrama”
and carried a “moral” (that is, “evil”) signification. Rather, this new vision professed a “heretical
faith” in light itself, a matter that Walcott, throughout the poem, ties with the light of the tropics
present subliminally throughout Pissarro’s work.
Indeed, about his own practice of painting, Walcott writes to the effect of the Caribbean light’s sublime quality: “If I pitched my tints to a rhetorical excess, / it was not from ambition but to touch the sublime, // to heighten the commonplace into the sacredness / of objects made radiant by the slow gaze of time . . .” (98). Walcott’s twenty-six paintings (the same number of “chapters” in the poem) included in the book and published for the first time, treat, explicitly or not, a Caribbean subject matter with a style reminiscent of Impressionism. The colors used, however, are significantly more radiant than those of many Impressionist paintings, and most of the landscapes are actually seascapes, coastal paintings. Walcott has been chided for his bright palette—“two reviews . . . have said that it’s a lot like painting by numbers” (Sajé and Handley 136), and his response is immensely instructive with respect to the peculiarity of tropical light:

But if you went to the Caribbean and you looked at Caribbean light, that’s what you’d say, that you have to paint it by numbers. Because you’re talking about a primal kind of light; you’re talking about an intensity that is incredible. There is a blue that you can’t find in your palette. And if you don’t have it, how are [you] going to paint the sky? Because that sky that you’re looking at does not exist in the watercolour that you have. . . . Gradation and subtlety are important, but the attitude of imperial authority says that grey is the colour of a culture, of a real culture. Blatant colour; brassy colour, bright colour is associated with underdeveloped cultures, with underdeveloped people. These are places you go to for vacation. You don’t take them seriously. . . . (136)

Ultimately, towards the end of *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Walcott invites us again to look at Pissarro’s work and at the Caribbean with this new, different vision adumbrated by the study of light, and especially present in Impressionist painting. “In his life’s dusk,” writes Walcott, “though hand and eye grow weary, / his concentration strengthens in its skill” (155), and “some critics think his [Pissarro’s] work is ordinary” (155). However, what we shall find, if we are willing to see as if for the first time, is that “the ordinary is the miracle” (155).

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32 Pissarro’s early *Two Women Chatting by the Sea* (1856), painted while still in St. Thomas, is here an important intertext.
Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, having published multiple novels and essays, is perhaps best known for cultivating the genre of the chronicle, a hybrid medium through which he has constructed a sharply incisive and satirical perspective on Puerto Rican and Caribbean society, especially in texts such as Las tribulaciones de Jonás (1981), El entierro de Cortijo (1982-3), and El cruce de la bahía de Guánica: cinco crónicas playeras y un ensayo (1989). His work can be said to be part of an important shift—generally ascribed to the “Generation of the 70s”—in Puerto Rican literature and historiography toward an extensive reconsideration of Puerto Rican history in terms of heretofore-suppressed topics related to race, gender, and class. Moreover, Rodríguez-Juliá’s texts have incorporated recurrent phenomena in Puerto Rican society such as wake rituals, pop culture icons, sports, and Afro-Puerto Rican music, that many in the literary establishment had considered before too banal and “popular” to be part of literature.

For the purposes of this project, Rodríguez Juliá’s work, in general, is relevant as it manifests the production of an affirmative conceptualization of the sea (more on this in Chapter 5). But his recent novel El espíritu de la luz (2010), in particular, is crucial for the present discussion as it foregrounds and explores the “spirit” and effects of tropical light, that peculiarly luminous light, on a few historical and fictional characters—Francisco Oller, Armando Reverón, Joseph Lea Gleave, Nicolas de Staël, and Alfredo (the student in Oller’s homonym painting)—that were, according to Rodríguez Juliá, obsessed with it. The following discussion will focus on several recurrent and interrelated aspects of the novel having to do with the question of tropical light, which can be appreciated both in terms of form and content: (1) the attention to subtle difference in quality and type of tropical light despite a generalized perception of a monochromatic, blinding light; (2) the reinterpretation of tropical light as a way to produce a new kind of vision and to activate a broader

33 The writer himself seems to be obsessed with the topic of tropical light, as pieces on Armando Reverón and Joseph Lea Gleave published as part of his collection Caribeño reveal a longer-term involvement with it.
sensory perception, and the question of how this relates to light and art; and (3) the historicization of light through its contextualization in the tropic and the simultaneous defense of light as an affirmation of the present, as a phenomenon manifesting Nietzsche’s “intención vitalista” (“vitalist intention,” Cancel 6).34

Describing the various characters’ works as “estudios de la luz” (“studies on light”), a phrase that can, in turn, aptly describe Walcott’s poem, Pissarro’s work, and El espíritu de la luz itself, the novel travels incessantly in an Atlantic circuit between the Caribbean coast of Venezuela, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, France, and the Mediterranean. More importantly, two (Reverón and Gleave) of the main three historical characters obsessed with tropical light throughout the novel are almost at all times set on a coastal situation, whereas Oller is portrayed several times at sea because of his multiple travels between Paris and San Juan. The characters’ experience of tropical light is deeply marked by such positioning, which implies a fundamental openness, amplitude and horizontality in their encounter with tropical light: for instance, Santo Domingo is described as a coastal, horizontal, luminous city (15, 29); Reverón “prefería la anchura del paisaje marino, la luz del playón” (“preferred the seascape's amplitude, the light of the beach” 75) and was convinced that the coastal landscapes “escapan hacia un estado de gracia, la luz” (“escape toward a state of grace, light” 76-7); Oller taught his students that “la clave de la luz estaba en el horizonte” (“the key to light is in the horizon” 139). Such a resolutely horizontal perspective implies a radically different positioning with respect to the capitalist perpendicular production of space we will discuss more amply in the following chapter. The horizontal perspective, furthermore, implies that the possibility of “flight” continuously invoked in the novel is fundamentally maritime.

The characters’ open, vast positioning in the novel seems to overexpose them to tropical light, and therefore to produce the clichéd effect of blindness due to the glare. What each character

34 Mario Cancel's early review of the novel can be found here: <http://lugaresimaginarios.wordpress.com/2010/09/05/el-espiritu-de-la-luz-de-edgardo-rodriguez-julia/>
does with such overexposure, as we will see, is intimately related yet vastly different. *El espíritu de la luz* seems to perform, yet again, the truism of the harmful, threatening, implacable tropics only to demonstrate, through repetition, the diversity of its light and the creative possibilities contained therein. The narrative strategy will also, as we will see, bring to the fore a history of light and the uses it has been put to by both capitalism and artistic forces attempting to resist the latter. In the process, the novel will demand of its characters and of its readers a “change of vision” and an opening of our sense perception in order to perceive the subtle changes of the Caribbean ambit.

*El espíritu de la luz*'s formal construction stands out upon a first encounter, not least because the writer himself writes quite a directive, and, as Cancel notes in his review essay, perhaps unnecessary (6), prologue on the topic. Vignettes constitute the novel, with intercalated sections narrated by each of the different characters in a specifically assigned grammatical person (first-, second-, third- person singular). Such distribution of vignettes and voices, however, starts to merge in the middle of Chapter 4, as noted by another reviewer (San José Vázquez 166). As the novel reaches its conclusion, the distinction among voices becomes even more difficult to sustain when a new, “uncanny” (as the writer himself describes it in the prologue), voice appears that eventually declares its involvement in the narrative as part of its “trade” (Painter? Photographer? Writer? Journalist? All of the above?). I want to suggest, however, that this “uncanny” voice is light itself, a voice that, like light, enables a different access to the characters and their stories but whose body and biography we are unable to see, a voice for which there is no source. The novel’s structure, then, suggests that tropical light is not just a coincidentally shared and therefore unconnected preoccupation between these characters. It is rather a phenomenon that unites them across times and spaces, and that becomes, especially in the second half of the text, a preeminent voice without which the narrative would become unsustainable.

The idea that, despite their physical and temporal distance, the historical characters are somehow together in their, at times despairing and at times joyful attempt to understand or render
tropical light, is further buttressed by another narrative device that emerges well before the “uncanny” voice. The device, as the prologue also declares, is found in the figure of Alfredo, who functions as a connecting thread initially appearing only in Oller’s biography but eventually finding its way into everyone else’s. To my mind, however, Alfredo is important not merely because he connects all the other stories, but more specifically, because of the way he does it. Atlantic circuits that revolve around the more specific Caribbean area characterize the biography the novel provides him with. He is the rather typical colonial figure in-between two worlds, but he does not experience his position tortuously or melodramatically. Rather, he cynically exploits his opportunities both in the metropolis and in the “ex” colonies. He will be, alternatively and in different contexts, a somewhat phony doctor, a pornographic photographer, a touristic businessman, and a hyper-sexualized gigolo.

With respect specifically to Oller, Alfredo will increasingly appear in the memories of the former’s early years in Paris with intense homoeroticism. Those are the times when Oller is cultivating friendships with Impressionist painters such as Cézanne and Pissarro, whom we have considered extensively through Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound*. Most importantly, however, a time will come in the novel when Oller starts experiencing his memories of Alfredo as those of light itself. Through this identification, a certain sense of triumph of tropical light and, with it, of the creolized Caribbean strategist, is affirmed through Alfredo’s somewhat unpleasant character. Oller, the Puerto Rican painter, had attempted a study of light in *El estudiante* through light’s construction of a space, through the way it “sculpts” spaces and bodies, and through the way it creates volume and perspective upon traversing windows and reflecting dust particles at a certain time of day in Paris. But light and the painting’s main subject will eventually seem to merge just like the narrative voices in the novel do, and although Alfredo cannot, in a strict plot logic, be the “uncanny” voice alluded to above, it is conceivable to conclude that the novel’s increasing “confusion” of voices is a result of all of them becoming light in its elemental preeminence, eternal present, and unstoppable “flight.”
Having discussed the extent to which the novel’s form attests to the intimate relationship between light and body, light and life, and even light and writing (the narration being submerged in a fusion of light with its voices), let us now turn our attention to the text’s specific engagement with tropical light. As we have anticipated, the main three characters’ overexposure to tropical light enables a constant qualification of the various types of light in the tropics. Gleave, the British architect who wins a competition issued by the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo to build the “Faro a Colón,” is the character most influenced by the truism of the monochromatic blinding light of the tropics. In his supreme ignorance of the region for which he is designing the “Faro,” Gleave makes of the competition an “oportunidad de concebirse como un visionario de la luz. Era como saberse exótico en un paisaje de cielos grises, en viviendas de aposentos oscuros. La luz sería su oficio. ¿No era esa, después de todo, la ambición inconfesa de la arquitectura?” (11).

His design—in which he includes people (ostensibly Dominicans) taking the stereotypical tropical “siesta” under huge charro Mexican hats (!)—pretends to invert, in a supreme manifestation of the capitalist “panoptic” (47) use of light as medium for control, the order of light: his “Faro” would illuminate the sky at night just like the sun lights the earth during the day (15, 27-8). Although Gleave will eventually seem to realize that the idea of himself as a “visionary of light” was spectacularly mistaken in its pretense to “educar al trópico en el oficio de la luz” (“educate the tropics on the trade of light”) (28), Gleave will approach the end of his life convinced that he nevertheless was right. As he departs the Dominican Republic, seeing its light for the last time, the architect muses:

Sí que era una luz indómita, más inclinada a deslumbrar que a delinear, con recortada y quieta nitidez, las figuras y las formas, camino a difuminarse en el horizonte. Tenía de aquella luz una impresión centelleante, sí, primeramente golpeaba, eso; luego enceguecía y, finalmente, se poblaba de una lírica y apacible cremosidad, matizada por el verdor de esas islas. Se reafirmó en su concepción original: bien valía la pena esa iluminación nocturna del

35 “an opportunity to conceive of himself as a visionary of light. It was like being conscious of himself as exotic in a landscape of gray skies, in homes with dark quarters. Light would be his trade. Wasn’t that, after all, architecture’s unconfessed ambition?”
Faro, tan artificial y grandiosa que contenía la posibilidad del mal gusto; sólo sería, ni más ni menos, una variante de las truculencias de la luz en el trópico. (194)

Still, we should note the fundamental difference there is in such “reaffirmation” when we compare it to Gleave’s initial plan to become the first imperial architect concerned not with the gray of England but with the brightness of the tropics. Even the architect, the most recalcitrant character in the novel with respect to the cliché of the harmful, threatening tropics –they are “implacable” (14)

“avasallante” (“overwhelming”), “amenazante” (“threatening” 47)– has finished his time in the Dominican Republic with the realization that tropical light has variants within its “truculence.”

With Caribbean painters Oller and Reverón the story is quite different. Their entire lives and work, according to the novel, were devoted to tropical light. Theirs was an attempt to study, understand, render, such a light on the canvas. Their plastic production was also a meta-study of painting’s relationship and dependence on light. So, although the novel does make occasional remarks in these characters’ sections on tropical light’s overwhelming brilliance, it focuses much more on the creative openings it provided for Oller and Reverón. From the very onset, in sharp contrast to Gleave, these characters were attempting to capture precisely the subtle variations in tropical light, both at different times of the day and also through light’s interaction with multiple forms, bodies, objects. Aesthetically and subjectively, however, both painters performed such attempts quite differently.

Oller, a nineteenth-century painter whose status as one of Puerto Rico’s most revered artists can hardly be overstated, was, according to the novel, especially concerned with the interaction of light and inanimate objects, more particularly, windows, curtains, particles of dust: “cuando pinté a Alfredo en El estudiante mi ambición fue captar esa luz que entraba visillo adentro. Era una luz

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36 **“It was indeed an indomitable light, more inclined to dazzle than to delineate, with neat and still clarity, figures and forms, on its way to diffusing in the horizon. He had of that light a blazing impression, yes, it first beats, then it blinds and, finally, it is settled by a lyric and mild creaminess, toned down by the greenery of those islands. He reaffirmed his original conceptualization: the nighttime illumination of the lighthouse was worthwhile indeed, so artificial and grandiose that it contained the possibility of bad taste; the Faro would be nothing more or less than a variant of tropical light’s truculences.”**
“when I painted Alfredo in The Student, my ambition was to grasp that light entering through the window curtains. It was a morning light that reminded me clearly of the luminous Caribbean atmosphere late in the morning.”

“El velorio no vela, a recent fictionalization of the painting by Antonio Martorell, a contemporary well-known Puerto Rican painter in his own right, includes a brief biography of Oller where an account is provided of his travels to Europe and his friendship with both Pissarro and Cézanne. Indeed, Oller participated in the 1859 Impressionist exhibition, although his lifelong work was still marked by representational realism. On another note, it is worthwhile to remember in this context that the spread of the use of curtains and other such objects for controlling the invasion of public, outside lighting inside the private sphere, the bourgeois house, is a nineteenth century phenomenon that coincided with Oller’s fascination with them (Schivelbusch 185-6).

“For Camille, on the contrary, what was decisive was, precisely, that fulguration that erased the object, to grasp that flight. I was a pathetically realist painter positioned in light’s sanctuary.”

“Camille preferred to recognize in that morning light what he remembered from his distant St. Thomas. He told me, with a tinge of gravity, as always: ‘It is a domestic or, rather, marital, scene, where desire is contained in that light’”

“when Camille, painting’s ascetic, noticed our complicity in light, I wondered how he could “guess the miracle without knowing the saints” [an idiomatic expression I translate literally that refers to the preeminence of an action over the persons involved in it]. It was the light that he, Alfredo, and I knew.”
In contrast, Reverón, who was born in the late nineteenth century and whose work was developed primarily in the twentieth, followed a much more intense path insofar as he literally gave his life over to the pursuit of light by choosing to live permanently in a shack on the Venezuelan beach of Macuto, where he could be the closest and the most open to light. There, he radicalized modernist painting and produced some of the most unique and amazing frames in the history of art by means of a scrutiny of light’s interaction with “enramadas,” coastal vegetation, the sea, the beach (“la luz del playón”). It is safe to say that his work was much more directly and forcefully, in comparison with Oller’s, an exploration of the interaction of light and life.

The novel’s insistence on these different perceptive qualities that produce singular artistic creations are possible because of the characters’ attempt to “evidenciar, mostrar, hacer más vidente la Mirada, volverla, en resumen, más atenta” (“to show, to make Sight see more, to make it, in a word, more attentive” Oller 85); to expand our sense perception in order, for instance, to see trash as a provider of light (Reverón 204); and to become blind with the midday tropical light and therefore be able to see otherwise. For instance, when blinded by light, the next moment of seeing “reality” is characterized by a blur that includes many disparate forms such as dots and lines, rather than sharpened, rounded objects. The different perceptive qualities producing singular artistic creations are possible, moreover, because the novel’s characters propose a vision that is firmly positioned horizontally rather than perpendicularly. Light in these painters is also not only “seen” differently, but also felt, touched, heard, smelled. Such a problematization of the dominant regime of sensory perception squarely contextualized in a tropical and coastal chronotope, brings to the fore the identification the novel performs between light and life, between light and the present. Light, as we have seen, is a phenomenon that cannot be experienced as having a source in the past or a point of arrival in the future. It is a constant, and perhaps the only one. It is therefore, always, present, untimely. It is, again, Walcott’s “Time.”
The relationship between light and time is, as a result, also recurrent in the novel. Its temporal schema is remarkably similar to the retruécano structure we will study in Chapter 4 concerning Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*. The characters’ narratives are built through memory, and there is of course a certain timeline involved in their biographies. But the ways in which this timeline is accounted for are absolutely “disordered,” rambling. The sections on each character seem to start toward the end of their lives, and then keep going back and forth without any attempt whatsoever at constructing a linear, chronological order of events. Towards the end of the novel, we are brought back to the end of the characters’ lives with which the novel started, but that “end” is now very different. Like the fresco that so obsesses Walcott, there is no point of origin for these characters; in a certain sense, one could say that they are always “at sea.”

Within this reading, the rather bizarre and out-of-control ending of the novel, which gives up the main three characters it has been following in the name of a sequel of endogamous genealogies and truculent and melodramatic passions related, ultimately, to Alfredo, can be understood as part of the text’s attempt at becoming, itself, light. Indeed, it is here that the voice characterized by Rodríguez Juliá as “uncanny,” a voice in the first person whose source is absolutely unknown but who knows the proliferating characters’ destinies that, simply, “le ha tocado reseñar” (“he was the one to report on” 257), takes over. This voice, as was anticipated above, is a literary attempt at linguistically rendering light.

With the exception of Gleave, all the historical figures in the novel were painters, a medium that, as we have seen, has been especially tied to the changing conceptions of vision and its relationship to light, a matter that connects this novel further with *Tiepolo’s Hound*. But, on the whole, *El espíritu de la luz* can be described as a commentary on the intimate relationship and differences between several forms of art (painting, writing, photography, architecture) by virtue of their diverse engagements with the phenomenon of light. The most sustained discussion on different art forms throughout the novel is, however, that between painting and photography. This is dramatized in
several instances: (1) the rather adverse relationship between Oller’s painting and Alfredo’s photography (“La luz no lo inunda todo, no muestra tanto como la fotografía; ésa era la reserva del charlatán de Alfredo respecto a la pintura: no evidenciaba lo suficiente” [82]); (2) Reverón’s struggle with the documentalists’, tourists’, and curious people’s cameras wanting to “capture” his image; (3) Gleave becoming a photographer of his Dominican lover inside a coastal hotel; (4) the subject of the “uncanny” voice at the end of the novel being itself a photographer.

There is another, more specific, discussion in the novel having to do with three traditions of painting—impressionism, realism, and symbolism—that I find crucial for the present argument. The first two traditions are epitomized by Oller, whose career as a painter was simultaneous with the development of Impressionism, but who retained a realist aesthetic precisely because, according to the novel, “Yo, que venía de la región del fulgor, sabía de las traiciones de la luz. Si te dejas seducir por ella, el objeto se fuga del lienzo; es el final del realismo que tanto nos costó” (83). His was a trajectory, like Pissarro’s and Walcott’s, plagued by the tension between tropical and temperate light, which is another way of saying by the tension associated with a colonized artist. Oller dealt with it rather differently than Pissarro, choosing, as Walcott, always to return to his native Puerto Rico and preferring to work with a representational, narrative style. A modernist aesthetic characterizes Reverón’s work, which for its part increasingly moves away from impressionism and becomes, according to the novel, a very peculiar and powerful symbolism of tropical light.

Rodríguez Juliá’s novel, as Walcott’s poem, seems to side with Impressionism and symbolism. As Cancel argues, the discussion between these modes of painting in the novel is ultimately related to a discussion of “Caribbeanness,” the latter being approached in this case through

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42 “Light does not inundate everything, does not show nearly as much as photography; such was Alfredo’s reservation, the charlatan, with respect to painting: it did not show enough.”
43 “I, who was from gleam’s region, knew about light’s treasons. If you let yourself be seduced by it, the object flees the canvas; it is the end of the realism that costs us so much.”
44 Notice that the very identification of different visual traditions in painting is made on the basis of their understanding and rendering of light.
the lens of its light. The result is that, “lo que queda es el Caribe de las impresiones: cómo lo ve el Otro desde adentro (Gleave), o cómo lo percibe el Yo desde afuera o mediado por el retorno (Oller) o, al cabo, por la locura (Reverón)” (Cancel 9). Because light, in Cancel’s analysis, is intimately related to both Eros and Thanatos (light’s presence produces reality, but its absence implies the latter’s negation), the novel’s focus on it foregrounds the fundamentally subjective quality of vision and produces a “Caribbeanness” that “ya no es un objeto fijo sino una percepción fluida” (“is no longer a fixed object but rather a fluid perception” 6). The novel, furthermore, “recoge una serie de registros respecto a la caribeñidad como expresión de un tipo peculiar de luz mediada la apropiación por el observador en el tiempo y en el espacio, o sea, en la historia” (6).

Although it is not in the scope of this analysis to dwell extensively on the rich question of the different artistic media and light (and, more specifically, on the relationship between that and capitalist coloniality), I mention this aspect of the novel because it foregrounds a historicization of light key to our discussion. As already anticipated, I find Cancel’s suggestion that there is in the novel a Nietzschean “vitalist intention” compelling. I want to argue that such affirmation of life is most evident in El espíritu de la luz’s peculiar way of historicizing light. The novel’s exploration of the three main characters’ trajectories echoes the history of light we briefly sketched above. Through its contextualization in the tropics, one can more directly see, however, the oppressive uses to which

45 “what is left is the Caribbean of impressions: how the Other sees it from within (Gleave), how the I perceives it from without or mediated by the return (Oller), or, ultimately, by insanity (Reverón).”

46 “collects a series of registers concerning Caribbeanness as an expression of a peculiar type of light, an appropriation mediated by the observer in time and space, that is, in history.” Cancel’s approach runs contrary to that of another early reviewer of the novel, San José Vázquez, who interprets light in the novel as “un elemento simbólico convertido en cifra de la inasible ontología caribeña” (“a symbolic element turned into the measure of the ungraspable Caribbean ontology” 165), as “una aspiración a una plenitud ontológica” (“an aspiration to ontological plenitude”), and as “un pretexto de un deseo de absoluto” (“a pretext for absolute desire” 166). Such “absolute,” “ontological” desire he further relates to “apasionados intentos de elucidación de la esencia caribeña” (“passionate attempts at elucidating the Caribbean essence” 166). But I believe this is not the case: El espíritu de la luz has little or nothing to do with ontology; it is, as we have seen, all about relation, perception, contextualization. It is a study on how light produces differences, relations, connections. It is, therefore, a novel about epistemology.

47 See, for instance, Esther Gabara’s essay, which follows to a certain extent Susan Sontag’s work on photography in order to analyze the preeminent role of photography in the expansion of the United States’ empire. Within the Caribbean region more generally, see Krista Thompson’s fascinating An Eye for the Tropics. For Pacific archipelagoes, see essays by Carolyn O’Dwyer and Max Quanchi.
capitalist coloniality has subjected light, especially and more intensely with the invention of photography and of electric lighting. We will see that Reverón’s work becomes, in the context of the novel, the most intense and brilliant attempt at resisting that history and, therefore, at affirming light-as-life-as-present. To use Walcott’s concepts again, Reverón’s light is related to Time rather than History.

As was anticipated in our discussion of the “sun towers” above, Gleave’s “Faro,” whose aspect is compared in the novel to a “tombstone” (189), constitutes a belated attempt on the part of a Caribbean dictator to control light and thereby to relish in a delirious, pseudo-nationalist grandeur: “Su [Trujillo’s] visión se había convertido en maldición para esta pobre gente. Era como si su obsesión por domeñar la luz hubiese tirado por la borda, echado al precipicio, volcado a las penumbras, a todo un pueblo” (13).\(^48\) The Faro, an affirmation of death and an ultimate symbol of the attempted absolute control of a fascist government, is the apotheosis of the regime of electric lighting, which we discussed above as part of a long western European and U.S. tradition of “sun towers.” In a brilliant scene reminiscent of the baroque aesthetic of Carpentier’s theater set upon “the Machine” (see Chapter 4), Rodríguez Juliá recounts the inauguration, in 1948 (52), of the Faro using nuclear explosives, the result of which was a cloud of smoke that reminded the observer of the (photographed) images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The local Dominican news went on to boast in their headlines: “se utilizó por primera vez en el mundo, la energía atómica con fines pacíficos” (“for the first time ever, atomic energy was used with peaceful purposes” 54). Thus, the scene allows us to perceive the historical continuity between an apotheosis of electric lighting as ultimate control and the invention of nuclear power as ultimate death.

Gleave’s complicity with this type of capitalist subjection of light, which is always doomed to failure, is further exemplified when he becomes an obsessive photographer of his Dominican lover,

\(^48\) “Trujillo’s vision had become a curse for this poor people. It was as if his obsession with subjugating light had thrown overboard, cast to the abyss, turned to the shadows, a whole country.”
Betty, in a hotel room overlooking the Caribbean Sea. For every photo shoot, which the novel characterizes as Gleave’s sublimation of his desire for a racially suspect woman, the architect frantically shuts all curtains in an attempt to black out any crevice through which the assaulting tropical light might enter. He wants desperately to build his own dark room in a hotel to protect himself from the threatening presence of tropical light, in order not to allow himself to ever be captured, overcome by that light, a desire that is the exact opposite of Oller’s fascination with the way light intrudes interior spaces. But, paradoxically, Gleave also wants to force on all Caribbean peoples an inversion of the sun, so that they have their nights illuminated by the monumental and far-reaching glare of his Faro… This delusion is perhaps the tragically perfect manifestation of the long-term historical results of imperialism’s Eye sighting land from the perpendicular mast of its legendary ships.

The history of capitalist uses of light is explored differently through the story of Armando Reverón. In his case—and in the context of this project it should be clear by now why this is a perfectly logical approach—the fundamental phenomenon is tourism. The sections on the Venezuelan painter address, if subtly, the increasing “development” for touristic purposes of the coast where he had chosen to establish himself. At the beginning, Reverón had come to the “Edén, una promesa de luz” (“Eden, a promise of light” 58), but increasingly he finds himself the subject of bourgeois tourists all dressed the same, white way and hoisting their cameras to capture “el loco del litoral” (“the crazy man of the littoral” 4). The cameras’ kind of light is fundamentally alien to Reverón, who plays the role of the “native” circus specimen for tourists, documentalists, art aficionados, and photographers of all kinds. The shock, according to the novel, has a significant, irreparable impact on his relationship to the “luz del playón,” and, as a direct result, on his painting.

Always having been, in sharp contrast to Gleave, willing to give himself over to light, Reverón is increasingly taken over by it. This understanding is possible due to the novel’s “confusion” of insanity and light, a brilliant reversal of the association of light and good sense. But,
“siempre pensaste que tu verdadera locura empezó con la fotografía, con esa manía de ellos –
Boulton, Luisa– de sacarte fotos como curiosidad turística del litoral de Macuto” (34). The passage
implies that the insanity attributed to Reverón as a result of his obsession with tropical light was not
“true,” for the true one started with the photographers. The actual causes of his ultimate withdrawal,
*El espíritu de la luz* suggests, were, first, the artificial light of photography –deployed in this case
specifically for exoticizing and exploitative purposes– and, second, the intense electric light put over
Reverón’s body for medical examination when he was interned in a psychiatric ward. The painter’s
greatest anguish, while at the hospital, is that the electric lighting and the electric shock treatment he
was submitted to made him “forget” the light of the beach: “el tratamiento eléctrico en 1954 sólo le
produjo la pérdida de memoria de sus años en la luz de Macuto” (“the electrical treatment in 1954
only produced the loss of memory of his years in Macuto’s light” 211). Significantly, in another
connection between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, reminiscent of Walcott’s poem and of
Carpentier’s *El siglo de las luces*, the novel has the notes of Koppel, Reverón’s last doctor, say that,
toward the end, the painter “proclamaba, con algo de coraje, que toda la luz del Caribe se había ido a
Niza, un pueblo del Mar Mediterráneo, como Macuto. Esto último lo subrayaba, repitiéndolo”
(212).

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The peculiarly resplendent tropical light, when considered from within as Walcott’s poem
and Rodríguez Juliá’s novel do, has indeed blinded the dominant mode of vision explored in this
chapter’s opening. Tropical light has become a vehicle for the proposal of a different, new, “awed”
kind of vision that emphasizes horizontality over perpendicularity, amplitude over depth, adamic
impression over narrative representation, the untimely present of “Time” over the subjugating

49 “You always thought that your true insanity started with photography, with that mania of theirs –Boulton, Luisa– of
taking pictures of you as a touristic curiosity of Macuto’s coast.”
50 “he proclaimed, with a tinge of anger, that all the Caribbean light had gone to Niza, a town in the Mediterranean Sea, just
like Macuto. He insisted on this, repeating it.”
chronologies of “History.” Ultimately, the monocular, static Eye, always that of a human-god, becomes displaced in the name of a much more modest, restless vision working alongside – rather than atop of – other manifestations of sense perception. Crucially, this new vision does not dominate that which is seen, but rather becomes coterminous with it – it becomes the “black mongrel” and the “uncanny voice.” The Caribbean, a site consigned to what Walcott describes as “History’s afterthought,” is thus seen again as if for the first time, a process in which the region’s landscapes and seascapes manifest their utter beauty not as an originary Eden or as a tourist postcard, but rather as its own, perpetually tidalectic force.
Chapter 3: The Tidalectics of the Coast

The Coast, a Chronotope

“Land!” The proverbial cry of sailors —whatever its status with respect to historical veracity—haunts islands everywhere. The trite legend has it that it is a joyous cry at the sight, smell, or sound of a coast or at something that signals it. It is a cry packed with symbolic and historical meanings and implications, the most pernicious of which is that “land!” was, too often, “my land!” The assumption of many of those who steered imperial ships —the speculation is plausible given the way their bodies went about their business under explicit instructions from above or under implicit directives from a thoroughly imperialistic “horizon of expectations” and of “experience”— was more often than not such a possessive assumption despite what was actually found to be the case in terms of inhabitants, human or otherwise. (The question whether this possessive impulse was also experienced by ancestral natives [for instance, the multifarious groups that populated the islands in the Pacific or the relatives of Arawaks who settled on the Caribbean islands] is unavoidable, and it better be so. But, as with many such questions, it is also necessary to declare a definitive answer impossible. In any case, there is enough information to assume that if and when there was a possessive impulse [rather than or along with, just for the sake of examples, a haphazard impulse, a contingent impulse, an adventurous impulse, a flight impulse, a life impulse, a death impulse…], it responded to a very different “horizon of expectations,” or, to put it bluntly, to a very different world. The possible combinations of different kinds of impulses —present, of course, also in imperial captains and sailors— must have also been organized differently, according to other structural, social, political, psychical, arrangements).

For imperialism, its agents, and its potential acquisitions, the coast was a proscenium, so to speak, where, depending on the historical and economic circumstances and the peculiarities of the

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1 I use these concepts in the sense adumbrated by Hans Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. 121
imperial design projected on the ship, (1) a permanent claim for possession of all land beyond the coast was performed; (2) a medium-term establishment was set for the subsequent addition of more lands in the huge maze of archipelagoes resting upon the ocean; or, (3) a more contingent and brief stopover was made—<br>in the midst of a frankly exhausting and hostile set of conditions on the ocean—to get water and supplies, to repair armament, to rest, to have (or force) sex, to “barter,” to laugh at the ignorance of natives, and, sometimes, to love (and be loved by) them.

Today, a powerful imaginary of coastlines, especially associated with insularity by means of, as we have seen, a long and profuse tradition, permeates the tourist industry’s idea of paradise. The coast remains a “contact zone,” in Mary Louise Pratt’s by now famous formulation, where foreigners can “get a splash of sunshine,” “a bit of paradise,” “a relaxing experience,” or where, bikini-clad, they can doze off in a hammock with a martini. The economic transaction is, apparently, less crude: machines and plastic cards, all hidden in luxurious hotel lobbies, take care of it. And the premise under which both tourists and “locals” operate is that insular economies not only have come to depend on this state of affairs, but also that it benefits them (no matter the actual research that has given us ample evidence to the contrary).² Accordingly, we perform the role of grateful hosts conspicuously, for the arrangement leads us to believe that we are, in actual fact, the “hosted” ones by the generosity of foreigners. Tourists, on their part, can feel good about themselves that they are helping these poor people out, rather than taking, as Columbus and his men did, their gold for metal trickles.

But they are…

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The concept, discussed in the Introduction, of tidalectics (a horizontal, back and forth movement without definitive point of origin or conclusion and whose rhythm is dictated by an

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² See, for instance, essays in *Tourism in the Caribbean: Trends, Development, Prospects*; the introduction to *Island Tourism: Trends and Prospects*; and essays in *Island Tourism and Sustainable Development: Caribbean, Pacific, and Mediterranean Experiences.*
extremely slow time) provides the cue for the following discussion, which makes the coast a problem for thought in the context of a project on insularity. We will approach the coast tidalectically as a chronotope in the hope that it will help us to imagine and affirm a baroque engagement with time, history, and space that resists the dictates of capitalist coloniality. The subsequent chapter will see this approach at work in the novels *El siglo de las luces* by Alejo Carpentier and *Le quatrième siècle* by Édouard Glissant.

I do not claim the coarse historical sweep performed above as useful (or even defensible) for anything else than allowing us to see, however crudely, that both historical paradigms are remarkably close: the coast is a space to visit only briefly, without exactly taking it very seriously, before going beyond it for more; or before picking up your stuff and leaving. Such is only a corollary of the paradoxical condition we have explored concerning islands when used and deployed from without. At the same time, the counterpoint between those two nodal points – imperial encounters starting in the late fifteenth century and touristic encounters starting in the late nineteenth century – in the histories of many islands allows us to see the coast-as-time and, with it, a certain association of insularity with time that has also buttressed the perspective from without. In a word, the comparison allows me to foreground the coast as a fundamental chronotope, as a historically crucial space that has, nevertheless, been consistently neglected on its own terms. Still, as will be shown, the coast-as-chronotope, if considered immanently, has worked and can work, also, for the mobilization of something else.

**Interlude: On the Chronotope**

The concept of the chronotope as Mikhail Bakhtin defines it in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics” in relation to the (European) novel as a genre, proves particularly useful for approaching the coast as a problem:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. . . . we are
borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature . . . In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. . . . for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. (84-5)

However, despite Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope as that which seeks to point to and understand the inseparable interdependence of both time and space, several elements in his text seem to bestow upon time supremacy over space, a move that perhaps can be explained as the result of a desire to invert what we will see is capitalism’s preferred submission of time to space. Besides the title, some of the aspects that privilege time in Bakhtin’s essay are: his claim, after the formal definition, that “space is understood and measured through time,” and the bulk of his analyses in the essay (including his fascinating exposition of the time of agriculture and its subsequent breakdown with the advent of “capitalist society”). Likewise, his tracing of those he understands as the major chronotopes in the novelistic tradition—starting with the three types of Ancient novels, passing through the medieval novels with special emphasis on Rabelais, and ending with some examples of twentieth century European novels—reveals decidedly a focus on and precedence of time as it is “expressed in literature,” and especially as it is spatialized. The temporalization of space, a process that the chronotope also brings into view, is very rarely considered. Indeed, in the last section of the essay, entitled “Concluding Remarks” and written much later (1973) than the essay itself (1937-38), Bakhtin himself recognizes as much: “and it has been temporal relationships by and large that have been studied—and these in isolation from the spatial relationships indissolubly tied up with them” (258).

3 I imagine he refers more specifically to industrial capitalism.
In spite of this imbalance in Bakhtin’s essay, I am interested in mobilizing the chronotope as a concept that allows me to consider time and space as truly interdependent dimensions. From Bakhtin’s essay, I also gather a fundamental contribution for my argument, namely his exploration of the “chronotope of meeting” as one of the major, even one of the “most universal” (98), chronotopes in the novel. In fact, it is the “chronotopic motif of meeting” that Bakhtin finds as “probably the most important” (97) of the first type of novel in antiquity—the “adventure novel of ordeal”—and which he insists has had lasting influence on the genre (97-9). The chronotope of meeting, or of encounter, as I see it, is also the undercurrent motif of the chronotope of the coast.

An Immanent Coast, Pensamiento meridiano, and Slow Time

Wilson Harris insists on the fundamentally sentient quality of nature, on the life of the earth, on the infirmity of it all. It is true that such is the condition of the earth, despite its all-too powerful appearance of immobility, permanence, fixity. In that condition lies, more or less hidden, the monumental temporality we call “geological time,” which Darwin himself admitted was impossible for humans to grasp fully and, even less, to keep present, so to speak. A time innumerable times longer than the perception our lifespan allows us—even innumerable times longer than the expanded...

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4 See his “Theatre of the Arts.”
5 His discussion “On the Lapse of Time” in The Origin of Species is, significantly, framed by the observation of shorelines and volcanic islands. The relevant section begins with the remark: “It is hardly possible for me even to recall to the reader, who may not be a practical geologist, the facts leading the mind feebly to comprehend the lapse of time. He who can read Sir Charles Lyell’s grand work on the Principles of Geology, which the future historian will recognize as having produced a revolution in natural science, yet does not admit how incomprehensibly vast have been the past periods of time, may at once close this volume” (755, emphasis added). He then goes on to exemplify this “incomprehensibly vast” time thus: “A man must for years examine for himself great piles of superimposed strata, and watch the sea at work grinding down old rocks and making fresh sediment, before he can hope to comprehend anything of the lapse of time, the monuments of which we see around us. It is good to wander along lines of sea-coast, when formed of moderately hard rocks, and mark the process of degradation. . . . He who most closely studies the action of the sea on our shores, will, I believe, be most deeply impressed with the slowness with which rocky coasts are worn away” (755-6, emphasis added). After providing several examples of effects of the sea on the coastline and on volcanic islands, Darwin remarks resignedly, “The consideration of these facts impresses my mind almost in the same manner as does the vain endeavour to grapple with the idea of eternity” (758). The conclusion of the aforementioned section is in awe at the infinite, ungraspable diversity and vibrancy of life contained in the remarkably slow geological time: “I have made these few remarks because it is highly important for us to gain some notion, however imperfect, of the lapse of years. During each of these years, over the whole world, the land and the water has been peopled by hosts of living forms. What an infinite number of generations, which the mind cannot grasp, must have succeeded each other in the long roll of years! Now turn to our richest geological museums, and what a paltry display we behold!” (759) I find this amazement at the world remarkably close to Walcott’s “Adamic” perspective, which forces us to think humbly about our limits and hopefully about the world (759).
perception those who are devoted to history might be able to develop—“geological time” is an extremely slow time.

But the evidence of change, of transformation, is nevertheless manifest, and there are few areas, as Darwin also hints, where it is as striking as it is on coastlines. The coast, consequently, can be approached as an ambit where, (1) it becomes peculiarly possible to perceive the effects of a vast, slow, temporality, and, (2) where a possibility of a time uncontrolled by the dominion of space arises. It is true, for instance, that the increasing construction of “ocean-view” resorts, hotels, apartments, houses, directly threatens that possibility, but it also remains true that no matter how much sand is towed away and how much technical intervention is performed on land and on water, the strip of the encounter of land and water remains unbuildable and, at the same time, recalcitrant to the spatialized time of “progress,” of rampant capitalism. That strip has been, is, and will be, we must remember, under the unstoppable transformation of slow time.

The sand sparkled. . . . The beach is now without cover, without surprises, like a prisoner. Strolling tourists spread their towels on it. Not very many because this is an out-of-the-way spot. Not a single big wave to distract you from the pleasure of lethargy. . . . Beneath the conventional image, the kind one sees developed—or summarized—in publicity films in the United States or Japan, the luxuriously fatal imagine for selling a country (“The Antilles cheap”), beneath this insipid façade, we rediscover the ardor of a land. . . . I catch the quivering of this beach by surprise, this beach where visitors exclaim how beautiful! how typical! and I see that it is burning. For its background, it has the mornes, whose silence can be frightening, the same hills that stand ragged above the Cobée, the bay of Lamentin and the devastated mangrove there. They are trying to fill in this mangrove swamp, zoning it for industry or for major centers of consumption. Yet still the swamp resists. . . . This tie between beach and island, which allows us to take off like marrons, far from the permanent tourist spots, is thus tied into the dis-appearance—a dis-appearing—in which the depths of the volcano circulate. I have always imagined these depths navigate a path beneath the sea in the west and the ocean in the east and that, though we are separated, each in our own Plantation, the now green balls and chains have rolled beneath from one island to the next, weaving shared rivers that we shall open up when it is our time and where we shall take our boats. From where I stand, I see Saint Lucia on the horizon. Thus, step by step, calling up the expanse, I am able to realize this seabow. (Glissant, The Poetics of Relation 205-6, emphasis added)

Moreover, because the western European and U.S. empires were always maritime arrivers, the coast is also, (3) the space where the encounter of different temporalities took place. Such encounter
has systematically been understood as that between a more advanced, developed, and faster
civilization—the imperial one, whichever it may have been—and a not-yet, backward, and slower
civilization—if it is admitted as such. The implicit operation is, of course, an *a priori* hierarchization of
temporalities that subsequently deploys the massive machinery—epistemological, hermeneutical,
physical, psychical—of empire in the name of a self-ascribed superiority, a sense of moral duty, an
urgent religious calling, or a combination of those.

Through a discussion of the spatiotemporal regime produced by capitalist coloniality, we will
see that all three coastal arrangements—including the last one if understood as a true “encounter”
with the other on the part of both “sides”—could come to constitute a threat to the dominant mode
of production. Therefore, the coast remains a particularly intense chronotope that, from the
perspective from without discussed in Chapter 1, must either be superseded, repressed, neglected, for
its dogged remembering of the traumatic encounter, or dominated, subjugated, consumed, for its
reluctance to surrender its vast temporality to the sped up time of “progress” and “modernization.”
The epistemological question arises, therefore, whether there is another way to relate to and
understand the coast, and, along with it, the island? Is there an immanent way to do so?

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Very little material seeks explicitly to confront the coast and, along the way, the questions
that drive the following discussion. A notable exception is the work of Franco Cassano, particularly
the essays collected in *Pensamiento meridiano*. The book was published originally in 1996, an important
date for, as Claudio Fogu explains, the end of the twentieth century was a time when Italian
intellectuals were deeply engaged in thinking about the Mediterranean philosophically and politically
in the context of Italy’s fraught relationship with “Europe.” Fogu explains that the Mediterranean
Sea was a protagonist of the debate, as throughout the twentieth century, both Italian fascists and

6 For more on this, see Dainotto.
lifers had mobilized the powerful and enduring ideology of the Roman Empire’s *mare nostrum*—whose importance, in turn, for western European imperial projects will be discussed in Chapter 5—to problematic results. Cassano’s work intervenes in such sociopolitical debate, which coexisted with the late capitalist ideology of “Mediterraneism.” Within that context, Cassano’s work is assessed by Fagu as a “description of southern thought and an exemplary act of anti-Mediterraneism” (“*Mare Nostrum to Mare Aliorum*” 13-4).

In his essays, Cassano sets the stage for an intersection between the South, the sea, the ocean, the coast, and the time of modernization. It is important to stress, however, that the concern with the coast, the sea, and the ocean is an effect of the concern with producing a thought that understands the South on its own terms and as simultaneous to the processes associated with so-called “modernization.”

The task, as Cassano understands it, is to think modernity in light of the South rather than the South in light of modernity. The latter, he contends, produces analyses that perpetuate a timeline where the South is systematically treated as a function of the North, as the object of the true subject of thought, and, therefore, as a chronically “not yet,” a space consigned to the past. His “southern thinking” is described as follows:

Un pensamiento del Sur, un Sur que piensa el Sur, quiere decir ganar la mayor autonomía respecto de esta gigantesca mutación, fijar criterios de juicio distintos en cuanto a los hoy dominantes, pensar otra clase dirigente, otra gramática de la pobreza y de la riqueza, pensar la dignidad de otra forma de vida. Significa no pensar más el Sur como periferia perdida y anónima del imperio, como lugares donde todavía no ha sucedido nada y donde se repite mal y tarde lo que celebra su estreno en otro lado. . . . En su óptica invertida, las patologías meridionales no nacen de un déficit de modernidad, sino que, más aún, son el síntoma de una infección nacida en el centro del sistema, los indicios de la nueva y unidimensional ferocidad del ‘turbo-capitalismo.’ (9-10)

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7 Indeed, insofar as Cassano wants to understand the relations between South and North, “meridiano” refers not so much to midday, but to the longitudinal measure of the Earth.

8 “A thought of the South, a South that thinks the South, means acquiring as much autonomy as possible from that gigantic mutation; setting up different criteria for judgment to those dominant today; thinking about another ruling class, another grammar of poverty and wealth; thinking about the dignity of another way of life. It means not to think anymore about the South as a lost and anonymous periphery of empire, as places where nothing has taken place yet, and where that which is celebrated as new somewhere else is repeated badly and late. . . . In its inverted optics, southern pathologies are not born out of a deficit of modernity, but instead constitute the symptom of an infection born at the very center of the system, the sign of a new and one-dimensional ferocity of ‘turbo-capitalism.’”
*Pensamiento Meridiano*, therefore, argues for a claim of the South such as it is, as subject and as present, for: “Ninguna sabiduría puede surgir de la remoción de los desechos. Es de ellos, de su acumulación, de la mierda industrial del mundo que resulta necesario partir de nuevo si se quiere pensar en el futuro” (19). From that general project, Cassano moves to a more localized consideration of the Mediterranean by means of the coast, the sea, and the ocean, understood as philosophical (in addition to social, economic, political, cultural) problems.

Although Cassano does not employ the concept of the chronotope, his essays, through and on the coast, adumbrate at once a different space and a different time than those of capitalism and its attendant processes of “modernization.” The first consideration of time Cassano insists on is, as discussed above, the South as present rather than past. He identifies two poles in the Mediterranean-as-product-of-modernity rather than as its backward neighbor: the (legal) touristic paradise and the (illegal) underground economies and mafia hells. These, as Cassano understands them, constitute the tragic evidence of a South that seeks to catch up with the global economy precisely because it understands itself to be “traditional” and “backward.”

The second consideration of time to be found in Cassano that is crucial for the following discussion is the affirmation of a slow time he perceives to be in place already, although threatened, in the Mediterranean. Walking slowly, taking pauses and being silent, Cassano argues, must be

9 “No wisdom can emerge from the removal of waste. If one wants to think about the future, it is necessary to depart from waste, from its accumulation, from the world’s industrial filth.”

10 It must be pointed out that it is not altogether clear what exactly Cassano imagines the relationship to be between the specificity of the Mediterranean and the generality of “the South.” Sometimes he seems to use these terms almost interchangeably, as if what he says is the case in the Mediterranean is also necessarily the case elsewhere in the South. At other times, he seems to insist on the peculiarity of the Mediterranean, especially with respect to its geographical configurations.

11 In a remarkable resonance of Cassano’s defense of these needs against identitarian claims, Walcott writes: “That there will always be abrupt eruptions of defiance is almost irrelevant itself, because the impulse of such eruptions, their political philosophy, remains simplistic and shallow. That all blacks are beautiful is an enervating statement, that all blacks are brothers more a reprimand than a charter, that the people must have power almost their death wish, for the real power of this time is silent. Art cannot last long in this shale. It crumbles like those slogans, fragments and shards of a historical fault. Power now becomes increasingly divided and tribal when it is based on genetics. It leads to the righteous secondary wars of the Third World, to the self-maiming of civil wars, the frontier divisions of third-rate, Third World powers, manipulated or encouraged by the first powers. Genocides increase, tribal wars increase and become increasingly hallucinatory and remote.
defended against the increasing speed of capitalism. He contends such slowness permits a different and, according to his argument, better, relationship to the world than capitalistic turbo. It is, indeed, an altogether different kind of thinking:

Este pensamiento lento es el único pensamiento, el otro es el pensamiento que sirve para hacer funcionar la máquina, que aumenta su velocidad, que se ilusiona con poder hacerlo hasta el infinito. El pensamiento lento ofrecerá refugio a los prófugos del pensamiento veloz, cuando la máquina comience a temblar cada vez más y ningún saber logre apagar el temblor. El pensamiento lento es la más antigua construcción antisísmica. (19)\(^\text{12}\)

It is a thinking defended in the name of a constant encounter with the other that refuses the “Northern” bent on annihilating her, be that by means of so-called “integration,” by outright slaughter, or by demanding that she be entirely visible so she can be “understood”: “Ante la monocromía de la velocidad, los mil colores que se pueden percibir solamente cuando la vida se hace más lenta; ante la incontinencia del ‘tiempo real,’ el valor de la distancia física y cultural del otro, de la incomprensibilidad de su orgullo, de la dificultad de comprenderlo, del riesgo de acercársele” (11).\(^\text{13}\)

The human figure walking (versus the human figure driving a car) becomes a symbol of sorts – “Pensar a pie” (“thinking on foot”)– of slow time’s difference.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\)“This slow thought is the only thought; the other one makes the machine work, augments its velocity, hopes that it will be able to do so infinitely. Slow thought will offer refuge to fast thought’s fugitives when the machine starts to tremble increasingly and no knowledge is able to shut down the tremor. Slow thought is the oldest anti-seismic construction.”

\(^{13}\)“In the face of velocity’s monochromatism, the thousand colors that can only be perceived when life becomes slower; in the face of ‘real time’s’ incontinence, the value of the physical and cultural distance from the other, of the incomprehensibility of his pride, of the difficulty of understanding him, of the risk of coming near him.” This refusal of absolute visibility and comprehension (and the related modesty it asks of us in our relationship with knowledge and with others), is subliminally related to Édouard Glissant’s insistence on the “right to opacity” (see Caribbean Discourse, especially 154–5, Poetics of Relation, especially 111–20, and Poetic Intention, especially 161–8), a right that today, with the ever expanding regime of “visualization” and “transparency” reproduced by Facebook, “reality TV” and other such phenomena, is deeply hounded.

\(^{14}\)Lefebvre makes a similar claim in the context of his critique of “abstract space:” “The person who sees and knows only to see, the person who draws and knows only how to put marks on a sheet of paper, the person who drives around and knows only how to drive a car –all contribute in their way to the mutilation of a space which is everywhere sliced up. And they all complement one another: the driver is concerned only with steering himself to his destination, and in looking about sees only what he needs to see for that purpose; he thus perceives only his route, which has been materialized, mechanized and technicized, and he sees it from one angle only –that of its functionality: speed, readability, facility. Someone who knows only how to see ends up, moreover, seeing badly” (313).
One of the necessary pauses Cassano defends is constituted by the sea, to which he attributes an “interruption of the dominion of identity” and the capacity to “host excision” (30). The sea poses a limit to land, with “its obsession with fixity, security and appropriation” (30). It simultaneously invites escape, flight: “un horizonte que nos llama justamente porque huye. Es de esta línea de fuga que nace esa inquietud conocida cuando uno llega solo a una tierra de mar: cada atracadero es la tentación de zarpar, de irse, de perseguir la línea utópica del horizonte sin poder aferrarla . . .” (20).

Cassano is much more interested in affirming the need of both uprootedness from the hold of identitarian and territorializing regimes and re-rootedness of new relations. The sea is, therefore, an ambit that hosts such constant dialectic, as can be seen in its fluctuation between water and land, in its invitation to flee and, also, to return. The coast-as-space constitutes, according to this argument, a third term that is, at the same time, both land and water and neither. It is an “in-between” term that is neither familiar nor alien, limited nor limitless. The coast is a “Measure” that can only function as such in relation to the sea.

In order to prove this point philosophically (and to defend a crucial link between the sea and philosophy itself), Cassano proceeds to establish a tradition inaugurated in ancient Greek philosophy:

Hay entonces un aspecto de la filosofía que la vuelve hija del mar griego, pero también hay un aspecto que remueve y borra este origen, un aspecto que se hará cada vez más fuerte, movido por el deseo de sustraer sus propios resultados a la precariedad surgida del alternarse de tierra y mar, de la duplicidad de la costa. No es casual que Platón mire con desconfianza el mar y la transformación de los immobili opliti en marinos: el mar impide la clausura del círculo, aun del pulido y reflexivo de la filosofía. La polis no puede ser pensada sin la inquietud y la compleja fidelidad que nacen de la naturaleza doble de quien vive en la costa. Sin el mar, el poder corre el riesgo de convertirse rápidamente en patrimonio en las manos del déspota o de los filósofos; la ruptura del horizonte producida por el mar impide al mismo tiempo que cada saber se paralice en un pensamiento definitivo y que el poder se fije en la

15 “a horizon that calls upon us precisely because it flees. From this line of flight emerges that well-known restlessness one feels when arriving alone in a land of sea: each mooring is a temptation to set sail, to leave, to pursue the horizon’s utopic line without being able to seize it.” The rather problematic distinction Cassano makes in his essays between the sea and the ocean will be discussed in Chapter 5.

16 This, it seems to me, constitutes another resonance with Glissant, who maintains that what he calls the “detour” must be followed by a “retour” (see his Caribbean Discourse and Chapter 5 for more on this).
inmovilidad del patrimonio personal. En Grecia, la filosofía encuentra su razón pero también su límite, y descubre que es parte de algo que la precede y la explica. (31)

He then counterpoises Greek philosophy with that of Heidegger and Nietzsche. Both are considered generously, but found to be lacking insofar as they are bent to polarizing thinking: the former toward the land and its fixity and the latter toward the ocean and its uprootedness. Against both these poles, Cassano upholds the figure of Ulysses as the paradigmatic example of that dialectic of fleeing and returning that is provided by the sea:

Aquí está el don del mar, no en una metafísica del más allá que al final solamente puede naufragar, no en una eterna persecución del Occidente, sino en su conferir libertad a la tierra, no en su negar las patrias sino en el obligarlas a que se hagan elegir, a ser electivas. Es este ir y venir, este ir-volviendo y este volver-partiendo, este partir no para escapar sino teniendo confianza en el nostos (retorno), sino también su contrario, el estar en otro lugar cuando se está en casa, esta que ha sido vista largamente como una enfermedad la posible solución, esta gramática doble y antinómica del confín atravesado . . . (55-6)

Cassano, however, remains oblivious to the thoroughly imperialistic bent in the Ulysses character and in The Odyssey as a whole. The memorable episode with the Cyclops, for instance, exemplifies the encounters Ulysses’ indomitable dialectic between leaving and returning makes viable, but humbleness with respect to himself and the capacities of his knowledge is not exactly what characterizes The Odyssey’s protagonist (214-29). Furthermore, the others, such as, again, the cyclop

17 “There is, then, an aspect of philosophy that makes her the Greek Sea’s daughter, but there is also an aspect of it that removes and erases such origin, an aspect that will become increasingly stronger, moved by the desire to protect philosophy’s results from the precariousness proper to the alternation between land and sea, to the coast’s duplicity. It’s not by chance that Plato distrusts the sea and the transformation of the immobili opiliti into sailors: the sea prevents the closure of the circle, even of philosophy’s polished and reflective one. The polis cannot be thought about without the restlessness and complex loyalty that are borne out of the double nature of those who live on the coast. Without the sea, power runs the risk of quickly becoming patrimony in the despot’s or philosopher’s hands; the horizon’s rupture produced by the sea prevents, at the same time, that each knowledge gets paralyzed as a definitive one and that power gets fixed in the immobility of personal patrimony. In Greece, philosophy finds its motive but also its limit, and discovers that it is part of something that precedes and explains it.”

18 “Here is the gift of the sea: not in a metaphysics of the beyond that can only, in the end, shipwreck, not in an eternal pursuit of the West, but rather in its conferring freedom to land. The gift is not in denying homelands but in forcing them to be elective. This coming and going; this leaving-returning and returning-departing; this leaving not to escape but having faith in the nostos (return), in its opposite; this being elsewhere while being at home; this that has for so long been thought about as an illness, is actually a possible solution—the double and antinomic grammar of the crossed confín . . .” The reference to the “confín” is important insofar as it signals several things at once (there is no English word that appropriately contains all these connotations): the horizon; a place far away (as in “at the ends of the earth”); a frontier or border (as in the frontier between two countries); or a limit or boundary (as in the bounds of a discipline). If the sea is a “confín” it is all these things at once, with the crucial implication that the farthest place, the frontier and limit of the sea is always the horizon, which is also a non-frontier, non-limit.
Polyphemus, are more often than not vanquished for the sake of Ulysses’ projects and survival. The sexual and class politics at stake in *The Odyssey*, where the possibility of the coastal dialectic is reserved for a rich male figure who, incidentally, encounters women—others that he is both seduced and repulsed by and whom he ultimately has to abandon if he is to survive, are also elided from view in Cassano’s celebration of Ulysses. The Euro- and male-centric slant in Cassano’s appreciation of philosophy, the dawn of which he reserves, in line with the standard canon, to ancient Greece, and which he links with the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche, also begs the question whether there was not a philosophy tied to the sea in other ambits of the Mediterranean itself—given that that is the area Cassano focuses on—considering the profuse diversity of civilizations that have lived and died on its archipelagoes and on its coasts.

In conversation with Cassano’s nevertheless urgent and inspiring work, it is imperative, I suggest, to imagine a creative perspective of the coast and the island that departs from the wretched of the earth. A start can be found, as we will see in the following chapter, in Caribbean literature.

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19 And also in his characterization of the sea as “se da a todos como una muchacha fácil e infiel” (“giving itself over to everyone as an unfaithful girl sleeping around”)

20 For examples of this, see Dainotto, Chambers and, especially, Marvejevic. See also *Mediterranean Passages*, a collection of primary texts that includes several examples.

21 Cassano elaborates on his proposal, explicates the genealogy of his thinking on the dialectic between sea and land, and discusses in more detail the Italian context in his interview with Claudio Fogu, entitled “Il pensiero meridiano oggi: Intervista e dialoghi con Franco Cassano.” Another thinker who has considered the coast as a problem for thought is the historian of the Pacific, Greg Dening. In his book *Islands and Beaches*, a very self-conscious Dening structures the history of the Marquesas in quite a heterodox fashion. The book’s format is the first striking element: it is constituted by a counterpoint between chapters that reconstruct—in many instances in an engaging, lyrical style—the history of the archipelago and shorter, reflective chapters on problems haunting the historian, such as how to understand without understanding?; how to write a history while maintaining and respecting the subject’s opacity?; how to mobilize the tools provided by established academic disciplines against the assumptions of those very disciplines?; how to write history with the consciousness of a fundamental *silenio*, for, no matter how hard the historian tries, history is dead insofar as what can be recounted departs from the discourse of those who precipitated death in the first place, insofar as death, rather than the “eternal life” promised by missionaries, was the catalyst of change, of history?… The keen self-awareness of the book’s structure allows Dening to provide a history that justly accounts for the natives without idealizing them and demonizing the colonizers. Islands and beaches are the structuring axes for the chapters’ counterpoint and the concepts that allow Dening to make sense of the archipelago’s history. Because the historian understands the beach and the island as metaphors, he develops the concept of “beach crossing” as a metaphor that allows him to account for three important things at once: (1) both colonizers and natives performed and participated in encounters on the beach, but the unequal conditions—the most basic and profound of which was the misrecognition of the metaphors that sustained their cultures—under which such encounters took place must be part of any discourse that tries to historicize them: both sets of groups were violent, but the people who arrived from Europe and the U.S. could, among other things, “take possession,” construct ships and houses, declare certain things as sins and others as savagery (without any self-consciousness, of course), and insert a notion of law that then proceeded to make basic customs outlaw without being subject to any kind of accountability, without having to
The Time-Space of Capitalist Coloniality; the Time-Space of the Coast

Cassano’s work, as we have seen, allows us to begin a reflection on and affirmation of the coast, a land-seascape especially associated, in history and myth, with insularity. It also allows us to link the coast to a reflection on capitalism’s time and its potential subversion in archipelagic ambits such as the Mediterranean. In other words, an approach such as his enables the possibility of a creative and affirmative time-space of the coast, and, subsequently, of the island. But in order to grasp more fully what this possibility entails, a step back must be taken to consider in more detail the problem of space and time under capitalist coloniality (the former of which is not dealt with explicitly by Cassano beyond its specific instantiation as the “natural space” of sea and land).

Space

The weird, raggedly inaccurate, infantile maps of the old explorers, in school, were more fearful than comic. The wrongly real outlines were perhaps more terrifying than their blank confession ‘Terra Incognita.’ If what they knew was so inaccurate, how accurate was what they did not? Not Atlantis and all that, or leviathans and sea serpents, but a world without edges, a flat world without edges, giving us two unapproachable concepts –Terra Incognita and Space. Savages have no such edges, no urgency about topography. Short on such ego, they do not try to contain a detailed world whole in their heads, except as metaphor, except as the word ‘world.’

Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 51-2

As was briefly mentioned in the first and second chapters, Henri Lefebvre’s wide-ranging *The Production of Space* (1974) is useful for a discussion of space as a problematic and, more specifically, for a discussion of the capitalist production of space. For the purposes of this project, Lefebvre’s work will be deployed primarily because of: (1) its analysis of space at once on the physical, mental, and social spheres (with the understanding that these are distinct yet indissoluble); (2) its exploration of the process capitalism has unleashed for the production of its own space (with care about the consequences after their departure; (2) in contrast, for instance, with the case of many Caribbean islands and the regime of the plantation, the imperial projects in the Pacific had much more arbitrary, haphazard, unplanned, transitory qualities: the Pacific was swarmed by traders, sandalwood businessmen, whalers, missionaries, sailors, admirals, military men in temporary enclaves, among others, who came and went constantly, not only because they wanted, but especially because they could; and (3) the emergence of the figure of the “beachcomber,” the one who ceases to be from either culture, the mediator, the creole (though Dening reminds us that the structural differences were so powerful that the beachcombers who were “originally” from the U.S. or Europe had much more possibilities of escape and redemption).
the understanding that every mode of production produces its own space, but that the capitalist one is peculiar insofar as it has, increasingly and at the same time, made space the most autonomous it has ever been while at the same time seeking to subjugate and slice it up more than ever; that is, it has made space a “concrete abstraction” not unlike money and commodities);\textsuperscript{22} and (3) its insistence throughout on producing a theory of the production of space that recognizes its intimate entanglement with time (although it is definitely space what Lefebvre focuses on).\textsuperscript{23}

Lefebvre’s dialectical analysis of space as produced by capitalism is, like Cassano’s take on the coast, dependent on a triad rather than on a binarism. He distinguishes between “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “representational spaces.” The first of these is space-as-perceived: “The spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (38). The second is space-as-conceived: “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers . . . This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (38-9). The third is space-as-lived: “space as directly \textit{lived} through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ . . . This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (39). In Lefebvre’s rather loose historical genealogy, pre-capitalist “spatial practice” was \textit{absolute}; (early) capitalist was \textit{historical}; and (late) capitalist is \textit{abstract}:\textsuperscript{24}

1. \textit{Absolute space}:

\textsuperscript{22}“The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it” (26).

\textsuperscript{23}As far as I understand this, Lefebvre’s book is concerned with responding not only to various traditions of western philosophy he deems inappropriate, but more specifically to a Marxist tradition of thought that has focused much more on the capitalist treatment of time than it has on space, perhaps as a result of the capitalist \textit{subjugation} of time to space (spatialized time) those very commentators identify. I will return to the question of time under capitalism below.

\textsuperscript{24}I have supplied the very general prefixes “pre,” “early,” and “late” capitalism to the periodization performed by Lefebvre, who is not, to my mind, clear or rigorous enough on what modality of capitalism he is referring to, although he does insist that these types of spaces do not necessarily correspond to “widely accepted periodizations” (48). The problem, still, is that he does not explicate what those periodizations are or why they are not in correspondence.
was made up of fragments of nature located at sites which were chosen for their intrinsic qualities (cave, mountaintop, spring, river), but whose very consecration ended up by stripping them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness. Thus natural space was soon populated by political forces. . . . A sanctified inwardness set itself up in opposition to the outwardness in nature, yet at the same time it echoed and restored that outwardness. . . . Those who produced space (peasants or artisans) were not the same people as managed it, as used it to organize social production and reproduction . . . (48)

2. **Historical space**:25

[...]

3. **Abstract space**:26

in becoming independent of that process [productive activity becoming independent of reproduction], labour fell prey to abstraction, whence abstract social labour —and abstract space— ... [it] took over from historical space, which nevertheless lived on, gradually losing its force, as substratum or underpinning of representational spaces. Abstract space functions 'objectally,' as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships ... Formal and quantitative, it erases distinctions, as much those which derive from nature an (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity). ... The dominant form of space, that of centres of wealth and power, endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates (i.e. peripheral spaces), and it seeks, often by violent means, to reduce the obstacles and resistance it encounters there . . . (49)

Within absolute space, Lefebvre claims, one can already perceive the seeds of a new space to be produced, namely differential space.

Capitalism, according to Lefebvre, not only appropriates space but seeks to dominate it—and, in the same movement, to dominate time through its spatializations.26 The import of The

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25 I am especially intrigued by the taxonomy Lefebvre chooses here. “Historical space” refers primarily to the space produced by the inauguration of “the plane of accumulation” (218), which makes, in one stroke, the capitalist mode of production the inauguration of history. Beyond the supreme narrowness and, along the way, ethnocentrism, inherent in that conception of history, such a move seems to obfuscate more than illuminate, especially if one departs from the conviction, as Lefebvre does, that space is never given but rather produced. Isn’t that then, necessarily and at all moments, a historical process?

26
Production of Space is located, primarily, on abstract space, insofar as Lefebvre understands the present (late twentieth century) to be dominated by that type of space in tandem with an intensification and extension of a capitalism that can fittingly be described as increasingly “abstract.” This modality of space is governed by three formants: (1) the geometric formant (space as reference; reduction of three-dimensional realities to two-dimensional plans, maps, and the like); (2) the optical (or visual) formant (the complicity fostered in western thought between seeing, intelligibility, transparency and truth; the sheer domination of sight over all other senses, which reduces everything to an image and renders all objects passive—“By the time this process is complete, space has no social existence independently of an intense, aggressive and repressive visualization” [286]); and (3) the phallic formant (what provides a “truly full object—an objectal ‘absolute’” to the rendering of everything into “mere images or transitional objects;” it also makes the orientation of space primarily perpendicular) (285-7). Abstract space is also characterized by the goal of homogeneity, by its constant effort to “render homogeneous” despite the fact that it is “multiform” (287).

Lefebvre even claims that revolutionary forces—and especially the French Revolution—have not managed to produce their own space but have actually braced the capitalist regime of space:

“Also among [the French] revolution’s effects, direct and indirect, was the definitive constitution of abstract space, with its phallic, visual and geometric formants” (290). Still, an appropriation of space and, in so doing, a production of space for different purposes (against the geometric, visual and phallic formants; with the creation of a “second nature”)

and for the highlighting of such differences must be the project of any revolution, Lefebvre claims, for “‘Change life!’ ‘Change

26 “But it was space which regulated time, because the movement of merchandise, of money and of nascent capital, presupposed places of production, boats and carts for transport, ports, storehouses, banks and money-brokers” (278).

27 “Space as locus of production, as itself product and production, is both the weapon and the sign of this struggle. If it is to be carried through to the end—there is in any case no way of turning back—this gigantic task now calls for the immediate production or creation of something other than nature: a second, different, or new nature, so to speak. This means the production of space, urban space, both as a product and as a work, in the sense in which art created works. If this project fails, the failure will be total, and the consequences of that are impossible to foresee” (109-10).
society!’ These precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space” (59); and “Space’s investment—the production of space—has nothing incidental about it: it is a matter of life and death” (417).

Lefebvre’s entire project, however, appertains specifically to land; it is a fundamentally landed argument. Nowhere are we to find a sustained engagement with the sea and the ocean. Lefebvre himself makes that clear through an indirect remark:

Space itself is never produced in the sense that a kilogram of sugar or a yard of cloth is produced. Nor is it an aggregate of the places or locations of such products as sugar, what or cloth. Does it then come into being after the fashion of a superstructure? Again, no. It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces—but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an a priori condition of those institutions and the state which presides over them. Is space a social relationship? Certainly—but one which is inherent to property relationships (especially the ownership of the earth, of land) and also closely bound up with the forces of production (which impose a form on that earth or land); here we see the polyvalence of social space, its ‘reality’ at once formal and material. Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it. (85)

Does this mean that the sea and the ocean are taken as resolutely natural spaces, immune to the capitalist production of space? Or are they more simply—and inexplicably—forgotten altogether along with the history of European coloniality in the Atlantic? The passage reveals a blindness regarding the central importance of the ocean and of coloniality for the (re)production of precisely those landed property relationships in European soil. It is also blind with respect to the fact that capitalism has subjected the ocean, historically, into becoming perhaps the most important “network of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy,” which both “fashion space and are determined by it.”

As far as I can tell, the only instance where Lefebvre touches upon the sea is the example he provides of the Mediterranean as the “vacationland festival” of Europe, where he assigns to the (Mediterranean) sea, along with “sun, festival, waste, expense,” the category of “representational
space” (58-9). But I take it that, just as much as land, the sea and the ocean are not just “representational spaces” but also “spaces of representation,” both of which are part of a “spatial practice.” Lefebvre’s omission of the ocean is striking insofar as capitalism’s spatial practice, since the dawn of the “sphere of accumulation,” is deeply and intimately dependent on, as Steinberg insists and we will discuss more fully in Chapter 5, the production of ocean-space. As has been amply demonstrated, European imperialism in the Atlantic, and insular spaces specifically, were crucial for the process Marxist thought has come to call “primitive accumulation.” That is, if Lefebvre had been less concerned with the particularity of European soil and more concerned with a bigger world (despite his dogged insistence on the need of accounting for the production of space at a global level and for the need of a unitary theory), he not only would have reconsidered assigning to this moment the category of “historical” but would have also “deteritorialized” significantly his argument.

When performed, however, the operation of deteritorializing the argument of The Production of Space allows us to mobilize its taxonomy in new directions. The legendary coast of the imperial cry “my land!” was, at the moment of the encounter and the subsequent history of colonization,

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28 The example of Venice in the second chapter does not say anything of significance with respect to the sea itself.
29 Carl Schmitt’s book Land and Sea is another instance of a discussion of the history of space, especially with respect to the relationship between land and sea. Although the history Schmitt constructs is intimately related to the development of capitalism, he does not even use the concept nor is he, subsequently, interested in considering the production of space. For Schmitt, space is a given and is more or less equivalent to what Lefebvre would call “natural space.” Schmitt also has no interest in considering the possibility that space might be a question outside the History of Europe. Indeed, his claims about “planetary revolutions of space” with respect to space are necessarily originated, developed and broken down in the European ambit. From a long, earth-bound, nomos (that included, ironically, so-called thalassocracies such as those of ancient Greece and early Venice, which, according to Schmitt, looked at the sea from the land and were therefore not truly “children of the sea”), there occurred what Schmitt calls a “planetary revolution of space” whereby humanity turned to the sea. The seed of this revolution had been growing inside Europe, but found its apotheosis after 1492 (this date is only important for Europe and Europeans; there is no exploration at all of how this might all relate to the Americas). The country that was to become the leader of the monumental change in the world’s nomos was, of course, England, to which Schmitt attributes the change of perspective from land toward sea. The change is so radical, according to Schmitt, that one can say there are two islands of England, an old, land-based one and a new, sea-borne one. His description of the historical development of England (metaphorized, interestingly, as “fish-whale” and “leviathan”) from sheep-breeders to children of the sea, and, finally, to machine-makers is, albeit simplistic (the book itself is framed as a story for Schmitt’s daughter), does allow for the conclusion that it was the turning to the sea that made the Industrial Revolution (i.e. industrial capitalism) possible. After this monumental revolution in space determined humanity’s nomos for several centuries, Schmitt speculates that the 20th century was witnessing the beginnings of a new shift, especially with the invention of the airplane and the dominance of the element of air (after land and water), or, hints Schmitt, perhaps more accurately, fire. This paradigm shift commenced with the regime of machines inaugurated with the Industrial Revolution, which made socially meaningless all the figures related to the sea (whale-hunters [to whom Schmitt accords a huge historical role—that of the “planetary revolution of space”], pirates, sailors, privateers, etc.).
produced as, at once, an “absolute,” “historical,” and “abstract” space. It was a site imagined as an open door whereby capitalism might penetrate (phallic connotation intended); where it might experiment, on all levels, with the appropriation and domination of nature and, along with it, with the appropriation and domination of bodies as it established the gap between those who produced the space and those who owned, administered, controlled and exploited its yields. It was an ambit where European powers developed and perfected the subjugation of space to the two-dimensions of maps for further exploration and colonization and of plans for the clearing of land and the establishment of plantation economies;30 where the regime of visualization was especially tinkered with; where the most brutal form of abstract labor, slavery, was established on its most massive scale. Today, as we have seen, the domination of nature and the intensification of abstract space in its three formants (geometric, visual, and phallic) is, as Lefebvre himself hints at with the initial example of the Mediterranean for the European ambit, especially palpable in coastal areas (almost) swamped by the tourist industry. Again, the continuities between these types of spaces are remarkable.

But the coast, that strip that constitutes a third element (both and neither water and land) was and is, still, a natural space in the sense in which Lefebvre describes it at the beginning of his book’s second chapter: it is a work rather than a product; a space of creation rather than of production. And perhaps because the sea and the ocean are as well, it was impossible for Lefebvre to see how they had been, like land, also produced as peculiar spaces by capitalism. The point to be made is that the coast has been both produced by capitalism (or, rather, by capitalist coloniality) and has also remained fundamentally resistant to that process. It is a space with immense potentialities for creation both as a natural work and, with a human appropriation other than the capitalist one, as a “second nature,” a “differential space.”

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30 For explorations on the long-held intimate links between map-making and imperialism, see, for instance, essays in The Imperial Map; Mignolo’s The Darker Side of the Renaissance; Padrón’s “A Sea of Denial” and The Spacious Word; and essays in The New Nature of Maps. The second section of Predrag Matvejevic’s Mediterranean, entitled “Maps,” also notes briefly the supreme importance, for those in power, of maps, which were high-priced documents long kept in secret. On the clearing of lands and the establishment of plantation regimes, see Chapter 1.
This irreducible, ungovernable, indomitable, quality of the coast—an unstable strip where an encounter with the ever receding horizon, the boundary that is not a boundary, takes place, and where a desire for fleeing and for returning is relentlessly nourished—is what fascinates Cassano and what makes many Caribbean literary and philosophical texts strong proponents of a “submarine connection,” of imagination and creation despite and against history.

**Time**

*When curtains of rain close off the ocean and we look out of windows on interminable grayness, the leaves’ beads beaten down, something heavy and cold as a frog sits on the heart, and if it goes on long enough we doubt the return of the sun, just for longer periods men begin to doubt the fact of spring.*

The extension of time doesn’t matter so much as its intensity. Derek Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 55, emphasis added

Marxist thinkers have been concerned with the question of time within the capitalist mode of production for some time now. For Marx, diachronic analyses that seek to begin in the “origins” while assuming that it is possible to wrest oneself free from one’s present standpoint will necessarily fail. Such mode of diachrony tends to conceptualize history in terms of epochs that follow each other chronologically, the assumption being that there are discernible breaks between them. These accounts cannot consider all the elements involved, simultaneously, in a given mode of production, precisely because the former take the latter to be a strictly differentiated, unique, same-to-itself entity. More crucially, such model is not able to lay bare the contradictions of the present, capitalist system, since it will necessarily result in tautologies and apologies of capitalism as the “best possible world,” and as the most faithful embodiment of “natural laws.” The result of the conception of capitalism as a “natural law” is that “there has been history, but there is no longer any.”

31 Not coincidentally, this is the privileged mode of analysis performed by the bourgeois political economists Marx so consistently criticizes.

31 Quoted from “The Poverty of Philosophy” in Carvounas 86.
The dialectical idea that “humans both inherit material conditions and create their own
conditions is for Marx the secret to understanding the relation between past, present, and future”
(Carvounas 84). Marx does not imagine the past as a static, completely divorced-from-the-present
entity. In order to consider the past, one has to resolutely situate oneself in the present and analyze
the former retrospectively. The result is a present necessarily full of, but not identical to, the past.

An equivalent logic applies to the future. In *Capital*, Marx continuously adduces that the
present contains the elements that can be transformed into preconditions of the future. Prophetic
moments, such as the following towards the end of Volume I, attest to this:

> [T]here also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers,
and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist mode of
production. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which
has flourished alongside and under it. The centralization of the means of production and the
socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist
integument. This integument is burst asunder. . . . The expropriators are expropriated. (92)

For Marx, the project of those who concentrate their outlooks on the future as a radically distinct
sphere from the present –i.e. those who wish to negate the present as it is or “leap out of time”
(Carvounas 75), such as the utopian socialists Marx admires but nevertheless finds at fault– will also
necessarily fail. The systemic analysis Marx proposes is situated in the present of the capitalist mode
of production, and it is within it, in turn suffused with the past, that Marx finds the project for the
future.

All of this is not to say that the horrors of past and present will find themselves transfigured
in the future. In fact, Marx argues that “those who wish to change the world must ‘let the dead bury
the dead,’ and create their poetry not from the past but from the future instead” (Carvounas 84). The
construction of a better future needs a sense of turning its back on the past, but this must be done –
perhaps can only be done– if the way we imagine the future is grounded in the present.

As it surely has become evident by now, such an account of Marx’s engagement with the
question of past, present, and future has, willy-nilly, transformed into a position regarding history,
which, although intricately connected with a conception of time, is not, as Walcott reminds us in *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Time itself. In that sense, Agamben deplores historical materialism’s inability to “change time” and to match its powerful conception of history with an equivalent transformation of the manner in which time is understood in the West (91). Still, we will see that, according to Casarino, there is a dimension in Marx’s thought, especially in the *Grundrisse*, regarding the fundamental relation between time and money fashioned by capitalism that concerns time in itself, rather than only in its historical manifestations.

Capitalism renders time empty and homogeneous precisely to the extent that its primordial fantasy is the absolute conquest of time, or, indeed the latter’s annihilation. To arrive at such an intensification of necrophilic desire, capitalism has deployed long-standing western traditions of temporal thought. According to both Agamben and Negri, two currents, which despite their differences end up with the same result, have dominated the western conceptualization of time. Both the Graeco-Roman conception of a circular time and the Judeo-Christian conception of a linear time privilege the instant by negating it: “in both cases, time is imaged as a homogeneous and quantifiable succession of instants in which each instant is understood as always fleeting and hence as inconsequential in and of itself, or, put differently, as acquiring significance only insofar as it negates itself” (Casarino “Time Matters” 220). The result, as Casarino also observes, is a perpetual deferral of time (i.e. a constant negation of the present), in which humanity is always waiting for its redemption.

Our fundamental struggle with time, then, manifests itself as a constant “spatializing, measuring, and quantifying [of] it” (“Time Matters” 220). Of course, one can then see that, “as Agamben implies at one point in his essay, such a spatialized, measurable, quantifiable, homogeneous, empty, and teleological time found its apotheosis with capitalist modernity and its purest expression in the specular and complementary temporalities of industrial wage labor and of bourgeois historicism” (“Time Matters” 220). Indeed, if one replaces the word “time” for the word “money” in the previous
quote, then the dictum “Time is money!” acquires its clearest meaning and renders perversely visible capitalism’s use of time and its desire to engulf it completely within its dynamics.

The expansion and intensification of capitalism has therefore resulted in a long chain of equations that fundamentally concerns (spatialized, quantified, homogeneous, empty…) time, and which one could summarize as follows: time of the instant = time of money = time of circulation = time of consumerism = time of debt. Throughout this chain, the constant attempt is “to annul time by deferring it so as to produce capital for capital” (Casarino, “Time Matters” 242-3). Crucially for the present argument, such operation was historically nurtured by the ocean, although it coincided, paradoxically, with the apparent displacement of the ocean’s—and, consequently, of islands’—supremacy as the “originary” element of capitalism in the name of a greater focus on land (see Chapter 5 for more on this).

In Modernity at Sea, Casarino himself allows us to see the process in motion through literature, insofar as he accounts for the shift from water to land during the nineteenth century through a comparative study of Melville, Conrad, and Marx. Casarino’s analyses of the first two writers are based precisely on the notion of modernity (used here as a virtually synonymous concept to capitalism) in crisis. The latter has to do primarily with the displacement of ocean space in capitalism’s global arrangements, and the consequent “acceleration of time” whereby, under industrial capitalism, time = money, whereas it “did not matter” before:

The time that is being imaged here [in Melville] is the time prior to the tyranny of the clock, the time before the factory’s regular working hours and mechanized labor, the time before time had been completely colonized by the logic of the wage, the time before the equation ‘time = money’ had fully come into being as the beating heart of industrial capitalism: *this is the time when time did not matter for capital.* (58)

And later:

Melville launches himself with *Moby-Dick* into the ever-accelerating whirlpools of an other time, which unravels at once as increasingly regularized and systematic and yet as heterochronically shot through with a multiplicity of nicks, caesurae, and enclaves. Melville’s poetics of ‘the nick of time’ needs to be understood as the assemblage resulting from the interferences between the time of capital and a time of resistance to it. This is the poetics of
temporality never synchronous with itself that unfolds along two apposite and transversal vectors: a vector of increasing homogeneity and regularization that is repeatedly intersected and intercepted by a vector of increasing heterogeneity in the form of heterochronic punctuation and indentures. (59)

As we shall see more fully in Chapter 5, the global capitalism of today, however, shows that the displacement of ocean space was never completed. Most commodities today still travel by oceanic routes; the virtual world is understood through maritime metaphors (“navigate” the internet, “surf” webpages, and so on); the networks of islands remain central for lucrative businesses such as drug trafficking and tourism. But it is important to stress that capitalism’s subjugation of the ocean was also, as we have seen, never possible to begin with. To the same conclusion Marx and Casarino arrive with respect to time: its fundamentally ungraspable nature forever will resist capitalism’s capture in ways that space perhaps cannot. For capitalism’s ultimate desire to annihilate time is always already an impossibility. The question is then, as Agamben insists, how to “change time” (91).

Keeping in mind the previous exposition of capitalist time, let us return to the question of slow time and its relationship to the coast and to the island. For the purposes of this discussion, I am especially concerned with the persistent association, discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, of insularity with origins, isolation, and primitiveness, associations that reveal more explicitly the insularity-temporality knot. By resorting to a general overview of the extraordinary wealth of philosophical, economic, and literary (or, more generally, aesthetic) discourses explicitly using insularity as their elemental trope (and without even considering the equally immense amount of cultural manifestations that concern insularity only implicitly), one can schematize a certain “island time” as follows:

1. **Timely Island**

   - Island as space subjected to time: island as the most intense site of spatialized, “empty, homogeneous time;” island as quantified and quantifiable; island as money
- Island appearing at the timely moment when there are social, economic, and historical needs to be overcome by capitalism: islands’ position regarding the consolidation of mercantile capitalism and the subsequent development of industrial capitalism, where one could argue that the plantation economy was the *sine qua non* for this transition.

2. *Timeless Island*

- Island as space of no time: island as allowing the escape of time; island as the site of temporal limbo; island as isolated, even from time; islands as having “timeless appeal”

- Island as site of origins: either anchored in the past (fantasy of “time travel” back to origin; islands as sites of “primitive” cultures and “noble savages”), or in the future (fantasy of origin as a prognosis/utopic project for the future; dystopic possibility of islands as nuclear and military experimentation sites)

The glaring coincidences in such an apparently opposed schema are, (1) capitalist time’s negation of the present, of the now; and (2) the apparent subjugation of the island to capitalism’s sped up time, either by deploying the island as the perfect laboratory for putting spaces “up to speed” with “progress” – a process that later can be exported to other locales – or by upholding the island – by virtue, one guesses, of its “nature” – as the total antithesis of such a possibility. Islands constitute, then, an enduring fabrication where the time of capital is exercised and intensified at will: they must be either past (origin, primitiveness, isolation) or future (project of a utopia, site for technological experimentation). In other words, “islands are,” as Gilles Deleuze memorably put it, “from before or for after humankind” (“Desert Islands” 9). Within this framework, the question becomes, then, how to conceptualize island time otherwise? How to produce an insular forgetful memory, an *untimely island*?

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32 My use of the timely/timeless/untimely triad is inspired by Casarino’s explorations. The following discussion of his opposition to the rendering of Melville as either “timely” or “timeless” can serve as an indirect explanation of the concepts and as one of the most fascinating sources for my own engagement with time and the island: “Such then is the double bind: if we uphold the myth of the timeless genius, we make Melville’s text identical to itself, that is, we merely pay homage to
Interlude: On the Untimely

Although thinkers such as Casarino and Grosz have deployed it recently, untimeliness is ultimately a concept that emerges from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his forceful Foreword to “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche writes: “for I do not know what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not untimely—that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (60). He goes on to argue that the dominant conception of history in 19th century Germany is pernicious insofar as it tends to over-privilege the past to the detriment of the present:

A man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination. Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting. Or, to express my theme even more simply: there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture. (62)

He makes clear, however, that such need for forgetfulness is not absolute either, since, unlike for the animal, “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (63).

As I take it, Nietzsche is resolutely arguing for the need of affirming the now, which, in his terminology, is the same as affirming “life”: “We need [history] . . . for the sake of life and action . . . We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate . . .” (59). To phrase it using the concepts we have been advancing in this project, “the now” and “life” are equivalent to Walcott’s and ventriloquize what he already thought and wanted to hear us repeat in aeternum; if we counter that myth with the figure of the timely writer, we make Melville’s text different from itself by negation, that is, we find that his text is exactly what he thought it was not—and either way we buttress Melville’s authorial wishful thinking and we foreclose thought. What remains unthought in the oedipal and dialectical strictures of the binary relation between the timeless and the timely is the untimely—and the Nietzschean echo here is at once inevitable and intentional. The untimely is the temporal register of that which is nonsynchronous with its own history, of that which at once is in history and yet can never completely belong to it: the untimely is the unhistorical time of potentiality” (Modernity at Sea xxxix-xl).
“Time.” Nietzsche establishes, then, that the affirmation of life should be the *sine qua non* of any human endeavor, as well as of our conceptualization of history and of time. But affirming the now unavoidably entails an equal degree of forgetting and remembering, a sort of *forgetful memory*, which, hence, is necessarily untimely.

In relation to the previous discussion of accelerated capital time, I wish to expand the untimely in two directions: (1) insofar as the present is actively negated under capitalism, efforts to inhabit, study, intensify, and share the now will also and of necessity be untimely; and, (2) slow time (both that of nature [“geological time”] and that of Cassano’s and Lefebvre’s human figure walking rather than driving) is also untimely with respect to capitalism’s turbo.33

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An island of/in the now, an island “Time,” against all dominant discourses and capitalist uses surrounding insularity, is, then, necessarily untimely. It is neither an absolute escape from history (and from capitalist time) nor a total capture by history (and by capitalist time): “We make too much of that long groan which underlines the past” (Walcott “The Antilles” 68). It is rather more akin to a sort of anticipatory retrospection; to a time of potentiality (Casarino); or, to bring this discussion closer to a creole home, to the already invoked “recuerdos del porvenir” and “propethic vision of the past” (see the Introduction). That is, we are concerned with affirming a present that remembers the

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33 A brief detour through Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other* will prove useful to further conceptualize the untimely and its potential relationship to insularity. Fabian perceives what he calls the “denial of coevalness” as a fundamental operation of anthropology, a discipline that has been, incidentally, quite attached to islands. The island, as we have seen, is either in/of the past or in/of the future; it is a particularly loaded site of Fabian’s “denial of coevalness.” The result is “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). Even if they are concealed or unaccounted for explicitly, the uses of time, Fabian claims, are not secondary or marginal to imperialist projects and the ways in which anthropology has been complicit with them. Consequently, Fabian considers anthropology to be an inherently political discipline, and its critique, “existentially and politically, . . . starts with the scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another” (31). In other words, “it is by diagnosing anthropology’s temporal discourse that one redisCOVERs the obvious, namely that there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, political act” (1). The “denial of coevalness” enables anthropology to reify its subject of knowledge and to establish a fundamental distance between the “civilized scientist” and the “savage” or the “primitive.” For Fabian, who wishes to generate a materialist practice out of his critique, anthropology must rid itself of the conceptualization of time that assumes “the Knower” to have/be the present and “the Known” to have/be the past. From his forceful indictment of anthropology, one can extrapolate the need to posit the coevalness of apparently disparate temporalities, rather than the periodization of a “pastness” forever surpassed.
future, an anticipation of memory quite different from capitalism’s perpetual deferment. This
untimely tidalectics of a present that forgets and remembers works alongside the spatial tidalectics of
fleeing and returning we discussed above. It is the affirmation of the possibility of a third term that is
both and neither one and the other, and of the constant, tidalectical movement between these. It is
the affirmation of a differential space that finds hope in the slow time of natural phenomena that, like
the coast, is always on the move.

What can be found in the Caribbean ambit that speaks to these political and imaginative
potentialities with respect to space and time? As Walcott would put it, “Let’s walk” (“Isla Incognita”
57). We will notice that the search must go beyond the visible and into the slow time and differential
space of natural phenomena that, like the coast, the sand, the woman in Brathwaite’s image, are
always on the move:

Las Arenas: El ebrio torneo de las implicaduras del mundo, en que todos cantan encantando.
Sufrimiento, también, de todos los sufrimientos. Las Arenas no son infértiles. Aposentan el
silencio en todo ese ruido que las rodea. . . . Que la idea de huella se adhiera, por oposición, a
la idea de sistema, igual que una erranía que orienta. Sabemos que es la huella lo que a todos
nos coloca, vengamos de donde vengamos, en Relación. . . . La huella va por la tierra, que nunca
volverá a ser territorio. La huella es forma opaca de aprendizaje de la rama y el viento: ser uno mismo, pero
derivado al otro. Es la arena en auténtico desorden de utopía. (Glissant, Tratado del Todo-Mundo 15/22-3)34

34 “The Sands: the drunken turning of the world’s involvements, in which all sing delighting. Suffering, also, of all sufferings,
The Sands are not infertile. They lodge the silence in the midst of all that noise that surrounds them. . . . That the idea of
the trace adheres itself, by opposition, to the idea of the system, the same as an errantry that orients. We know that it is the
trace that puts us all, wherever we may come from, in Relation. . . . The trace goes through the land, which will never again be
territory. The trace is an opaque form of learning from the branch and the wind: to be oneself, but derived from the other. It is the sand in
authentic disorder of utopia.”
Chapter 4: Coastal Centuries: *El siglo de las luces* and *The Fourth Century*

Esta noche he visto alzarse la Máquina nuevamente. Era, en la proa, como una puerta abierta sobre el vasto cielo que ya nos traía olores de tierra por sobre un Océano tan sosegado, tan dueño de su ritmo, que la nave, levemente llevada, parecía adormecerse en su rumbo, suspenderse entre un ayer y un mañana que se trasladaran con nosotros. Alejo Carpentier, *El siglo de las luces* 7

‘All this wind,’ said Papa Longoué, ‘all this wind about to come up, nothing you can do, you wait for it to come up to your hands, then your mouth, your eyes, your head. As if a man was only there to wait for the wind, to drown, yes, you understand, to drown himself for good in all this wind like the endless ocean…’

Édouard Glissant, *The Fourth Century* 3

As we have seen, Caribbean history, the past, our time-space, must be apprehended by other means than the historical products of capitalist coloniality. The latter are, as was amply discussed in previous chapters, about a negation of the present in the name of an ever-increasing turbo, about the regime of the Eye, of the one, of the vertical, of a provincialism passing for universalism, of a domination of nature. Caribbean time-space, so abused, so misunderstood, so consistently named from without, requires a deep engagement with those results if only to go beyond them; “to fall in love with the world, in spite of History” (Walcott, “The Antilles” 79); to produce “a different analysis to the boredom of cities, the industrial miasma, the locked-in and lunging despairs of city winters” (Walcott, “Isla Incognita” 55). The latter, in the context of Walcott’s essay, is the analysis performed from without, from the perspective that only sees the *tristes tropiques* of no change of seasons, of perpetual and immutable heat, of, “consequently,” no subtlety. But, as Walcott insists, the changes in our ambit are subtler than many: “These subtle few distinctions are all we have to go by in terms of

1 The only available English translation (made, in turn, from a French translation) of *El siglo de las luces*, entitled *Explosion in a Cathedral*, is inadequate for many reasons. For instance, the opening sentence of the novel quoted here is translated as “I saw them erect the guillotine again to-night.” There is no “them” in the original and the guillotine is referred to as “the Machine.” These details are crucial: first, “the Machine” seems, in the original Spanish version, to have a life of its own insofar as it activates itself and, second, the readers are prevented from immediately knowing what “the Machine” refers to (they will not know it, indeed, for a few hundred pages still…). In this chapter, consequently, I will include amended translations of the quoted passages when necessary, with the indication “TA” after the page number. “Tonight I’ve seen the Machine rise up again. It was, in the bows, like a doorway opening on to the immense sky that brought us scents of the land across an Ocean so calm, so much a master of its rhythm, that the ship seemed asleep, gently cradled on its course, suspended between a yesterday and a today that moved with us” (7, TA).
change, and maybe because they are so imperceptible to strangers or transients, they make landscape and people seem monotonous” (55).

From the very titles of the novels under consideration, the attempts to make literature a tool for the proposition of a different conception of temporality and history take center stage. The texts also constitute forceful immanent perspectives that forge, in different ways, a heterodox connection between a refashioned time and an archipelagic space. The innumerable signs of this process are both overt and subtle. We will consider some of them: (1) the activation of a sensory range beyond vision that is capable of grasping Walcott’s “subtle few distinctions;” (2) a careful consideration of the Caribbean archipelagic space as part of the entire Atlantic ambit and, ultimately, as part of the globe (both novels include plenty of maritime voyages either voluntary or forced whose focal point, however, is resolutely Caribbean space – both its islands and its continental coasts – as networks of international connection, exchange, métissage); and, (3) a special attention to the lived experience of islanders themselves, both those brought by force and those born on the islands.

**El siglo de las luces: A Spatialization of Time**

*El siglo de las luces*, written in the 1950s but unpublished until 1962,² appears on the heels of a novelistic trajectory that had already established Alejo Carpentier as a preeminent Caribbean writer concerned with exploring questions of history and temporality in the specific context of the creole Americas. By then, it was also evident that his work was determinedly marked by a baroque method and style that seemed to Carpentier a necessity, for the Americas, their peoples, and their nature were, for him, fundamentally baroque. Previous novels exemplifying such concerns included ¡Écuyamba-O! (1933), where Afro-Cuban religious syncretism has preeminence, *El reino de este mundo* (1949), on the Haitian Revolution, and *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), an experiment on time and American nature. Carpentier also had a lifelong interest in the creolization of musical forms in the Caribbean, a

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² For a detailed publication history, see Roberto González Echevarría’s *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (213-19).
phenomenon he explored in *Los pasos perdidos* as well as in the book-length study *La música en Cuba* (1946), among other essays. By the time he wrote *El siglo de las luces* while living in Venezuela, he had escaped Cuba after being imprisoned for his opposition to the Gerardo Machado government, and lived in France, where he had become well acquainted with surrealism and most of its most famous proponents. The movement was to leave a powerful trace in his writing, although he would eventually critique it strongly in his formulation of “lo real maravilloso americano.” Furthermore, the Cuban Revolution’s triumph over Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship in 1959, which pretended to signal a “new time,” a different future, was overtly supported by Carpentier—a support he was never publicly to revoke—and would also exert a tremendous influence on his life and writing.

Carpentier’s novel, which covers the period between 1789 and 1809, appears at first to be a historical novel in the tradition of European literature, seeking, as the writer manifests explicitly in an Afterword, to write, among other things, the history of a little known official of the French Revolution (Victor Hugues) and his political activities in the insular and continental Caribbean. But upon closer inspection, there are myriad signs, symbols, traces, and formal strategies that produce quite different effects, to the extent that one is tempted to describe *El siglo de las luces* more as an untimely novel than a historical one. Examples of the alluded strategies are bewilderingly diverse: (1) the profuse references (both explicit and implicit) to alternative kinds and sources of knowledge and to secret human relations—arcane texts, cosmic allusions, obscure writers, painters, and thinkers, traditions of thought repressed by western canon-making, such as the Kabala, Islamic texts, and Afro-Cuban philosophy and religion, secret societies and brotherhoods, among others—both on the part of the narrator as on that of the characters; (2) the attention to the real maravilloso revealed at...
every turn in the American environment (objects out of place, landscapes and seascapes that defy human spatiotemporal bearings, simultaneity of different temporalities as seen both on nature and buildings, improbable repetitions, with differences . . .); (3) close attention to traces gathered from senses other than vision (smells, sounds, textures); (4) the much discussed baroque quality of Carpentier’s prose, where sentences and paragraphs amalgamate in apparently endless superimposition; among so many others. I will discuss especially the second and third examples as they relate specifically to a re-conceptualization of space and time.

As González Echevarría argues, the spiral and the retruécano distinguish Carpentier’s formal construction of the novel. Both the spiral-as-shape and the retruécano-as-rhetorical figure imply a peculiar conceptualization of time and space. Incessant movement both “forward” and “backward”
characterizes the spiral, but, in contrast to the cycle, the returns are never able to touch an “original” point of reference, and, in contrast to the line, returns—rather than just departures—are nevertheless possible. The temporal dimension of the spiral is therefore a constant movement, in the present, of return and departure resonant with Brathwaite’s tidalectics.

The retrueciano, for its part, is a rhetorical figure that refers to a repetition with a difference, which is more often than not an inversion. A syntactical structure tends to be repeated using the same elements as if it was the same, but in fact the repetition has produced an inversion—as the operation of the mirror—of the previous structure. Thus, in a similar fashion to the spiral as form, the retrueciano allows for a constant presence, repetition, of the past in the present, if only inverted. As González Echevarría observes, “what is peculiar about the future evoked in Explosion in a Cathedral is its quality of being simultaneously a past” (Alejo Carpentier 234).

The novel, indeed, opens with a regime of “inverted time” in the house of siblings Sofia and Carlos and their cousin, Esteban, after the siblings’ father dies. The adolescents sleep during the day and engage in all manner of activity—“a perpetual game” (28)—at night: “Puesto en el patio, el reloj de sol se había trasformado en reloj de luna, marcando invertidas horas” (26).

The hegemonic order of time will only be re instituted with Victor Hugues commanding and enigmatic appearance as a merchant established in Port-au-Prince and doing business in Havana. His well-travelled knowledge and his vast readings attract the adolescents immediately, as he quickly becomes the master of the house and of the deceased father’s warehouse. The characters’ eventual voyages in the Atlantic ambit (Esteban’s, Victor’s, and Sofia’s) as well as the ways in which the French Revolution is accounted for

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8 As we saw, Cassano attributes to the sea the capacity to prevent the closing of the circle: perhaps the sea is partly responsible for preventing Carpentier from using the cycle as the formal structure for El siglo de las luces? To further buttress such irresistible speculation, González Echevarría argues, convincingly, that the cycle ruled over the form of Carpentier’s previous—and also indirect—novelistic treatment of the French Revolution in The Kingdom of this World. The earlier novel, in absolute contrast with the one that concerns us here, was more content with suggesting the sea and its supreme importance in the Caribbean rather than situating itself explicitly on it.

9 The critic expands on a discussion of time in Carpentier’s novel taking into account particularly the many levels of anachronism in El siglo de las luces, as well as the writing itself and “the presence of the occult,” especially the Kabala, as “recasting the pattern of fall and redemption, of exile and return” (Alejo Carpentier 239).

10 “The sundial in the patio had become a moon-dial, marking inverted hours” (26, TA).
in the novel—contained in the story of the characters is, of course, a more general reflection on the movement of history itself—include repetitions and returns, that is, the presence of the past in the present. But these returns are never the same, nor can their movement be towards the “origin” or have a definitive point of reference, for there is none to be found. Rather, an inverted combination of elements is produced by means of, more often than not, a spatialization of time.

Although, as we have seen, this is the characteristic capitalist way to attempt to annihilate time, the novel’s displacement of the “core,” “metropolitan” space where the process most obviously takes place in the name of a resolutely Caribbean-Atlantic spatial perspective, produces a radically different result. The operation is particularly effective insofar as Carpentier chooses a time—that of the French Revolution—that supposedly questioned the dominant time of History as it had unfolded until then, and, therefore, apparently challenged the hegemonic formants of that time-space. Not only did the actual events not achieve that (as Lefebvre points out), but also, and perhaps even more tragically, the ways in which they have been accounted for have actually re-centered the focalization of History back to “its place,” the “Eurocentric” perspective; they have effectively reinstated the dominant time of History, the hegemonic formants of that time-space. This comes to light in the novel by means of an operation of displacement, as it re-historicizes the French Revolution from the Caribbean.

The oft-repeated understanding of the French Revolution as a referent for the history of slave revolutions in the Caribbean—indeed, as a referent for the Idea of Revolution itself—is broken down relentlessly in the novel. Even when Esteban and Hugues find themselves in France and are supposed to be working as agents of the French Revolution, the latter is nowhere to be found in any concrete way—Esteban himself attests to this as he frenetically tries to get himself at the center of an action he cannot find and to meet protagonists absolutely removed from his access (95-112). That is, the French Revolution is not (or at least not just) inversely repeated in the Americas “as if crossing the ocean meant entering a world where everything is inverted” (González Echevarría “Socrates”
Rather, it is itself “a locus of power that has disappeared” (552). When seen from the Caribbean, when put “out of place,” as the novel forces us to, the French Revolution becomes real maravillosa indeed. It meant a purely formal end to slavery while at the same time it signified a perpetuation of the structures of slavery and the racial and gender politics associated with the colonialist schema. Among many possible examples, perhaps one of the most powerful has to do with the guillotine, referred to as “the Machine.”

The novel begins with the lines that serve as epigraph to this chapter, through which, while still not clear on what “the Machine” refers to, we learn that it is on board a ship that is reaching land and whose movement makes the narrating voice feel as though there was no present but a suspension between past and future. The novel then takes up the Machine repeatedly, but a particularly important scene is when we learn that Hugues, disillusioned and displaced by events in France, plans to become a leader of the “Revolution” in the Caribbean, that is, plans to “take” the “Revolution” there. It is on that return, which we now know is what the opening scene refers to, that Hugues accompanies his revolutionary plans and the regime he is to establish in Guadeloupe with the guillotine, at once actual machine of ritualistic death and symbol of an inverted repetition. The effects of the “object out of place” are brilliantly brought home when an itinerant opera troupe arrives on the island and, having no suitable stage where to perform, Hugues’ agents disassemble the guillotine, clean up the dried blood, and use the floor where the guillotine had been set for the opera performance of a “obra preferida a todas las que se tenían en repertorio, tanto por su universal celebridad como por el contenido de ciertas coplas que habían anunciado el espíritu revolucionario: El Adivino de la Aldea de Juan Jacobo” (206). The “revolutionary” colonial government then attends

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11 On the question of the French Revolution as “an erasure, an absent or delayed presence,” see also Alejo Carpentier (242-3).
12 “the work which was the most popular of their whole repertoire, as much because of its world-wide fame as because some of its couplets had provided a foretaste of the revolutionary spirit –The Village Soothsayer, by Jean-Jacques” (201).
the event spectacularly, where the discriminatory seating by gender and race constitutes a further inverted repetition (204-8).\footnote{The following are but just a few further examples of how the “Revolution” and its intervention in the traditional temporality of History seem much closer to a repetitive inverted process that is everywhere undermined and, eventually, thoroughly bureaucratized, than to a radical historical break: “Las Iglesias permanecían cerradas cuando, acaso, las habían vuelto a abrir en Francia. Los negros habían sido declarados ciudadanos libres, pero los que no eran soldados o marinos por la fuerza, doblaban el lomo de sol a sol, como antes, bajo la tralla de sus vigilantes, detrás de los cuales se pintaba, por añadidura, el implacable azimut de la guillotina. Ahora los niños recién nacidos se llamaban Cincinnatus, Leonidas o Licurgo, y se les enseñaba a recitar un Catecismo Revolucionario que ya no correspondía a la realidad—como en el Club de Jacobinos recién creado seguían hablando del Incorruptible como si aún estuviera vivo” (168). \"The churches were still closed here, though they had perhaps been reopened in France. The blacks had been declared free citizens, but those who had not been forced to become soldiers or sailors were bending their backs from sunrise to sunset, as they had done before, under the whips of their overseers, behind whom, for good measure, they could now see the guillotine’s implacable azimuth. New-born children were now being called Cincinnatus, Leonidas or Lycurgus, and were being taught to recite a Revolutionary Cathechism that no longer corresponded with reality—just as at the recently formed Jacobin Club they continued to talk about the Incorruptible as if he were still alive” (164, TA). “Cerca de él [Billaud-Varennes, another historical figure of the French Revolution who was deported to Cayenne, where he died], echada en un camastro, la joven Brígida [Billaud-Varenne’s mulata sexual worker], desnuda, se abanicaba los pechos y los muslos con un número viejo de La décade philosophique” (241). \"Beside him, laying naked on a misshapen bed, the young Briga was fanning her breasts and thighs with an old copy of La Décade Philosophique” (235, TA). \"Asistíase en esta época a una multiplicación, a una universal proliferación de papeles, cubiertos de cuños, sellos, firmas y contrafirmas, cuyos nombres agotaban los sinónimos de ‘permiso,’ ‘salvoconducto,’ ‘pasaporte,’ y cuantos vocablos pudiesen significar una autorización para moverse de un país a otro, de una comarca a otra—a veces de una ciudad a otra” (241-2). \"The epoch witnessed a multiplication, a universal proliferation of papers, covered in seals, stamps, signatures and counter-signatures, whose titles exhausted all possible synonyms for ‘permission,’ ‘safe-conduct,’ ‘passport,’ and any other terms that might have been taken to signify authorization to move from one country to another, from one region to another—sometimes even from one city to another” (235-6, TA). “Cuatro grandes ríos de la Guayana habían prestado sus nombres indios a vastos cementerios de hombres blancos—muertos, muchos de ellos, por haber permanecido fieles a una religión que el hombre blanco se esforzaba por inculcar a los indios de América desde hacía casi tres siglos...” (243). \"Four great Guyanese rivers had given their Indian names to these vast graveyards of white men—many of whom had died because they had remained faithful to a religion that the white man had been striving to inculcate to the American Indians for almost three centuries...” (237, TA).14 On the 7th of July 1798—for certain events the chronologies of the Revolutionary Calendar were useless—the United States declared War on France in American waters” (204, TA).}

Moreover, when Bonaparte reestablishes slavery, the “revolutionary” leader Hugues, now governor of Cayenne, averts another possible “gran cimarronada” by means of a massive cheating of ex-slaves whereby every possible avenue of escape from the city is closed down in advance of the announcement of re-enslavement (328-30). The “cimarronada,” of course, nevertheless occurred and Hugues would eventually lead a colossal—and colossally failed—enterprise to catch and re-enslave the maroons. Even the attempts to change time by naming it differently is consistently parodied: “El 7 de Julio de 1798—para ciertos hechos no valían las cronologías del Calendario Republicano—los Estados Unidos declararon la Guerra a Francia en los mares de América” (209).
Although we have learned from C.L.R. James, among many others, that the influence of the French Revolution in the Caribbean ambit is undeniable and, for the history of the Haitian Revolution especially—a subject Carpentier also cared deeply about—is quite crucial, *El siglo de las luces* allows us to see that, if we only paid attention to historical processes immanently, there is no reason to ascribe to the developments in France the supreme status they have been accorded.

“Cimarronadas” have been taking place always, as even a colonial agent in the novel must admit:

‘Todo lo que hizo la Revolución Francesa fue legalizar una Gran Cimarronada que no cesa desde el siglo XVI. Los negros no los esperaron a ustedes para proclamarse libres un número incalculable de veces.’ Y con un conocimiento de crónicas americanas, insólito para un francés (pero recordó Esteban, al punto, que era suizo), el cultivador se dio a hacer un recuento de las sublevaciones negras que, con tremebunda continuidad, se habían sucedido en el Continente… (237)

The “cimarronadas” have no traceable “origin” using the traditional, empiricist source-finding, and they also have no metropolitan referent of which they are resonances—they do not need it. They resonate themselves historically; use, mix, confuse, as is convenient, metropolitan developments in their favor; have been going backward and forward in a long, slow, incessant, spiral of hope.

So much for the tidalectics of past and present in the novel. But, as was hinted above, *El siglo de las luces* is also keen on including the future in this spiral movement, of which two examples come to mind. On the one hand, the use of epigraphs from Goya’s *Desastres de la guerra* series, which operate on the temporal level inasmuch as they constitute anticipatory forces in the narrative structure of the novel. Catherine E. Wall explains:

Goya’s role in *El siglo de las luces* is multifaceted. Most obviously, the epigraphs are premonitions of what will come to pass at the end of the novel. Additionally, they suggest an extension of the chronology of the novel by documenting the period that begins on the very day the novel ends. Used outside of the epoch to which they historically belong, they acquire an allegorical quality. . . the Goya allusions are futuristic anachronisms that summon a future not yet realized within the novel’s temporal constraints. (153–4)

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15 “‘All the French Revolution did was to legalize a Great Maroonage that has not ceased since the sixteenth century. The blacks didn’t wait for you to proclaim themselves free a countless number of times.’ And with a knowledge of American history unusual in a Frenchman (but Esteban suddenly remembered that he was Swiss), the planter began recounting the black uprisings that, with terrifying continuity, had taken place in the Continent…” (231, TA).
On the other hand, Carpentier’s attention to hurricanes—a recurrent natural phenomenon in the Caribbean whose movement is, precisely, that of the spiral—reveals them not only as cataclysms after which a certain newness dawns, but, more importantly, as temporal signs that produce a sort of anticipatory temporality on the islands (54-6). Both these examples mobilize the untimely, those “recuerdos del porvenir” Carpentier himself summons in another great novel on time, *Los pasos perdidos*.

The spatialization of time we have been discussing, where the novel relocates the time of the *siglo de las luces* in the Caribbean, is further aided by a special attention to the Caribbean natural space as a carrier of temporal signs, as we already began to notice with the example of hurricanes. Arnaldo Cruz has pointed out how the form of the spiral González Echevarría discusses, which allows the characters to distance themselves from the lineal time represented by the *pater familias* (the father and Hugues), also enables Carpentier to articulate “the natural and the historical” (229). Carpentier’s novel pays special attention to the Caribbean sea as a, to remember Cassano, “línea de fuga”—these were the times of the predominance of ships as means of travel, and all the characters that escape Cuba do so on a ship—16 and, at the same time, as the bearer of capitalist coloniality’s tragedies. The sea is also a thoroughly temporalized element. In a memorable scene, the Caribbean Sea is imagined as a Mediterranean heir to “the other Mediterranean,”

recibiendo, con el trigo y el latín, el Vino y la Vulgata, la Imposición de los Signos Cristianos. No llegarán jamás los Caribes al Imperio de los Mayas, quedando en raza frustrada y herida de muerte en lo mejor de su empeño secular. Y de su Gran Migración fracasada, que acaso se iniciara en la orilla izquierda del Río de las Amazonas cuando las cronologías de los otros señalaban un siglo XIII que no lo era para nadie más, solo quedaban en playas y orillas la realidad de los petroglifos caribes—jalones de una época nunca escrita—con sus seres dibujados, encajados en la piedra, bajo una orgullosa emblemática solar… (251)17

16 Of special relevance is Sofía’s escape from Havana to what she imagines—although this would turn out to be tragically wrong—as a new, “revolutionary” life with Hugues in Cayenne. The passage describing her trip onboard forcefully forges an intimate association of the sea with freedom (309; see also 296 and 307-315).

17 “receiving, along with wheat and Latin, Wine and Vulgate, the Imposition of the Christian Signs. The Caribs would never become the Mayan Empire, remaining a race frustrated and fatally wounded at the climax of its secular undertaking. And of its failed Great Migration, which perhaps began on the left bank of the Amazon River when the chronologies of the others signaled a thirteenth century that was such for no one else, only the reality of Carib petroglyphs remained in beaches and
This sea, along with its beaches and coasts, shelters a non-written history—that of the Caribes—under the sign of a different chronology with respect to that of the “Signos Cristianos.” This Mediterranean is elevated, as many other elements in Carpentier’s work, to a sort of cosmic status. But such status, we must remember, is, at the same time, thoroughly historical. Because of its fundamentally baroque quality, the Caribbean Sea allows, therefore, for the coexistence of different temporalities:

La selva de coral hacía perdurar, en medio de una creciente economía de las formas zoológicas, los primeros barroquismos de la Creación, sus primeros lujos y despilfarros . . . Esteban veía en las selvas de coral una imagen tangible, una figuración cercana –y tan inaccesible, sin embargo– del Paraíso Perdido, donde los árboles, mal nombrados aún, y con lengua torpe y vacilante por un Hombre-Niño, estarían dotados de aparente inmortalidad de esta flora sumptuosa, de ostensorio, de zarza ardiente, para quien los otoños o primaveras sólo se manifestaban en variaciones de matices o leves traslados de sombras… De sorpresa en sorpresa descubría Esteban la pluralidad de las playas donde el Mar, tres siglos después del Descubrimiento, comenzaba a depositar sus primeros vidrios pulidos; vidrios inventados en Europa, desconocidos en América . . . Había playas negras, hechas de pizarras y mármoles pulverizados . . . playas amarillas, de tornadiza pendiente, donde cada flujo dejaba la huella de su arabesco . . . playas blancas . . . Maravilloso era, en la multiplicidad de aquellas Oceanides, hallar la Vida en todas partes . . . Esteban se maravillaba al observar cómo el lenguaje, en estas islas, había tenido que usar de la aglutinación, la amalgama verbal y la metáfora, para traducir la ambigüedad formal de cosas que participaban de varias esencias. . . . muchas criaturas marinas recibían nombres que, por fijar una imagen, establecían equivocos verbales, originando una fantástica zoología de peces-perros, peces-bueyes, peces-tigres, roncadores, sopladores, voladores, colirrojos, listados, tatuados, leonados . . . (180-2; see also 177-184/198-200)
This passage, a rumination of Esteban’s upon watching, among other species, a conch shell (“la Espiral” [184]), brilliantly condenses most of what we have discussed: the intensely creative, diverse, baroque (recall Glissant’s description of the baroque as “accumulation, proliferation, repetition”) character of the Caribbean seascape; the consequent coexistence of different elements, species, times (including those brought from distant and foreign shores) amalgamated in an incessant transformative process; the inadequacy of language, which is forced to become, itself, baroque. In fact, this hyphen-producing nature of sea creatures, for which language cannot find appropriate names, is a fitting example of the ways in which a third, tidallectical term that is both and neither the two terms in a binary is the necessary product of the sea and the coast as creative chronotopes.

Such engagement with the sea is somewhat mirrored in the novel’s relationship to the forest, especially when Hugues, Sofía, and the narration itself move to the continental Caribbean. In Cayenne, we are able to glimpse the fundamental difference between the natural space and the capitalist space discussed in the previous chapter with the help of Lefebvre. The “revolutionary” governor Hugues has become an obsessive “Edifier” (334). His project is (capitalist) domination of nature at its most intense:

Víctor, con esas obras múltiples, que siempre modificaba sobre la marcha, rompiendo con los lineamientos de planos cuyos papeles enrollados le salían por todos los bolsillos del traje. ‘Venceré la naturaleza de esta tierra –decía–. Levantará estatuas y columnas, trazará caminos, abrirá estanques de truchas, hasta donde alcanza la vista.’ Sofía deploraba que Víctor gastara tantas energías en el vano intento de crear, en esta selva entera, ininterrumpida hasta las fuentes del Amazonas, acaso hasta las costas del Pacífico, un ambicioso remedio de parque real cuyas estatuas y rotondas serían sorbidas por la maleza en el primer descuido, sirviendo de muletas, de cebo, a las incontables vegetaciones entregadas a la perpetua tarea de desajustar las piedras, dividir las murallas, fracturar mausoleos y aniquilar lo construido. (333-4)\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^\text{20}\) “Víctor, with these extensive building operations that he always modified as they were under way, altering the rolled-up plans’ designs, which stuck out from every pocket of his clothing. ‘I’m going to vanquish this land’s nature,’ he would say. ‘I’m going to put up statues and colonnades; I’m going to make roads; I’m going to dig ponds as far as the eye can see.’ Sofía deplored Victor’s waste of so much energy in the vain attempt to create here, in this ample forest, uninterrupted until the Amazon River’s sources—perhaps until the Pacific shores—an ambitious simulacrum of a royal park, whose statues and rotondas would be absorbed by the undergrowth the moment they were left unattended, and would merely supply support and nourishment for the limitless vegetations engaged in the perpetual task of dislodging stones, splitting walls, breaking open mausoleums, and annihilating the work of human hands” (324-5, TA).
The contrast with the “palenques” of the “cimarrones” and the latter’s relationship with nature is absolute. As noted above, Hugues is utterly unable to dominate nature, and his and his army’s defeat at the hands of both the maroons and the forest itself is so comprehensive that Hugues is even left temporally blind (339-40).

Finally, El siglo de las luces’ spatialization of time is consolidated by continuous references to meaning-producing senses other than vision. Although the novel is deeply informed by visual elements — Goya’s paintings and sketchings, as has been pointed out; Explosion in a Cathedral, the painting that functions as the constant substratum and touchstone throughout the novel; baroque descriptions of both architecture and nature to be seen on the islands, in Paris and Madrid, in Cayenne and Surinam; among others— it is also quite powerful in its references to smells (the recurrent tasajo\(^\text{21}\) in the father’s warehouse reminding the readers of the scraps of meat bought for the feeding of slaves); tastes (the rich descriptions of tropical fruits and the banquets held at the father’s house with profuse edible commodities brought from Europe); sounds (most notably that of the rumors of rebellions on the part of slaves). These provide not only alternative knowledge-producing sources that, for the most part, are associated with Blacks on the islands, as González Echevarría points out, but also alternative historical accounts that have to do with the unseen: the barracks of the enslaved, which are literally repressed from view of the colonial rural mansion in Sofía and Esteban’s trip to the countryside constitutes a poignant example of the unseen. All of these instances are reminders of the tragic retruécano of slavery in a time of “revolution.”

**The Fourth Century: A Temporalization of Space**

Published in 1964, The Fourth Century follows some of the same characters that appeared in Glissant’s first novel, The Ripening (1958), while exploring much more forcefully and complexly the question of time and history in the insular context. The Martiniquan writer was part of a tradition of

\(^{21}\) The closest translation of this smoked, salted and dehydrated meat would be “jerky.”
thinkers—most notably Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon—especially concerned with questions of origins, race, and politics in the Caribbean, a tradition he would systematically question throughout his texts. Still, Césaire’s influence on Martiniquan intellectual and artistic life can hardly be overstated. In an indirect connection with Carpentier, it should be remembered that Césaire’s literary explorations were particularly marked by surrealism, especially after André Bréton’s visit to Martinique in 1941. Glissant had also experienced first-hand the colonialist education imparted in Martinique, where the Creole language and any other manifestation suspected of having “popular” extraction were strongly repressed. By the time he wrote *The Fourth Century*, Martinique had been subjected to the Vichy regime and suffered a devastating blockade (1940); Glissant had lived and studied in France (having moved there in 1946), where he came into contact with the “new novelists;” and had participated in various political initiatives both in Martinique and in France.22 As his multifarious texts—novels, poetry, essays, drama, and pieces of indefinable genre—kept appearing, Glissant’s exploration and defense of métissage, creolization, syncretism, multilingualism, orality, *Relation*, among other related concepts, based firmly on a Caribbean land-seascape, consolidated. As we have seen, Glissant also wrote passionately about the baroque as a method and a poetics, an important thread of connection with Carpentier, to whose work the former has also devoted a few essayistic pieces.

In contrast with *El siglo de las luces*, *The Fourth Century*’s most consistent operation is a *temporalization of space*. The novel’s engagement with the island, its land, its sea, its trees, and its wind is recurrently determined by the grasp of temporality *through and in* those spatial elements. Papá Longoué, a *quimboiseur* descendant of maroon, produces and understands time and history in a radically different way than Mathieu Béluse finds at school (259). Longoué’s knowledge refuses the traditional periodization and linear account of history and proposes an apprehension of the past not

22 For a detailed account of Glissant’s biography, his contexts, and his position in French and so-called Francophone thought, see the volume J. Michael Dash devoted to his figure.
in terms of origins, but rather of the past’s effects on landscape, seascape, memory, and the human body’s senses. Such an understanding of time and history, crucially, is transmitted in the unseen manner of orality—the exchange that structures The Fourth Century—and is fundamentally informed by concepts we have now learned to appreciate—silence, slowness, thickness, density, motionlessness, opacity:

It seemed that the weight of the silence, the accumulating lightning, the mass of heat that the slow power of the two men crammed into the heat itself—by their motionless, patient confrontation—thus finally made Papa Longoué (more vulnerable this way than his young companion) in a hurry to get it over with as fast as possible; and it seemed that Mathieu thus achieved the task he had undertaken, to make the old man speak (in this language without price, all in how it was said and in repetitions, that nonetheless proceeded reliably toward some knowledge, beyond the words, that Papa Longoué alone could guess; because if he anticipated anything it was not obvious, and, to tell the truth, he let himself be guided by the unpredictable consequences of the words; yes, this way of speaking was so right considering the thickness of the day, the weight of the heat, the slow memory). If he spoke it would make the past clear and perhaps explain precisely this passion that he, Mathieu, had for the past. . . . But Papa Longoué guessed that his young friend had possibilities other than the gift of darkness; Mathieu, for his part, knew that the quimboiseur would be put off by logic and clarity. Consequently, they were both afraid of words and only proceeded very warily in getting to know each other. Both sensed however that no matter what they did they—a Béluse and a Longoué—would meet some time or other (thought Longoué). (6-7)

The novel’s formal aspects further bolster the process of temporalizing space. Celia Britton has written a fascinating essay on the matter of The Fourth Century’s form, where she argues that, (1) the novel’s “alternating pattern” between the voices of different characters, (2) the usual confusion of Papa Longoué’s voice and that of the narrator (or the possibility that there is no such distinction to be made),23 and, (3) the moment in the novel after which entire blocks of text are italicized, reinforce

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23 Britton’s convincing speculation is that Glissant refuses to make the novel a pure story-telling of Papa Longoué’s because “it would entail presenting the narrative as a story whose authority was based solely on the trustworthiness of the storyteller. That is, whether or not it was ‘true’ would simply depend upon the perceived psychological characteristics of the individual narrator. The general and far more important issue of the very possibility of reconstructing the past would thus be elided. And of course a straightforward omniscient ‘histoire,’ which is by definition valid in its own terms, would equally preclude this question—which is central to the whole novel—being posed. . . . To create a space in which this [whether and how a society can construct a representation of its historical past] can be addressed, conversely, it has to set up a kind of intermediate or indeterminate discourse whose provenance and authority are uncertain” (157). A somewhat similar claim is made by Dash, who observes that Papa Longoué is a deliberately “contaminated” creole” whose “fallibility” Glissant emphasizes. As a result, the novelist “provides an assault on authorial omniscience, or a single dominant consciousness. Rather, as the representative of collective memory, Papa Longoué’s voice is the vehicle for a polyphony of other voices. If Longoué is a dense character it is not because of his psychological composition but because of the dialogic connections that
Papa Longoué’s/the narrator’s description of the past as “mass rather than line, and as something which accumulates” (thus, as baroque). The past, moreover, continues “to exist in the present.”

There is a curious tension between the overall, large-scale forward progression of the chapters through time [1788-1946] and, on the other hand, a pervasive habit of treating the events of the narrative as though they exist, not in sequence, but as a tangled mass which is experienced simultaneously. Thus in many of the most dramatic, potentially most suspenseful, incidents, we are told the end of the story first, and what leads up to it is only recounted later . . . The systematic use of this narrative technique in itself creates an impression of the past as ‘mass’ –as both potentially accessible and inexhaustible. (153-4)

To understand the implications of this process, it is useful to turn to a relevant section in Glissant’s Tratado del Todo-Mundo, entitled “Rhetorics of the End of the Century.” In it, Glissant argues that the refusal of linear time amounts to a refusal of the “universalizing generalization of Judeo-Christian time,” which has “entered the common sensibility, has imposed itself generally, has marked a rhythm” and “is to be found in the principle of History” (Tratado del Todo-Mundo 101). It is necessary to affirm the “rhetorics of orality” (103) in a way that provokes a “renovated poetics in which orality is maintained in writing, and vice versa, in which the exchange between the languages spoken in the world would burn” (105). These exchanges between the written and spoken languages of the world would “not only affect the diversity of times these communities live” but it would also “inspire languages, or archipelagoes of languages, that would be equivalent to the infinite variety of our relations” (107). Among other qualities, these “poetics of orality-writing” would have as its motives: “duration that does not ‘detail’ the times;” “clustering and accumulation that take the word out of its line;” “return and repetition, which do not cheat meaning;” “the rhythms of assonance, which weave the memory of the surroundings;” “the opaque, which is the echo of the Chaos-world” (108-9). As in Carpentier, these are resolutely baroque poetics.
In Papa Longoué’s and Mathieu Béluse’s exchange, which is initiated, significantly, with the latter’s request, “The past. Tell me about the past, Papa Longoué! Just what is it?” (7), the past—and, with it, time itself—is transmitted through unwritten, and, in many instances, unseen ways. The unseen entails both that which can only be grasped by activating a sensory range beyond vision and that which can only be seen if the hegemonic dictates of vision are upset. For instance, the unseen has to do with feeling the wind that opens the novel and is repeated continuously. Indeed, the account of the Rose-Marie’s arrival, which is the ship where the first Longoué and the first Béluse were brought to Martinique, is initiated by the wind, that which, says Papa Longoué, is “what you are asking for!” He then continues, “Can anyone measure the strength of this great wind that rises up the hillsides?” Because today they just hang around in that little spot of theirs, and they can’t see! Where is this wind? What direction? Which one? ‘They don’t even see the boat!’” Mathieu asks, “The boat that brought them over . . .” (12). The unseen is also related with smelling death: “The odor of vomit, blood, and death that even the rain could not get rid of all that fast was still there. But things had been cleaned and the odor would go away—until the next trip. Until the next cloying stench of death came to drop anchor in this harbor. (Yet I can smell it just the same, thought Papa Longoué . . .)” (16), and with smelling the slavers’ ship (105). The unseen means, like it does in El siglo de las luces, listening to rumors of rebellion (41) and to the sound of the sea (84). It also entails admitting that which is beyond language:

Just as one cannot entirely describe the state of slavery (because of this one tiny, irreducible fact of reality that no description, no analysis will ever succeed in including: the frail spirit that awakens to pain day after day and sometimes becomes exasperated, only to lapse into the usual, the accepted, which is even more terrible than the spasm of damnation), likewise there is nothing to say about a rebellion of this sort except that it is hidden inside the wooden horse of suffering. (97)

24 Dash goes so far as to argue that the wind, which “sweeps all before it” is “the metaphor of narration” of the novel, for it “typifies the spiral of bits and pieces of the past we see in Le quatrième siècle” (83, emphasis added).
And becoming able to see the land otherwise:

He [Papa Longoué] saw the former verdure, the original madness still innocent of man’s touch, the chaos of acacias rolling down in a great swell to the high grasses; now there were woods that had been thinned softly lapping all the way down to the clear, checkered plain. All history becomes clear in this land before them if the changes in the land’s appearance are followed over time. Papa Longoué knew that. He trembled slightly, thinking how Mathieu ought, at least, to learn by himself how to see the woods pouring down to a sieve of furrows, learn all alone how to feel the ancient madness quivering, there in that spot where the madness of men now imposed its rigid and patient greed. He had the power to feel this, and it filled him with oppressive heat and made him shiver in the sun. He stretched out his hands toward the plain: toward that other ocean looming between the land here and the mountain of the past. (39-40, emphasis added)

These instances of the unseen, as was the case in Carpentier’s text, are to be felt in the body’s skin, smelt (the phrase “staunch of death” is repeated continuously as it signals the regime of slavery), and tasted (many of the main two characters’ exchanges, where the history of Martinique is effectively reconstructed, are held over a pot of boiling plantains).

Furthermore, this sort of alternative knowledge production is, as we somewhat saw in Carpentier’s novel too, deeply related to Afro-Caribbean traditions. Glissant’s text, however, resolutely focuses on two lineages of Afro-Caribbean peoples: the enslaved lineage of the Béluses and the maroon lineage of the Longués. Both lineages have been engaged in a more or less overt battle since the first man of each was brought from Africa and one immediately escaped to the woods while the other was enslaved at the Senglis plantation. The Fourth Century’s focus on these Afro-Caribbean lineages contrasts with El siglo de las luces’ suggestion or secondary deployment of such characters, for the latter’s protagonists are part of a criollo merchant’s family, most probably descendants of Spanish colonists.

The constant tidalectics between the two lineages allows Glissant’s novel to present, according to Britton, “two ways of interpreting the idea that ‘the past is still here’” (159): Mathieu Béluse’s “logic” and Papa Longoué’s “magic” as a quimboiseur. The entire novel is a stage, a coast, where the encounter between these two modes of production of knowledge and of apprehension of history and time takes place. The exceptional achievement of Glissant’s text is to have taken this
encounter seriously and to force us, readers, to also do so. The Fourth Century, indeed, seems to have been written with the palpitating conviction that this is a matter of life and death:

It is thus the power of the quimboiseur that not only explains the elision of the boundaries between past and present, but also transcends the distinction between ‘discours’ and ‘histoire’. This in turn implies that the coherence of the novel’s whole discursive structure depends upon the validity of the quimboiseur’s magic – which, therefore, the reader has to take seriously. (Britton 158–9)

Significantly, the diegetic “present” – and we discover this not immediately but as the novel accumulates – is the moment at which these lineages will fuse on the level of the apprehension of the past (Papa Longoué’s parents, Apostrophe Longoué and Stéfanise Béluse, were already a mixture of the lineages), for Mathieu is inheriting from Papa Longoué his quimboiseur knowledge and practice.

Martinique’s history, as lived through the experience of these two lineages, began with the crossing of the Atlantic – a new time was inaugurated then: “(Because the time is important in this delivery ceremony that inaugurates the new existence. Not existence, ho! but death, death with no hope. And yet hope came in the end. . . .)” (14). According to Longoué’s understanding of it, which Mathieu learns to learn, since then only four centuries have elapsed, which can only be accounted for through their effects on space, on land-seascape:

And Mathieu did not notice that that was the precise moment when, carried away with his angry speech, he had begun the chronology and set up the first milestone from which the centuries could be measured. Not the gap of a hundred years unfolding one after the other, but the space traversed and the boundaries in the space. Because every day, whenever they wanted to express irritation or admiration for someone, they would say, ‘That black man, he’s a century!’ But none of them had yet shaded their eyes with their hands and said, ‘The sea we cross is a century.’ Yes, a century. And this coast where you debark, blinded and with no soul or voice, is a century. And the forest – kept in its prime until the day you became a maroon, simply to open up before you and close back around you, the forest that later would gradually waste away, felling almost on its own the huge tree trunk with its roots where the head of mud gripped by the creature made of vines had been placed— is a century. And the land, gradually flattened out and stripped bare, where the man coming down from the hills and the man waiting in the valleys came together to hoe the same weeds, is a century. Not centuries all decked out in ribbons in the clever artifice of the Tricentennial, but centuries knotted together by unknown blood, voiceless suffering, death without echo. Spread out between the infinite land [this phrase throughout the novel refers to Africa] and the land here that had to be named, discovered, and borne; buried in those four times a hundred years that were themselves lost in wordless time . . . (273–4, emphasis added)
Centuries become, on this invitation, an arbitrary construction that must be populated with new meanings other than periods in a linear temporal projection. Such a process will therefore allow us to grasp an immanent version of history and of time in the archipelagic ambit of the Caribbean: “cada año, cada día, cada minuto pueden ser un siglo o un final de siglo. Y también cada individuo. Así queda compendiado en ese refrán antillano que reza: ‘Un negro es un siglo.’ Y no quiere decir tanto que dure, ni que tenga un rancor paciente cuando es impenetrable y no se le puede ver el final” (Tratado del Todo-Mundo 107). A century, that is, can be embodied; a day or a minute can be intensified so much as to become a century, just as Walcott insists that time’s intensity matters much more than its extension (see Chapter 3). A century, history, time—and, in some cases, even the possibility of another life—can also be found at sea: “there is the sea! The sea is there!’ . . . Why always flee to the interior? When we stood tiptoe at the tip of Pointe des Sables we could sometimes see land on the horizon. People say it’s the same land as this; the earth goes under the sea and comes back up over there, then it goes back under again and comes back up farther away, on and on like that.” (88). It can also be accumulated on the coast, that coast the enslaved peoples don’t even want to glance at when they first arrive on the Rose-Marie: the captain exclaims, “I don’t understand their silence all of a sudden. During the ten years I’ve been doing this I never caught them shouting or moaning, or even looking at the land, the shore, anything at all, when time comes to put them ashore. It’s as if the end of the journey was the most terrifying part for them” (15). A century can also coalesce in trees, rain, wind, forest, hills, and plains, which signal the division between the enslaved and the maroons’ flight within: “They saw the red earth down there through the branches framing it, checkered parcels of land outlined in stones and rolling in large plowed squares to lap against the first wooded depths where the hillside sloped upward. The sea of earth and the shore of dark trees seemed almost at war” (36).

25 “each year, each day, each minute can be a century or an end-of-century. And also each individual. So it is contained in that Antillean saying that goes, ‘A black man is a century.’ And it does not mean that he lasts that much, nor that he has a patient hatred, but rather that he is impenetrable and one cannot see the end of him.”
All of these insular phenomena and spaces, as we have seen, are history; they are temporalized throughout Glissant’s novel. What we face here, then, is a history, a time, and a way of understanding and engaging with them much more akin to the “geological time” we discussed in the previous chapter: a slower process that is nevertheless deeply dynamic, in constant change, and where a radical boundary between “periods,” “epochs,” “pasts,” “presents,” and “futures” is absolutely impossible to erect. It is only fitting, therefore, that the novel ends with a compelling affirmation of the baroque Caribbean mixture, of the tidalectics of departure and arrival, with no end and no beginning:

Because the sea had intermingled the men who had come from so far away, and the land to which they were delivered had strengthened them with different sap. And the red lands had mixed with the black lands, the rock and lava with the sand, the clay with the flash of flint, the backwaters with the sea and the sea with the sky, giving birth in the battered calabash floating on the waters to a new human cry and a new echo. . . . A boat, a boat that was open and transparent as well, one that would finally make delivery be followed by departure, departure be followed by arrival. The black hole of time and forgetting, from which you are emerging. The land around you that is not like a rat trap where you feel yourself going rancid: there is the sea (the sea is there!) and that line strengthening along the bottom of the deep waters to moor one speck of earth to another speck of earth, the coast that is here to the visible coast one faces. . . . Life is what never subsides. . . . It waits patiently . . . it curls up on the burning earth. And in the calm, monotonous benevolence rising from the night, and far away over all the islands and the mown fields and the echoing forests, he [Mathieu] saw the tall transparent ship that sailed through the lands. He heard the sound of chains being manipulated, the rhythmic beat of yesyesyes, the canes snapping off under the propeller, in the sun, yes, in the height of the hot season—this is fever this is a world the world and the word sinks in the voice gets louder the voice burns in the motionless fire and inside his head he is spinning bearing off sweeping away ripening—and it has no end ho and no beginning. (292.4)

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Both chronotopic operations in *El siglo de las luces* and *The Fourth Century*—the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space—are interdependent, and in no way is that interdependence premised on a hierarchical arrangement. Both achieve a radical critique of capitalist time-space through the elaboration and affirmation of a spatialized untimeliness (a forgetful memory in the present) and of a temporalized differential space (a “second nature” as work and product; the third term of the coast) in the Caribbean. Most importantly, both these processes are deployed from and through the Caribbean, from and through the chronotope of the coast and its motif of encounter.
Such chronotope of an “untimely” and “differential” coast and, with it, of untimely and differential islands, is what many Caribbean texts, including especially *El siglo de las luces* and *The Fourth Century*, offer to the world.

Furthermore, the foregoing discussion of the novels’ operations with respect to time and space has shown – and this is an admittedly feverish wish – that it is possible to create and affirm a coast other than that which emerges from the legendary “my land!,” based, as it is, on the regime of the (imperial) seen from the perpendicular ship mast or from the two-dimensional map. A coast and an island from within, the novels teach us, might respond to quite different horizons of expectations and of experience: for instance, the tidalectics of the Middle Passage; the coastal time-space that, in its slow and obstinate movement, forever resists the subjugation by capitalist coloniality and its forward-oriented, ever-increasing speed; the perception of unseen subtle variation; the attention to a sound and to a taste that is new to the world. Immanence is required for the production of new modes of history-making, of new times and new spaces, of, in a word, new lives.
Chapter 5: Living with the Sea: “El cruce la bahía de Guánica,” “Para llegar a Isla Verde,” Poetics of Relation, and The Restless Earth

What is the earthly paradise for our visitors? Two weeks without rain and a mahogany tan, and, at sunset, local troubadours in straw hats and floral shirts beating ‘Yellow Bird’ and ‘Banana Boat Song’ to death. There is a territory wider than this—wider than the limits made by the map of an island—which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers.

Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” 81-2

But it is impossible to use the sea. . . .

Just as the Caribbean Atlantic, which, whether twisted rock or sand spells out the same fate for The quaking of the world where the new Water is born.

Edouard Glissant, Poetic Intention 230-1

Out to Sea

Throughout the preceding chapters, we have explored Caribbean literary texts concerned with imagining islands from an immanent perspective. Our study, more specifically, has focused on two of the most salient phenomena associated with insularity: tropical light and the insular coast. We have traced the ways in which, mostly, novels and poems by Walcott, Rodríguez Juliá, Glissant and Carpentier have produced a counter-imagination from within against capitalist coloniality’s model of perceiving and deploying islands, from the first voyages of imperial agents to the recent voyages of global tourists. This counter-imagination concerns, primarily, sense perception (a refashioning of vision itself and an intensification of senses beyond vision); time (an emphasis on the untimely slow time of the coast); and space (a reconfiguration of space inspired by the coastal tidalectics of perpetual movement).

The sea, a third element bearing a close relationship with insularity, has been a constant pulsation throughout our argument. In the obsessions of the historical figures in Walcott’s Tiepolo’s Hound and in Rodríguez Juliá’s El espíritu de la luz, the sea was to be found. Its presence was indisputable in the Atlantic circuits and spiraling baroque (recall the spiral as a maritime concept coming out of the sea conch) of Carpentier’s El siglo de las luces. The history painstakingly constructed
by Glissant’s *The Fourth Century* was, on its part, especially sea-bound. At long last, then, our movement goes out to sea and attends to its pulsations.

This chapter will proceed, as have the previous ones, tidalectically. First, it will trace the sea of History, that is, the uses to which capitalist coloniality has submitted the sea. Concomitantly, it will consider the parallel mythologization (as we will see, usually performed via a process of metaphorization) of the sea. Then, the discussion will be re-located within the Caribbean in order to explore the ways in which the chronicles “El cruce de la bahía de Guánica y otras ternuras de la Medianía” (“The Crossing of Guánica Bay and Other Tender Occurrences of Middle Age”) and “Para llegar a Isla Verde” (“To Arrive at Isla Verde”) by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, as well as the opening section of Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* and some poems from *The Restless Earth*, produce a different engagement with the sea, both on the level of and in relationship with history and metaphor. The implicit understanding throughout is that the sea (as the light and the coast in previous chapters) must be understood, at once, on three levels: a natural work (recall Lefebvre’s terminology here), a force of History and of history, and a mythologized and metaphorized realm in response to diverse interests. Although these dimensions are distinguishable, they have tended to operate in an entangled fashion.

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1 Hans Blumenberg’s *Shipwreck with Spectator* has primarily informed my understanding of the sea-as-metaphor in the western tradition, especially as it pertains to philosophical and historical debates. Blumenberg studies—as much as he did those of light, discussed in Chapter 2— the shifting “nautical metaphors of existence” (7) that have undergirded western thought from the ancient Greeks until the twentieth century, passing through Horace, Lucretius, Montaigne, Voltaire, Abbé Galiani, Goethe, Nietzsche, Burckhardt, among others. Blumenberg finds in the metaphors of human existence as a “perilous sea voyage” (7) with the concomitant images of potential shipwreck, and the philosopher, historian or scientist as either the spectator or the survivor of catastrophe—a fundamental entry point when attempting to answer the questions of how and in what terms western thought has understood such paradigmatic problems as humanity, nature, knowledge, history, and progress. Blumenberg does not, however, pay any attention to the intense relationship between the tradition he studies and the capitalist uses of the sea. In other words, his essay does not consider the extent to which the particular understanding of the aforementioned problems to be found in the “metaphorics of the sea” is informed, not just by a sort of suprahistorical human encounter with the sea, but also and quite crucially, by the fundamentally maritime phenomena of capitalism’s expansion and the parallel production of knowledge concerning alterity.
Interlude: Ocean and Sea

Franco Cassano, whose work on the Mediterranean was discussed in Chapter 3, distinguishes between the sea and the ocean, claiming that the latter, insofar as it is a fundamentally alien element to humans, makes us absolutely dependent on technology in order to survive. Cassano’s ocean also tends to dissolve all kinds of connections and alliances. Such are the reasons why, according to him, the ocean has been so intensely linked to the development of capitalism and its attendant technologies, as we will see presently. Once the sea becomes the ocean, the “occidental” becomes an absolute and a “planetary uprootedness” ensues (Pensamiento meridiano 29). Insofar as the sea, on the contrary, maintains the connection with land, humanity does not become absolutely helpless in its midst. Cassano suggests, consequently, that “southern thought” has appeared in and by the sea (the Mediterranean Sea more specifically) because it constitutes a dialectical way of thinking that refuses both absolute uprootedness (oceanic thought) and absolute rootedness (landed thought) in favor of a constant back and forth movement out to sea and back to land.

Although Cassano’s attempt at eking out a concept—the sea—from the apparently all-reaching grasp of capitalism is quite admirable, one should be careful not to surrender entirely the concept of ocean itself. Epeli Hau’ofa’s work, for instance, argues for the profound and ancestral relationship of Pacific islanders to the ocean as a home rather than as an alien, hostile element where absolute dependence on technology ensues. Both in his “we are the ocean” call and through the Pacific islanders’ understanding of their region as a “sea of islands” instead of as “islands at sea,” are contained the elements for reclaiming and reimagining the ocean as something other than a passive surface and tool of for capitalism.2

Moreover, Cassano’s implied fear of the suppression of the human itself when on the ocean should cause us to pause. As we will see with Glissant’s texts, it is possible to relate to the utter

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2 See We Are the Ocean, especially the essays entitled “Our Sea of Islands” and “The Ocean in Us.”
mystery of the ocean in creative ways that do not attempt to suppress or to overcome such unknowability. To recall our discussion in Chapter 2, the ocean definitely requires of us something of Camille Pissarro’s “modesty.” Finally, the admittedly dialectical structure of thought Cassano employs for understanding the movement from land to sea and back neglects the coast itself, where, as we have seen, the movement is both and neither. Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectics, which we should recall comes out of the observation of an Afro-Caribbean woman walking both on land and on water and, what is more, doing so as part of her everyday existence rather than as an exceptional back and forth trip, is much more compelling for our purposes. For all these reasons, against an absolute distinction between the concepts “ocean” and “sea,” I shall use them rather interchangeably in what follows.

The Sea/Ocean of History and Metaphor

That capitalism has been “made at sea” is not a new claim, but it is too often neglected. Indeed, the very names of the regions we accounted for in Chapter 1 — Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Pacific — while tracing how islands have been systematically imagined, used, and produced by the complex and shifting interests of capitalist coloniality, foreground the seas and oceans upon which islands were encountered. Hegel’s well-known statement on the sea in his *Philosophy of Right* poignantly condenses the richly significant claim of the connections between capitalism and the

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3 See Rediker and Linebaugh, Casarino, Maneke, Steinberg, among others. Generally ignored, many crucial aspects for the development and consolidation of capitalism at a world scale, such as insurance and publicity, are deeply bound up with seafaring and slavery. On the question of the maritime origins of life insurance in connection with slavery, Tim Armstrong writes: “Slavery thus occupies a middle position in the progress from insurance on goods to insurance on persons, providing a way of thinking about the value of a life. The ransom as an externally imposed ‘market’ value serves as a historically contingent measure for what was to become a more general equation of the person and economic value. In origin, then, when we insure our lives we are imagining the possibility of capture, or ‘buying ourselves back from death.’ But the life so imagined is anything other than for ourselves; it is a life lived in a state of negation. Behind this equation lurks the thinking on slavery that descends from Aristotle to Hegel: the slave has given up his or her existence to others and accepted subordination rather than face death” (170). On publicity, see Carla Rahn Phillips’ essay, which argues that: “publicity itself became a primary result of seaborne exploration in the eighteenth century. . . . The growing literate elite in Europe, with its culture of salons, intellectual societies, and bourgeois dabbling in the sciences, gloried in reports of exploration and exotic destinations. They were especially charmed by tales of unspoiled island paradises in the Pacific Ocean. . . . The record of modern exploration by sea and land can usefully be analyzed as a commodity. Whether produced by legitimate travelers or by rogues and charlatans, it supplied a public demand for vicarious adventure and continues to do so today, as demonstrated by the continued popularity of travel stories in print and other media” (75-6).
ocean, along with the concomitant and contradictory concepts, so dear to capitalism, of risk, industry, flux, danger, destruction, and communication:

The natural element for industry, animating its outward movement, is the sea. Since the passion for gain involves risk, industry though bent on gain yet lifts itself above it; instead of remaining rooted to the soil and the limited circle of civil life with its pleasures and desires, it embraces the element of flux, danger, and destruction. Further, the sea is the greatest means of communication, and trade by sea creates commercial connections between distant countries and so relations involving contractual rights. At the same time, commerce of this kind is the most potent instrument of culture, and through it trade acquires its significance in the history of the world. (qtd. in Cohen 75)

Since “prehistory,” a complex and persistent, though ever-changing, set of relations allowed maritime movement and commerce to become a more economically viable alternative than land-based trade. In the Mediterranean, a system of maritime exchange and trade was established since ancient times. Trade with and between different regions in Europe, Asia, and Africa was also primarily conducted by sea. Researchers of such regions and eras persistently describe navigational developments as crucial technological feats for the advancement of both colonization and capitalism. Once agriculture became an activity capable of producing surplus beyond what was needed solely for subsistence, navigation allowed, among other things, for: (1) the establishment of trade networks, including the trade of bodies for labor; (2) the consolidation of a merchant class, which can be described as the bourgeoisie’s antecedent and which, as the holder of the necessary capital, would later have a premier role to play in the expansion of western European empires; and (3) the establishment of economically prominent and culturally diverse port cities.

In the Mediterranean, this relationship with the sea based on commerce was built mainly around nautical miles close to the coasts. According to many observers, for the civilizations constructed and destroyed around the Mediterranean Sea, the vast oceans—most especially the Atlantic—out of sight of land were still unfathomable. The Atlantic was, indeed, the subject of

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4 See, especially, Braudel and Casson.
5 For more on this, see Braudel, Steinberg, Fernández-Armesto, and Horden and Purcell. This situation was, of course, not the case everywhere. For example, the peoples who populated the Caribbean islands, as is well known, were sophisticated
significant mythical discourses. Thule, Atlantis, the Hesperides, the Fortunate Isles or Isles of the Blessed, the Ocean of the Dead, and the existence of horrendous sea-monsters and alluring sirens, among others, are some of the interconnected myths that played a role in the avoidance of and fascination with the open Atlantic beyond the Pillars of Hercules. But already in this mythic archive it is evident that islands hold premier importance. In these myths, it is not a matter of the ocean per se, or, if so, only of the ocean by itself. Rather, it is the possibility of islands, both of eternal life and of desperate death, that which catalyzes the mythical imagination.6

Already “by the mid-fifteenth century, according to Mollat du Jourdin, all Europe had embraced the concept of sea power as a necessary route toward achieving economic and political power and as part of the state-ideal” (Steinberg 75). The consequent initiative of primarily Iberian agents in recurrently crossing the Atlantic provoked, not surprisingly, a questioning of the ocean itself in economic and political terms. The northern European powers (especially the Dutch and the English), who had concentrated until then on the lucrative fishing commerce but now wanted a share in the imperialist bounty, led the debate, which Steinberg calls “the Battle of the Books,” between 1580 and 1650 (89). Is the ocean a space? If so, of what kind? Who gets to traverse it and by what means? Is it controllable at all? If so, who gets to control it and how is such a decision to be made?

In his thorough account of the deliberations, where he describes not only the conceptions of the ocean held by traders in the Indian Ocean, by Micronesians, and by agents of the Roman Empire, but also how these all influenced to varying degrees the eventual Law of the Seas recognized internationally, Steinberg concludes that the model holding greater ascendancy on the development of western European maritime empires of later centuries was that of the Mediterranean under

6 See, for instance, Butel’s thorough account of the Atlantic’s mythic archive.
Roman rule. In this model, the ocean was not a substance that could be possessed by any one state or individual (*imperium*), but it could—and should—be guarded and controlled (*dominium*). From there, one can trace the western European notion, which was to become dominant, of the ocean as an *empty* space, fundamentally untamable but exploitable, and across which one could traverse in “floating states” (ships) to establish dominance overseas.

Under the aegis of the *dominium* model, the ocean, its resources, and, as we shall see presently, the routes devised to traverse it according to favorable winds and other such considerations, could not be turned into private property per se, but they could be policed and controlled by steward states. In fact, thinkers such as Hugo Grotius—author of the famous *Mare liberum* that established, by virtue of a difference between an impossible “common property” and a desirable “common use,” that “the sea cannot be possessed” (Steinberg 91)—argued that oceanic trade routes, of the essence for the establishment of overseas empires—Elizabeth Mancke calls them, accordingly, “empires of access”—could not be controlled or monopolized as colonies (land) could. This would obviously lead to mercantilist capitalism’s protectionist policies concerning the commerce “with” colonies overseas. Hence, also, the everlasting threat of piracy at sea, which was often used as a state-sanctioned policy for inter-imperial competition but which, as Rediker and Linebaugh have amply demonstrated, was a weapon frequently turned against the interests of the State.

From the hotly contested discussions in western European political quarters concerning oceanic routes, victorious would emerge a version of Grotius’ argument: the idea that it was possible to establish a “law of the seas” that guaranteed the possibility of every State (this, of course, surreptitiously meant every imperial, powerful State with the means to do so) to use and traverse the ocean as a “free domain.” At this point, when it was made submittable to law, the ocean was caught up with the development and consolidation of a different kind of capitalism—the industrial capitalism of the “free trade.” This process, however, was not straightforward.
In order to be subject(ed) to the law, the idea that the ocean was a “free void” – so akin to the interests of capitalist coloniality that it was to find many exalted, romantic representations – had to be delimited in its reach. As we have seen, the fundamentally liquid character of the ocean, its primary difference with respect to land, its originary deterritorialized quality, was much too threatening for the law. In order to contain it, the ocean had to be, first, conceptualized as territory. As Steinberg insists, this was a matter to be performed by capitalism itself, so adept in the constant dynamic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. And, I might add, islands, as “obvious” territories to be found at sea between the “Old” world and the “New,” were made to aid immensely in the process. In other words, islands were the “territories” that could achieve the improbable feat of territorializing the unterritorializable.

For the purposes of capitalist coloniality islands became, thus, pawns of sorts that allowed for the territorialization and subsequent “stewardship” of oceanic routes. As we saw in Chapter 1, islands also nourished in various respects those traversing the oceans, a situation interpreted, in many cases, as an opportunity to claim the former as imperial possessions. Islands were, as much as the ocean was, imagined by imperial agents as fundamentally empty space, pure blankness waiting to be found. Whether there were human inhabitants or not, and definitely despite the fact that there were other species living in them, the islands “discovered” were empty: even if “savages” inhabited them, islands had vast resources left to waste; the land did not produce for surplus; there was no civilization to speak of. As Chapter 1 showed, in the developing interests of capitalist coloniality, islands were: (1) historically forced to function as “specks” in the ocean’s vastness that could be guiltlessly used, among other things, as stepping-stones, entrepôts, trading posts, and sites to procure refreshment and rest from oceanic voyages; and, (2) mythically imagined as oases of bounty or hellish threats. To put it differently, islands were produced to fulfill the aforementioned needs, but in order for that process to take place, islands were first assumed as given in a supreme emptiness that required
“filling” with content, that required a “design.” This was true, differences notwithstanding, in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific.

The supreme importance of the ocean for the development and expansion of capitalist coloniality that we have been describing persists to this day. Even in today’s global capitalism, when the ocean’s role as the premier medium for travel has been decidedly displaced by air, the main arteries for the movement and distribution of commodities continue to be the oceans. Indeed, as Patricia Yaeger reminds us: “our era’s airborne imaginary should not mask the real materiality on which late capitalism is based: Earth’s commerce still depends on oceans. Ninety percent of the world’s good (most of what we eat or type on or wear) still travels in container ships” (523). Carolyn Cartier, on her part, explains that, simultaneously with the rising hegemony of air travel, “from 1960 to 1990, annual volumes of international sea trade quadrupled . . . and multinational corporate activity restructured and intensified” (279). She goes on to summarize the current, late-capitalist situation, which increasingly eclipses both the sea’s importance and the actual labor that sustains it (an equivalent state of affairs to that of islands worldwide), thus:

Toward the end of the industrial era, however, national merchant fleets shrank in equipment and personnel, and postwar vessel-ownership patterns became concentrated, so that by the 1990s five countries—Greece, Japan, the United States, Norway, and Hong Kong, in order of total tonnage—controlled more than half of the world merchant fleet. Meanwhile, the flags-of-convenience strategy increased in use, reflecting increased costs in the shipping industry and opportunities to register in countries that offered low registration fees and minimal regulations. . . . By 1991, 70 percent of the U.S.-owned fleet was registered in tax-haven countries . . . . Critically, flags of convenience have allowed shipowners to hire nonunion workers at low wages, often from yet another country. In these ways the shipping industry has adopted a flexible (minimal job security) labor regime, mirroring the conditions of flexible production in other industries of the postindustrial world economy. One result is that dockworkers have become oddly invisible, at least in comparison with the early twentieth century, when they were numerous and often dominated labor unions in port cities. . . . But the increased size of bulk carriers and the spread of container technology caused massive job losses in the shipping industry during the 1970s, rendering the remaining dockworkers relatively powerless as a labor force. Now cargo ships flying flags of convenience hire workers who are significantly deterritorialized with respect to the place of

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7 On the conceptualization of space as “empty” and in need of a “design,” see Lefebvre 27–8, and Chapter 3.  
8 Margaret Cohen provides a more precise, and higher, figure: “currently, 96 percent of the world’s freight measured in terms of weight travels by sea, and the figure is increasing with the growth of international trade” (75).
The supreme importance accorded to the delimitation and local control of a country’s “Exclusive Economic Zone,” a concept fabricated by the United Nations’ 1982 Law of the Sea, provides a useful barometer of the continued relevance of the oceans’ territorialization for global capitalism. The process has also ensured the consolidation of the United States as the 20th century world master:

All told, this new ocean territorialism tripled the size of the United States and generated a global ‘scramble for the oceans.’ In 1982 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea catalyzed the most radical remapping of the globe in modern history, expanding all coastal nations through an Exclusive Economic Zone of two hundred nautical miles. Roughly thirty-eight million square nautical miles of the global sea were enclosed by the state, a privatization of thirty-five percent of the world’s ocean. (DeLoughrey, “Heavy Waters” 705)

DeLoughrey goes on to claim that such late territorialization of the seas is “nearly synonymous with militarization,” as the control is not only over ocean surface but also submarine and air space claims that protect the passage of nuclear submarines, sea-launched missiles, and maritime surveillance systems undergirded by thirty thousand miles of submarine cables. While the ‘high seas’ are legally designated a ‘global commons,’ the United States has effectively monopolized them through missile test ‘warning zones’ that restrict free passage. So while the new Atlantic studies might claim that the sea cannot be possessed, since the end of World War II the number of military vessels at sea has doubled; by the 1980s over a thousand nuclear-powered vessels patrolled the world’s oceans. (706-7)

As was anticipated above, this chilling account of the sea of History has worked alongside a simultaneous process of metaphorization of the sea serving capitalism’s interests. In the context of a critique of late capitalism’s concept of “the Pacific Rim,” Christopher Connery argues that:

Modernity arose out of the world ocean . . . Ocean as source and ocean as destiny figure in the ocean’s mythological temporality; it is both life-giving mother and final frontier. The conquest of the world ocean being coterminous with the rise of Western capitalism, it is

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9 The supremacy of air travel should also not elide from view a parallel production of maritime travelers, namely the “castaways (boat people)” (Hulme, “Cast Away” 196) so tragically common in the Caribbean region and elsewhere.
natural that the ocean has long functioned as capital’s myth element, down to the postfrontier of Pacific Rim discourse. (“Oceanic Feeling” 288-9)

Notice that Connery’s description of the sea as capitalism’s “myth element” concerns primarily the sea’s *metaphorization* always under an ambiguous sign: in this case, the sea as either source or final frontier. The importance of what Hans Blumenberg calls, in *Shipwreck with Spectator*, the “metaphorics of the sea” for capitalism lies, I argue, precisely in such inherent ambiguity, one that Connery remarks makes the ocean “signify . . . , but in a manner beyond resolve” (“Oceanic Feeling” 290). Just like “island,” the sea is deployed both positively and negatively for the advance of capitalism and, with it, of the human civilization: it is both a vehicle of connection and of isolation; a fluid element ensuring human contact and movement and a hostile environment provoking human wreck and death; a fundamentally unknowable and unexploitable other and an element susceptible to formidable degrees of exploitation for its extraordinary wealth of resources. Steinberg’s work referred to above, which ironically insists on a “*territorial political economy* approach” (10) in order to challenge traditional approaches that only perceive the ocean as a “resource provider,” a “transport surface,” or a “battleground or force-field” (11), helps us in understanding how capitalism’s paradoxical need for both mobility and fixity has informed to no small extent its parallel imagination, deployment, and use of the sea.

Still, just as a particular mythical imaginary concerning the “island,” which, as we have seen, is ultimately structured as a negation, has coalesced into a dominant position, an overarching metaphorization of the sea as a *unifying element* has been particularly exploited by capitalism:

The idea of the West as trade-borne land of the free has a long history. Long before the world actually became unified through the operation of multi- and transnational capital, capital adopted a myth of a world unified through oceangoing trade, whose unity was present in the liberality and putative limitlessness of the free market. . . . A claim was made very early in the history of capital that the sea-trade emporium was *synecdochic* for the

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10 Although, to tell from world news, such exploitation is, like dock and ship workers, container ships, and the militarization of the sea, also quite invisible.
entire world and that the market was subject to a preexisting and natural global logic. (Connery, “Oceanic Feeling” 298)\(^{11}\)

For the sea to work as a metaphor for the (commercial) unity of peoples and lands, however, its fundamental ambiguity pointed out above –namely, that between deterritorialization and territorialization– had to be resolved. Just like on the level of History discussed above, on that of metaphor, too, the elementally deterritorialized sea also had to become recognizable as territory, an achievement for which, again, islands and their respective contradictory metaphorizations – connection/isolation, openness/boundedness, feminine receptiveness/masculine penetration, and so on– played no small a part.

Connery’s account, moreover, incorporates the fascinating claim that capitalism’s metaphorization of the sea has operated in intimate identification with the sublime: “in the language of Western expansionism, whether of empire or of consciousness, . . . this oceanic sublime is an oft-invoked source of inspiration” (‘Oceanic Feeling’ 289). Although the scope of Connery’s essay precludes him from furthering this observation, we should recall in our present context the great extent to which the concept of the sublime is related to Romanticism, an aesthetic that favored quite heavily the encounter with the “free void” of the sea both in literature as well as in the visual arts.\(^{12}\)

In fact, the Romantics’ metaphorization of the sea can be identified as one mode of critique of capitalism’s logic, insofar as it usually proceeded in the form of an escape from the not-so-sublime effects of capitalism on land, and especially on the big European cities. However, the familiar \textit{Bildungsroman} itinerary consisting of a temporary escape to sea and the eventual (and apparently inevitable) return from it retains something of capitalism’s understanding of the sea as something to visit more or less briefly and eventually abandon. What is more, inasmuch as the return of the human from the sea tended to be represented as the culmination of a voyage in which the former was

\(^{11}\) See, also, Mancke and Janzen.

\(^{12}\) For more on this, see Jonathan Raban’s Introduction to \textit{The Oxford Book of the Sea}, where he details the crucial connections of “Romantic theory” with the sea in works by, among others, Coleridge, Byron, and Conrad (13-21). See also relevant sections in Corbin’s \textit{The Lure of the Sea}. 

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bettered by virtue of its encounter with the latter, such movement implied the reinforcement of the human figure’s apparent inevitability as the encounter’s primary protagonist.13

A second mode of critique of capitalism’s metaphorization of the sea can be found in the recent “turn to the seas” within different academic disciplines, of which we shall briefly consider three examples. Using quite a different register than Connery’s, Patricia Yaeger takes strong issue with the identification of the ocean and the sublime when she writes: “But living on the edge of hypertechnologized oceans, we need to throw our mythologies wide open. What is the loss of faith compared with the loss of the living ocean? How do we feel (or even breathe) when the ocean becomes ocean$?” (538). Hester Blum has further insisted on the need to engage the ocean beyond metaphor:

The sea is not a metaphor. Figurative language has its place in analyses of the maritime world, certainly, but oceanic studies could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea’s abyss of representation. . . . The ready availability—and undeniable utility—of fluidity as an oceanic figure means that the actual sea has often been rendered immaterial in transnational work, however usefully such work formulates the ethos of transnationalism and oceanic studies alike. (670)

Iain Chambers, finally, argues for an exactly opposite position to both Yaeger’s and Blum’s when he defends the sea-as-metaphor for the sake of revitalizing theory: “the liquid insistency of the sea [that] can provide ontological criteria with which to reconfigure our theoretical prison house” (“Maritime Criticism” 679). Notice, however, the great extent to which these three positions concerning the capitalist metaphorization of the sea—regardless of the fact that the last is quite dissonant with respect to the first two— are informed by a more or less explicit analytical need that ends up producing an ill-advised stark opposition between “history” and “metaphor.” Such opposition makes it impossible to perceive the ways in which, although discernible, the dimensions of history and metaphor have operated in a mutually reinforcing fashion.

13 Although it is beyond the scope of this project, I should point to the fact that many Caribbean literary texts from the 19th century also bore the trace of a Romantic aesthetic linked to bodies of water. One would need to explore whether or not this link, in the work of José María Heredia, for instance, resembles what was described above concerning Romanticism’s metaphorization of the sea.
In contrast to capitalist coloniality’s History and Metaphor of the sea, as well as to the two modes of critique of the latter briefly sketched above, the present chapter’s dialogue with Caribbean texts seeks to adumbrate the ways in which they engage and produce both historicizations and metaphorizations of the sea while situated within a daily, ordinary experience of life by the sea. After a general account of the Caribbean Sea itself, the rest of this chapter shall focus on two chronicles by Rodríguez Juliá, on the opening section of Glissant’s Poetics of Relation, and on some of the latter’s poems. As we will see, the crucial difference these texts constitute with respect to our previous exploration of capitalist coloniality’s relationship with the sea emerges not from a denial of the problems of history, myth, and metaphor, but rather from the imaginative, non-utilitarian, non-exploitative engagement with the sea that becomes possible when it is experienced as an immanent force, as a force of (everyday) life, and as something that is, in its incommensurably slow time, always there. The difference, in a word, has to do with living in “a place whose only power / is the exploding spray along its coast” (Walcott, Tiepolo’s Hound 162).

**Living with the (Caribbean) Sea**

A first glance at the immediate present shows a Caribbean relationship with the sea mediated by the powerful machine of global capital: the tourist industry (both as a more or less grounded industry in hotels and resorts that take over our coasts, and as a transient industry in massive cruise ships that take over our inter-insular sea routes); the mobility of cheap labor force between Caribbean islands and toward the United States in yolas or balsas; the nodes of a global network of lucrative businesses, the most potent and deadly of which is, of course, drug trafficking; the dumping site of capitalism’s debris, waste, garbage, “spills,” and of the excesses of nuclear experimentation and of military operations.14

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14 The following are but a few examples of the latter phenomena in the Caribbean and elsewhere: the recent BP “oil spill” in the Gulf of Mexico; the paintings on the “tropical dump” by the Cuban Tomás Sánchez (my gratitude to Francisco J. Hernández-Adrián for sharing this work with me); the sudden and massive death of legions of species of fish and whales in
A first glance at the remote past reveals indisputably, however, that the native inhabitants of the islands, part of groups moving from the continent through the insular parenthesis of the Caribbean, had developed a strong connection with the sea, insofar as they became great voyagers at sea and powerful colonizers, too, through the sea. They also developed livelihoods that depended to a great extent on their maritime catch and their inter-insular maritime relations. But the natives were almost entirely wiped out; the stroke of empire was decisive in that respect, unyielding, mortal.

What happened in between this stark contrast? What happened between the remote past and the immediate present? A general and tentative answer would have it that a much more complex relationship with the sea developed in the centuries of western European and, later, U.S. colonization in the Caribbean. For many Caribbean peoples, the sea was a means to freedom, a line of flight: the stories of enslaved peoples who managed to create a different life for themselves by being employed as sailors, through commercial deals by contraband means, or as a result of surreptitious escapes on a ship, are innumerable and historically recorded. Equally crucial was the seaborne spread of liberating and inspiring news from rebellions in other zones of the European empires.

Still, and at the same time, a fear, a foreboding of the sea was brewing: it was through the sea that death came ashore. The sea brought the unspeakable tragedy of slavery. The sea transported every agent of empire to rule the plantations, every soldier to suppress the rebellions, every commodity that only Fanon’s “rich because you are white and white because you are rich” could use, enjoy, eat, sweeten his coffee with. And so much more… The sea also took so much away: the Pacific; the use of the ocean as generalized trash disposal (see, for instance, Yaeger’s “Sea Trash” and DeLoughrey’s “Heavy Waters”); the history of “Million Dollar Point,” a US military underwater dump in the Pacific (see <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/10/million_point.php>); among many others.

For more on these matters, see, among others, David Watts’ The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change since 1492; Samuel M. Wilson’s The Archaeology of the Caribbean, Irving Rouse’s The Taínos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus, essays in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion, and in Samuel M. Wilson (ed.), The Indigenous People of the Caribbean.

See, for instance, Marcus Rediker’s books, Jon Sensbach’s Rebecca’s Revival, the biography of Olaudah Equiano, Sybille Fischer’s Modernity Disavowed, historical accounts of the Haitian Revolution, among many others.
product of endless and miserable work that never saw its manufactured results except furtively in the master’s mansion, countless bodies either by choice or postmortem, native and black “specimens” for show in some European castle or circus, dissected fauna and flora for the sophistication of a necrophilic science or for the degustation of exotic, tropical fruits. And so much more… The sea, in a word, brought ashore and took away the miseries and tragedies of capitalist coloniality, and was made to become the latter’s primary means of movement, growth, expansion, conquest.17

But, needless to say, despite its character as quite a maritime set of phenomena, capitalist coloniality cannot live exclusively on and off of the sea. Once western European empires started acquiring strongholds on Caribbean islands, the economies established were grounded though they were brought ashore. Specifically, empires sought a new regime of land for the development of plantation economies, that mixture, as we saw in Chapter 1, of an agricultural and an industrial complex admitting only a one-crop scorching of the land. Thus, (1) the devastation (“clearing”) of the lands to unbearable limits that are still with us today;18 (2) the violent expropriations and re-territorializations that would ensure access to more land; (3) the vast reorganization of the relationship between peoples and lands resulting in the alienation of the former from the latter despite the regime’s “post” colonial avatar’s insistence, in its nationalist bent, on the need of a heartland for a “national identity” to develop.

Thereafter, the possibilities for constructing a maritime civilization on the basis of networks already established by native inhabitants were curtailed. The inter-insular connections have been systematically stunted not only because of the islands’ balkanization performed by the different western European and U.S. empires to this day, but also because of a devastating complicity on the

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17 Caribbean texts have not failed to record this deep fear of the sea. In Puerto Rico, notorious examples include Antonio Pedreira (see Insularismo) and René Marqués (see such texts as La vispera del hombre and “En la popa hay un cuerpo reclinado”). The Cuban Alberto Pedro’s play Mar nuestro is a more recent example, although the fear of the sea in this case is directly related to the balsero’s experience. Another Cuban, Virgilio Piñera, a much forgotten writer persecuted by the Castro regime, wrote “La isla en peso,” a remarkable poem figuring the sea as an asphyxiating force. But, I hasten to add, Piñera also wrote “Isla,” a poem on becoming an island as a kind of liberatory experience “from all restlessness.”

18 See, for instance, Benítez-Rojo’s “Paraisos perdidos,” Grove, Richardson, among others. See also information and references in Chapter 1.
part of thoroughly bureaucratized and co-opted “post” colonial regimes and governments. A striking instance of this situation is the lack of State-run, cheap transportation between islands. Only a few ferries, many in questionable conditions and quite unreliable, travel between some of the Caribbean islands. The result, for instance, is that Jamaica, for Puerto Ricans, is much farther away (and, consequently, much more expensive to get to) than any destination on the east coast of the United States. If not in yolas, the trips between many islands are performed by the (“legal” or “illegal”) rich and famous on their private yachts, which, on a daily basis, travel with drugs, sex workers and the miseries of Caribbean peoples as passengers.

The role of tourism, as anticipated above, has also been central in shaping the Caribbean peoples’ relationship with the sea in recent history. Krista Thompson’s *An Eye for the Tropics*, a study on tourism and photography in the Anglophone Caribbean, attests to this. Thompson insists on the intimate connection between the new forms of colonialism in the age of emancipation and the development of tourism with its image-oriented regime. Her argument reveals the fascinating paradox, with respect to capitalism’s trajectory, of an industry that reaches the sea only after having exploited the land: at least in the Anglophone Caribbean, tourism first developed at the end of the nineteenth century with a concentration on land, jungles, orderly plantations, and cottages. It took decades for it to move out to the coast, where it could exploit the images of pristine beaches, coconut trees, and happy white women on bikinis.

Today, countless beaches in the Caribbean have been privatized, their access restricted to hotel patrons, and their uses submerged in deeply problematic sexual, racial, and class politics. “Natives” are being banished even from the very regime of visualization Lefebvre identifies with late

19 “We know what threatens Caribbeanness: the historical balkanization of the islands, the inculcation of different and often ‘opposed’ major languages (the quarrel between French and Anglo-American English), the umbilical cords that maintain, in a rigid or flexible way, many of these islands within the sphere of influence of a particular metropolitan power, the presence of frightening and powerful neighbors, Canada and especially the United States” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 222).

20 The shift started in the 1930s, a time when Puerto Rican intellectuals were also engaged in an intense (and, most often than not, visualized) defense of insularity for the (touristic) consumption of the U.S. empire. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Richard Rosa’s “Business as Pleasure.”

21 A particularly powerful instantiation of this, among innumerable others, is the film *Heading South.*
capitalism: as the Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega deplores, high-rising hotels impede even our view of the ocean:

La verdad pura y dura es que la tragedia costera se reproduce sin freno. En Cataño, en Dorado, en Vega Baja, en Isabela, en Loiza, en Luqillo, en Vieques, en Culebra, en todos los rincones agraciados por el vaivén perpetuo de las olas, nos están robando a mano armada el mar. Pronto habrá que alquilar balcones en condominios de lujo o pagar vueltas en lanchas paseadoras para rememorar la infinidad de la onda o el sabor de la salpicadura en la piel. La ocultación sistemática del paisaje constituye un delito de lesa humanidad. Una de las actividades más gratificantes con que contamos los isleños es la contemplación del océano. En medio del ajetreo urbano, el rumor hipnótico del oleaje provoca un estado meditativo sumamente relajante. Con tamaño instrumento de paz a nuestro alcance, es inconcebible que hayamos permitido, por desidia, la privatización de nuestro principal recurso natural. (“Mi país es el mar” 23-4)22

Tourism’s spectacularization of the Caribbean coast has a steep price tag, indeed. This exploitation of the sea for tourists and foreigners constitutes the latest manifestation of a series of colonial relations that have produced the inward-looking islander so many island mystifiers have ontologically assigned to peoples born on islands. The inward-looking islander conveniently buttresses the ideologues’ sense of superiority by virtue of its contrast with respect to the latter’s supposed “openness,” “cosmopolitanism,” and “uprootedness.”

In the face of such a situation, how can we explode the historical and metaphorical trace of the Caribbean Sea as a line of flight in a present in which the ships that populate our ports are either cruise ships or cargo ships, yachts of the rich and famous or yolas of the poor and infamous? Some of the archipelagoes’ literature, I argue, provides an answer.

22 “The evident and difficult truth is that the coastal tragedy is reproduced without limits. In Cataño, Dorado, Vega Baja, Isabela, Loiza, Luqillo, Vieques, Culebra, in every corner graced by the waves’ perpetual rolling, we are being robbed unabashedly of the sea. Soon we will have to rent balconies in luxury condominiums or pay for rides on motorboats in order to remember the wave’s infinitude or the spatter’s taste on the skin. The seascape’s systematic occultation constitutes a crime against humanity. One of the most gratifying activities that islanders have is the contemplation of the ocean. The play of light and color subverts the grey empire of concrete. In the midst of urban hustle and bustle, the waves’ hypnotic rumor provokes a supremely relaxing meditative state. With such a colossal instrument of peace at our disposal, it is inconceivable that we have allowed, with our indolence, the privatization of our main natural resource.”
“Como una casa”

As Chapter 2 anticipated, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s work has paid special attention to the sea. Within the specific history of Puerto Rican literature, the fact that it has engaged the sea at all is significant because, in doing so, Rodríguez Juliá’s texts have deeply questioned a previous and peculiarly powerful tradition in the archipelago’s intellectual and artistic life at once terrified of the sea—in such canonical writers as Antonio Pedreira and René Marqués—and bent on turning to the land. Such an obsession with land can surely be situated in a more international context where a metaphors of land and nation has been intimately forged. In the specific context of Puerto Rico, it garnered special relevance given the fact that many intellectuals and writers have for long experienced the concept of “nation” as an elemental lack. Rodríguez Juliá has not only parodied such a territorialized, nationalist bent, but, more importantly, has written numerous texts one could justly describe as coastal, going so far as to equate the practice of literature with that of swimming (see “Literatura y natación”).

The chronicles “El cruce de la bahía de Guánica y otras ternuras de la Medianía” and “Para llegar a Isla Verde,” collected in El cruce de la bahía de Guánica (cinco crónicas playeras y un ensayo) (The Crossing of Guánica Bay [Five Beach Chronicles and One Essay], 1989), focus on both the experience of human swimming and Puerto Rican geography’s proximity to the sea as factors having significant social and cultural effects. As much as in Glissant’s texts to be considered below, the sea functions in Rodríguez Juliá’s chronicles as a mnemonic device for the retrieval of a “recuerdo del porvenir,” but the texts’ overall focus is much more on the experience of the sea as bodily pleasure (“El cruce”), and as the source and activation of a baroque imagination (“Para llegar”). The sea in Rodríguez Juliá’s chronicles attains mythical dimensions concerning both pleasure and the production of a certain

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23 I should note the significance of the word “cruce,” which in Spanish can refer to “crossing” or “going across,” as in the case of the writer crossing the Bay by swimming, but also to an intersection, a place at which the encounter and crossing between two or more elements occur.
aesthetics, but these, I argue, are resolutely non-utilitarian and non-exploitative. This is so as a result of the chronicles’ exploration of a life lived by the sea.

First, the account of the narrating voice’s (in this case, it is Rodríguez Juliá himself) distance swimming is given in the register of bodily pleasure. Swimming is equated to a sense of corporeal dissolution, whereby only the occasional nausea produced by swallowing seawater reminds the swimmer of having a consciousness. This “dispersión corporal” (“bodily dispersion,” “Literatura y natación” 105) is, in an echo of the sea’s ambiguity itself, a fundamentally contradictory experience that Rodríguez Juliá has described elsewhere as that between eros (the eminently pleasurable sensation of being in an aquatic environment) and thanatos (an impulse toward death that the writer identifies with the sea also in his short essay “El hechizo del mar”). The dissolution extends even to time itself, which is significantly altered, even “cancelled” (“Literatura” 105), or, in a psychoanalytical turn, it becomes the “tierno y viscoso tiempo, amniótico y amnésico, anterior al nacimiento” (“tender, viscous time, amniotic and amnesic, previous to birth,” “Literatura” 106). The detailed description Rodríguez Juliá provides in both chronicles, the first in the southern, Caribbean Sea surrounding the town of Guánica (“El cruce”), and the second in the northern Atlantic Ocean around the coast of San Juan (“Para llegar”), suggests that the pleasurable experience of swimming, of attaining that sort of deadly communion with the, for humans, unlivable but elemental phenomenon of the sea, is fundamental for the relationship, or the “cruce,” the writer will eventually experience with characters he encounters on the shore.

The first chronicle opens with a simultaneous detailed description of Guánica Bay’s geography and an account of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico through that same Bay in 1898, which is the one Rodríguez Juliá is about to cross swimming in an annual competition. As we shall see, that the chronicle begins like so is reminiscent of Poetics of Relation’s opening with the History of the slave trade in and through the sea. The U.S. invasion—a reverberating “cruce” with the Spanish one four hundred years before— took place through the sea, an event Rodríguez Juliá describes as “la visita de
la Historia” (“the visit of History”): “Aquel puerto apacible, refugio de taciturnos pescadores, manso panorama marino para los amodorados balcones frente a sus aguas, de pronto, casi sin aviso, recibiría la visita de la Historia” (12, emphasis and capitalization in the original). When the U.S. ships fired their cannons, “todo el silencio fue perseguido por las voces del miedo. La Historia anclaba . . . ” (“all the silence was persecuted by the voices of fear. History was dropping anchor” 13). Notice that, as we shall also find in Glissant’s texts, the “anchoring of History,” not the sea itself, is what produces the “voices of fear.”

Once History is apprehended through the imagination (i.e. the chronicle itself), Rodríguez Juliá zooms back to the diegetic present by describing, contrapuntally with respect to his own experience of crossing the Bay swimming, the multiplying, “crossing” scenes he encounters in the Guánica beach. To use a concept we will explore below in our discussion of Glissant’s texts, what takes place in the beach is an eminently Relational set of situations. The day is July 25th, an official holiday in Puerto Rico, but the celebration and commemoration is for the U.S. invasion of the country! The Historical event is deeply re-signified, however, by the relational and tidallectical coastal environment, which includes: a beauty pageant as part of the fiestas patronales (themselves reminiscent of the Spanish empire, for the fiestas are a carnavalesque celebration in honor of each town’s patron saint); two kids dressed up as Uncle Sam (the boy) and the Puerto Rican flag (the girl), combining for an appropriate representation of the Estado Libre Asociado; heterosexual couples in hypersexualized interactions; the dominant clothing fashions of the day consisting of Converse tennis shoes and tight Jordache jeans; and a meeting of the P.S.P. (Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño) for “cuatro gatos”25 in repudiation of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico. All this seems to be the result of what Rodríguez Juliá calls the “Carnaval colonial Boricua” (“colonial Puerto Rican Carnaval”) inaugurated, the chronicle claims, in 1898. Notice that all these relational, “crossing” scenes take place by the sea, and

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24 “That placid port, refuge of taciturn fishermen, calm marine panorama for the drowsy balconies in front of its waters, would suddenly, almost without notice, receive History’s visit.”

25 An idiomatic expression meaning literally “four cats,” and suggesting that there were very few people at the gathering.
that they manage to metaphorize in an entirely different, festive, quite useless way one of the most significant events for the expansion and consolidation of U.S. capitalism and imperialism. Guánica becomes, then, in the words of Glissant to be discussed presently, a resolutely “new shore.”

The first half of “Para llegar a Isla Verde,” the second chronicle I am concerned with, is devoted to a description of the Isla Verde coast in San Juan, the intricacies of its geography, maritime currents, undertows, and sands. As was anticipated above, the description is performed from the sea: not only is the narrating voice always swimming out at sea and, therefore, perceiving the coastal formations from such perspective, but also his observations are in the interest of furthering swimming's (useless) pleasures. “Para llegar a Isla Verde” also chronicles the touristic exploitation of specific coastal zones, and the tacit or overt class differentiations of the different beaches along the littoral.

The second and last stage of the writer's maritime route, in which we are constantly reminded of the need to swim at different angles and directions depending on the waters’ specificity at various points, takes place in the Alambique beach, the “territorio de Roberto; el artista de la playa” (“territory of Roberto; the beach artist” 70). Rodríguez Juliá describes Roberto as an utopist and a baroque artist, a style and method the writer readily identifies, like Carpentier and Glissant do, with the Caribbean. Roberto’s primary creation concerns the transformation of an old Volky (a Volkswagen) into what the writer describes alternately as a halfway between a home and an artistic masterpiece, and as an attempt at a utopia, an ideal space.

Crucially, Rodríguez Juliá notes:

La funcionalidad del bug, emblemática del Nacional Socialismo y su fiebre de movilización – recordemos la ubicuidad de los autobahn en la Alemania nazi–, se ha transformado en decoración ociosa, aquí en la playa del Alambique. . . . Con las resacas y marejadas de invierno ha llegado, a la playa solitaria, el horror vacui de Roberto, su puerta de Juan Bobo… Hitler quiso movilizar su creciente clase media con un automóvil de precio módico y a la vez funcional. Roberto ha logrado reprimir esas cualidades del auto moderno por excelencia –
pequeño y económico—en favor de un espacio para la imaginación. O sea, el Volky de Roberto no corre; a lo más que se parece es a una casa que ha enloquecido. (71)

Thus, a fundamental symbol of capitalism and its logic of functionality and efficiency is transformed, in a Puerto Rican beach by a poor “beach bum” from the “caserio Lloréns Torres” (“public housing complex Lloréns Torres” 82), into a space for the imagination, for baroque Relation, for a useless, “idle” formation. Such possibility, I argue, is especially informed in this case by the proximity of the sea, for Roberto lives by the sea. He could be no other artist than a beach artist, and his coastal creation works against the exploitative and utilitarian ways in which, as we have seen, capitalist coloniality has related to the sea.

Roberto’s imagination, the chronicle insists, operates under the guise of the constant “metamorphoses” characteristic of the Baroque: Rodríguez Juliá provides profuse details of the inexhaustible objects, images, objets trouvés, assembled by the artist in unimaginable fashion in his Volky—“Roberto es un genio del trompe l’oeil” (‘Roberto is a genius of the trompe l’oeil’ 73). The chronicler proceeds to characterize Roberto’s art as “el arte del contrapunto” (“the art of the counterpoint”), an art that seems to “fundar una utopía, un espacio perfecto donde todo cabe, donde todas las voces crean, por encima de su soledad, la armonía de una cultura…” (74). This is only possible, adds Rodríguez Juliá, “en el sincretismo caribeño” (“in the Caribbean syncretism” 75). In fact, Roberto’s “utopia” comprises, remarkably, a zone devoted to a collection of typical images of the Puerto Rican landscape and seascape, described by the writer as an “ensoñación arcádica del paisaje isleño” (“arcadic fantasy of the insular landscape” 77).

26 “The functionality of the bug, which was an emblem of National Socialism and its fever for mobilization—let us recall the ubiquity of the autobahn in Nazi Germany—has been transformed into idle decoration, here in the Alambique beach. . . . Along with the winter’s undertow and sea swells, Roberto’s horror vacui, his Juan Bobo’s pig [an idiomatic expression that usually refers to a woman excessively dressed and made up], has arrived to the solitary beach… Hitler wanted to mobilize his rising middle class with a reasonably priced car that was, at the same time, functional. Roberto has managed to repress those qualities of the modern car par excellence—small and cheap—in favor of a space for the imagination. That is, Roberto’s Volky does not run or race; what it looks like the most is a house that has gone mad.”

27 “Round a utopia, a perfect space where everything fits, where all the voices create, beyond their solitude, the harmony of a culture…”

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Upon glimpsing the Volky’s interior, Rodríguez Juliá experiences the double, tidalectical, “signs” of Roberto’s utopia: “Y tan pronto nos asomamos al interior descubrimos que la utopía de Roberto tiene dos signos opuestos, aunque no contradictorios: Uno nos habla del Volky como un espacio perfecto donde ocurren los cruces más improbables. El otro nos habla de un espacio íntimo que anhela algún tipo de habitación” (79).\(^28\) Roberto has insisted, since the writer’s first conversation with him, that he wants the Volky to be “como una casa” (“like a home” 71). But the baroque, syncretic, contrapuntal method Roberto has followed to construct such likeness of a home, where parts of washing machines, stoves, and furniture of all kinds are found alongside images of orishas, Puerto Rican landscape, a beloved woman, and plastic and real flowers, among so many others, manages to transform the Volky, also, into art, a “lienzo” (“canvas”). In a word, this Volky is, at once, a work and a product. It is useless as a car and never completed to become useful as “a home.” Rather, it remains in its creative, tidalectical movement, always “like a home.” And that “like” contains the never-ending Relation: “crossings,” combinations, metamorphoses in intimate bond with the sea.

Although Rodríguez Juliá does not employ the concept, the fact that he insists the two signs of art and home through which to understand Roberto’s Volky are not contradictory warrants describing the artist’s incessant creation as resolutely tidalectical. Towards the end of the chronicle, indeed, the narrating voice exclaims, “¡Roberto vive frente al mar!” (“Roberto lives by the sea!” 83), as if he finally “gets it.” The constant presence of the sea deeply informs Roberto’s profuse and unappeasable creativity, his baroque syncretism, and his never-ending tidalectics between the idea of home and of art. What is more, I want to suggest that the narrating voice is able to “get it” in the first place as a result of his everyday intimacy with the sea. When approaching Roberto from the sea, it

\(^{28}\) “As soon as we take a look at the interior, we discover that Roberto’s utopia has two opposing, though not contradictory, signs: one that speaks of the Volky as a perfect space where the most improbable crossings occur, and another that speaks of an intimate space longing for some kind of habitation.”
becomes evident that his *Volky* constitutes a manifestation of an immanent, non-exploitative, non-utilitarian history and metaphor of the sea.

**“I know you who are bank and beyond it mystery”**

As other collections of his, such as *Le Discours Antillais, L’Intention Poétique* and *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Glissant’s *Poétique de la Rédaction* (1990) comprises a collection of fulgurations generally assessed with the category of the essay but hardly recognizable as such in its traditional, academic form. These texts, as is fitting for Relation, favor a mode of writing that alternates between prose and poetry—and within these, the relation multiplies. We shall consider, by recourse to the opening section of the book, entitled “The Open Boat,” and to some of Glissant’s poems—which also alternate with prose—from *The Restless Earth*, the production, out of an engagement with the sea, of the concept of Relation as a tidalectical force between history and the imagination.

*Poetics of Relation*’s epigraphs establish from the outset the preeminence of the sea for Glissant’s study of *Antillanité-as-Rédaction*: “The Sea is History” (from Derek Walcott’s well-known homonym poem) and “the unity is submarine” (from Kamau Brathwaite’s essay “Caribbean Man in Space and Time”). Relation is, then, suggested immediately as a maritime concept. As will become clear throughout the book, Relation attempts to account for the aftermaths of colonization in a creative, imaginative way (thus the need for it to be apprehended by a poetics) that not only does away with the conventional, colonizing paradigms of “originality” versus “imitation,” but that also refuses to concede that History, with its landed epistemologies, is all there is. Relation, like tidalectics and the spiral, understands the centuries-old encounters in the Caribbean archipelagoes on the basis of a never-ending spiraling movement (as opposed to what Glissant calls the “arrowlike” movement of “atavistic” cultures) without definitive, rooted origins or definitive, rooted endings.

Concerning the question of history, the sea of Relation constitutes another third, tidalectical element, such as those Chapter 3 invokes, in perpetual movement and change, and operating as both
work and product. It is full of historical significations but recalcitrant to yield them by means of any conventional register—writing, language, documents—in which we may be accustomed to recognizing them. If Walcott’s dictum serving as epigraph to Glissant’s book is meaningful at all, then a poetics, to use Glissant’s concept, must be produced in order to find history in/through the sea, an apparently empty and a-signifying void, as Barthes once contended. To put it in the terms adumbrated in Chapter 2, when experienced daily either directly or through the constant consciousness of its presence beyond any horizon, the sea provides an adamic, poetic experience, one that is never a denial of history but an imaginative, poetic movement against the tragic overdetermination of History in the Caribbean region.

As a concept to account for the encounter of so many peoples precipitated by capitalist coloniality, Relation also represents an alternative to “synthesis,” which has been used in more traditional understandings of métissage (mestizaje), or even in Fernando Ortiz’s anthropological concept transculturación. In fact, as we briefly saw in Chapter 3, Glissant insists on the colonized people’s (specifically the Caribbean peoples) “right to opacity” as opposed to the demand for “transparency” implied in the synthesizing operation and in History. There is a mystery, an unknowability, that must be defended, Glissant claims, and that is immanent and necessary to Relation. I want to suggest that

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29 On the importance of water for Brathwaite’s understanding of history, Christopher Winks writes: “Brathwaite locates in the Caribbean both a reminder of the tectonic creation of the world out of water (‘Underground and under the water there are larger forms which have deeper resonance and we haven’t yet reached them’) and a pre-eminently historial struggle, however inchoate at times, for a reconstructive life-way, what Rastafarians would call livy, that would enter into an overstanding of the tidalactic interactions of ‘water and sun and pebble continent and song and kinesis and an ever-widening unlocking of a central atomic name or name or nyam or nam’” (Symbolic Cities 21).

30 In a footnote on the urgency of a “semiological science” given the fact that “In a single day, how many really non-signifying fields do we cross?,” Barthes distinguishes between the sea and the beach in terms of signification thus: “Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me” (Mythologies 112).

31 In another text, Glissant goes so far as to argue that the meeting of histories has in fact killed History: “Where histories meet, History comes to an end. (The pathetic effort of occidental nations to remain masters of the destiny of the world, and which is vain enough for the Occident itself to split into contrary intentions, suggests to us that the intrusion of (relativizing) relation into the heretofore absolute field of History—has killed History. Thus the first man of the Occident who dreamed of another land (adventurer, merchant, priest, roughneck soldier, or poet of elsewhere) began really to assume and actually to exhaust the Occident. This acting race accomplished the field of the One and opened the world to the Relational, which it does not want to experience)” (Poetic Intention 199).

32 Recall Cassano’s equivalent argument discussed in Chapter 3.
this understanding of Relation, which, as should be clear by now, is tantamount to an understanding of history, imagination, and metaphor, comes from a shared encounter with and life by the sea: from its tidalectics, its perpetual change, its promise, and its fundamental mystery.33

In “The Open Boat,” Glissant lyrically produces a history of the slave trade as a fundamentally maritime history. Inasmuch as “The Open Boat” opens Poetics of Relation, the text suggests that the slave trade, whose history is sea-bound, both inaugurates and is the necessary, urgent, touchstone of the poetics of Relation. The history of the slave trade produced in the text’s opening section unfolds by directly asking the reader to situate herself inside the slave ship, a move that is only possible, she realizes, by recourse to the imagination. Glissant had already proclaimed—in a brief, italicized section entitled “Imaginary” and positioned after the Walcott and Brathwaite quotes—the supreme importance of the imagination, equated there with the poetics of a people:

Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized. (1, emphasis added)

In other words, only by activating the imagination, a poetics, can thought appear, can its “risk” become realized. If that is the case, by asking us to

[j]imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo, this dizzying sky plastered to the waves (5-6),

33 J. Michael Dash, the critic and translator whose work has followed carefully Glissant’s oeuvre, writes the following, which, in another register, closely resembles my argument here: “In Glissant’s theory, relating and resistance do not collide as oppositional forces but are better understood in terms of twisting thresholds of contact that do not allow tensions to be resolved in an absolute manner but redistribute, on the one hand, the forces of consent and coercion, and on the other, the reaction of subterfuge and opposition. What is vital to understanding Caribbean culture, and in particular Martiniquan culture, is the analysis of those folds, or interstitial zones, where the complex and unpredictable infolding takes place. In this regard, Glissant is as fascinated with this subtle process of interrelating in Martinique as he is with the other permutation of this liminal world in the metropole. To conceive of the Caribbean otherwise would be, in Glissant’s view, a refusal to take into account its ‘irruption into modernity.’ Consequently, Glissant visualizes the Caribbean as an unceasing struggle between the reductionist forces of homogenization, or sameness, and the capacity for resistance that is found in cultural opacity” (The Other America 153, emphasis added).
Glissant is requiring us to recognize that thought, which is, for him, always risk, can only be realized in and through such imaginative encounter with history.

“The Open Boat” goes on to establish that this “terrifying” experience “partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown.” These “three times” are the boat, the sea, and the “reverse image of all that had been left behind” (6-7). Significantly, Glissant characterizes the first abyss, the boat, by recourse to a Harrisian image: “This boat is a womb, a womb abyss,” and, further, “This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death” (6). Already in the slaving ship Glissant finds the tidalectical condition fundamental to his invoked poetics: both and neither life and death; both and neither shelter and abandonment; both and neither entrance and expulsion.

The sea, on its part, is also an abyss, one of the “unknowns.” Much like the ship, the sea is constituted on the premise of unsolvable contradiction:

Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of yoles and gommiers—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (6)

Notice, again, that the thoroughly historical nature of what Glissant asks us to take as the inaugurating moment of thought can only be somewhat apprehended, always at risk, through the imagination, through a poetics that metaphorizes the “balls and chains” and turns them into “underwater signposts.” These metaphorizing poetics, when counterpoised with historical evidence—a method that, as noted in the Introduction, is deployed repeatedly by the writers studied in this project—are at once preexistent and produced. They are so inasmuch as only a poetics—as opposed

34 See Harris’s collection of essays The Womb of Space.
to the Historical archive—can affirm the validity for thought of “underwater signposts.” The
signposts are *there*, somewhere in the deeps of the ocean, but the fact that they may be physically
irretrievable does not preclude them from being perceived, in a poetics, as markers for thought. As
should be evident, such metaphorization is resolutely not in the interest of a parallel Historical,
capitalist exploitation of and expansion through the ocean, but rather in that of a poetico-historical
re-signification affirming the hope that “the entire ocean, the entire sea” constitutes “one vast
beginning,” with a slow time “marked by these balls and chains gone green.”

The sea of Relation works, therefore, as a mnemonic device much like it does in Rodríguez
Julía’s chronicles. But Glissant’s text extends, so to speak, the uses of the device by insisting on the
sea’s unyielding movement as a “recuerdo del porvenir:” from a deterritorialized (or *détourned*) “birth,”
which refers to the quintessentially deterritorializing slave trade as inauguration, to the
reterritorialization (or *retour*)

35 of “new shores,” which refers to the constantly reterritorializing
*métissage* of Relation, of Creole societies re-created in the Caribbean archipelagoes. This tidalectics of
detour and retour are beautifully condensed in the following homage to the ocean: “‘Je te salue, vieil
Océan!’ You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own
unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out these new shores, where we hook
our tar-streaked wounds, our reddened mouths and stifled outcries” (7). Glissant, like Walcott,
stresses this “newness” not in the manner of the “cutting-edge” rhetoric of capitalism, but rather as
the possibility of a Relational, cross-cultural (Harris), adamic (Walcott) world.

For this world-of-Relation, the sea has always been the Caribbean’s patient, eternal, slow-
timed, accomplice:

The ancestor speaks, it is the ocean, it is a race that washed the
continents with its veil of suffering; it says this race which is song,
dew of song and the muffled perfume and the blue of the song, and

35 In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant develops what he understands as the mutually necessary concepts of *détour* and *retour* to refer to different strategies of resistance and creation (one of the most prominent of which is the creation of Creole languages) on the part of the enslaved and colonized (see especially 19-26).
its mouth is the song of all the mouths of foam; ocean! you permit, you are accomplice, maker of stars; how is it you do not open your wings into a voracious lung? And see! there remains only the sum of the song and the eternity of voice and childhood already of those who will inherit it. Because as far as suffering is concerned it belongs to all: everyone has its vigorous sand between their teeth. The ocean is patience, its wisdom is the tare of time. (“Ocean,” in “Movement, Far from Shores,” The Restless Earth 50)

Hence, the poetics of Relation finds in the sea a slow-timed “accomplice” to move dialectically between history and the imagination. Relation, as we have seen, comes out of the Historical tragedy, but refuses to be capsized by its overwhelming logic. It does so by insisting on the sea as a producer of “new shores” and “metamorphoses:” “The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses [that went from “the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed”]” (Poetics 7). In other words, echoing Walcott’s impassioned call for a literature that is not kidnapped by “revenge” or “remorse,” Glissant wants us to see in the Caribbean (again, implicit in the latter’s argument is that this poetics already exists in the region but that it must also be constantly, and without it being ever fully predictable or finished, produced) a poetics of Relation, of an open boat at sea.

Still, as was anticipated above, for Relation to persist, the fundamental mystery of the sea—the element, I argue, that animates the concept in the first place—must be defended. The sea must be “an unknown that does not terrify” (Poetics 9), or, in the words of one of Glissant’s poems addressing the sea: “I know you who are bank and beyond it mystery” (“Theater” in “Movement, Far from Shores” The Restless Earth 49). Only by relating in ways that acknowledge fundamental opacity without attempting to deny it, subsume it, or even understand it, can the process of “metamorphosis” initiated at sea

36 Notice the resonance with Rodríguez Juliá’s account of Roberto’s Volky in terms of “metamorphoses.”
37 “In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. This shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia” (“The Muse of History” 37).
become an “alliance with the imposed land.” To phrase the matter in the terms discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the mystery of the sea, which is, also, the mystery of the other, must be defended if the deterritorialization (or detour) at sea is to be reterritorialized (or retoured) by those within on the “new shores” “laid out” by the sea. These new shores, for the enslaved and colonized peoples, are “the land-beyond turned into land-in-itself” (Poetics 8), transcendence turned into immanence. These new shores, moreover, come from the abyss, from the unknown, and only by remaining linked to that historical and metaphorical mystery, can they become a decidedly immanent land. Indeed, in its thorough, relational reappraisal of the nature and form of history and imagination, the process I have just described is for Glissant what produces knowledge itself in the Caribbean: “Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss [the boat] and the infinite abyss [the ocean], in the end became knowledge” (8).

Resonating with Walcott’s homage to Pissarro’s “modesty” (see Chapter 2), Glissant goes on to stress that this relationship to the sea, to its mystery and opacity, to the historical and metaphorical abyss it represents, has nothing to do with “vanity.” “Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies” (8). This experience, for the “original victim” an “exception,” “became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others” (8). Emerging as it does from the abyss, from the unknown, such knowledge and poetics of Relation are constantly to be re-made in the perpetual tidalectics of the sea, for they are “also a projection and a perspective into the unknown” (8). The poetics thus produced “hail[s] a renewed Indies” where we are “for this Relation made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats” (8-9). “This is why,” continues Glissant, “we stay with poetry” . . . We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (9).
Coda: “Let’s walk;” “We need to live it differently”

It is against this double hegemony of a History with a capital H and a Literature consecrated by the absolute power of the written sign that the peoples who until now inhabited the hidden side of the earth fought, at the same time they were fighting for food and freedom. . . . we should let the weight of lived experience 'slip in.' Literature is not only fragmented, it is henceforth shared. In it lie histories and the voice of peoples. We must reflect on a new relationship between history and literature. We need to live it differently.

Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse 77

*Imagined Islands* has tidalectically staged the encounter of different uses and imaginations of insularity. It has traced the ways in which, from without, capitalist coloniality has imagined and deployed islands in its History and in its mythical imaginary. The latter was primarily explored through texts of varying fields coinciding with the capitalist coloniality’s relentless expansion. The fields (philosophy, anthropology, evolutionary biology, literature) on which Chapter 1 focuses are, of course, by no means the only ones where an obsession with insularity is recurrent. Further studies could explore, for instance, maps and cartography, as well as other media such as cinema, television, and the visual arts. In the first case, briefly touched upon in Chapter 1, the fundamental centrality of islands for the development of cartography in such early instances as the medieval *insularios* and the map-making technique of representing the ocean as full of island-monsters must be considered. Questions of scale, dimension and proportion with respect to land and sea in cartography are also of crucial importance. In the second case, a long list of European and U.S.-produced films and TV shows with their own imaginations and uses of islands –ranging from Ingmar Bergman’s work to *Jurassic Park* and *Shutter Island*, from *Gilligan’s Island* to *Lost* and *Survivor*– waits to be studied.

Still, the constituent parts of the aforementioned encounter enabled me to show the extent to which the Historical balkanization of the Caribbean archipelagoes has functioned as an ideological subterfuge to naturalize and sustain that very process and the concomitant negative appreciation of the region: the “truths” of geography are responsible for the “truths” of History. To that, *Imagined Islands* responded with several Caribbean literary texts that, according to my argument, have painstakingly constructed a way to “live differently” the relationship between history and literature.

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These texts have produced a history against History, one that does not shun its inextricable relationship with myth and metaphor, with the blinding light, the sandy coast and the non-written sea. *Imagined Islands* proposes, thus, the existence of a “not only fragmented, but henceforth shared” Caribbean literature that has imagined islands in terms of a deep, but modest, affirmation and love. This immanent imagination—in contrast to the one explored in Chapter 1, which ultimately depends, the complexities discussed notwithstanding, on negative terms (as even the myth of the island paradise was proven to do)—relies on Derek Walcott’s awe at the insular seascape and landscapes, of which we have focused on the quality of tropical light, the chronotope of the coast, and the mystery of the sea.

It should be clear, however, that the writers and texts on which *Imagined Islands*’s second section focuses do not hold exclusive status in the shared literature I have been arguing for. Deeply related to this project and requiring further study is how the work of Caribbean women writers, such as Maryse Condé, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, Ana Lydia Vega, Zoé Valdés, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior, Mayra Santos Febres, among so many others, relates to the main questions that drive *Imagined Islands*. How do these writers’ texts engage with the concepts studied throughout the previous chapters? What concepts do they produce and/or rearrange? Likewise, and as was anticipated before, studying the ways in which islands have been imagined and deployed beyond literature in oral, non-“academic” spheres such as ritual, religion, music, dance, song, among others, by native inhabitants, enslaved peoples, and all their creole descendants, is crucial for furthering the immanent logic this project defends.

As much as it can be considered a work of literary and cultural criticism, *Imagined Islands* has sought to be, at the same time, an argument on the need to transform the epistemology of capitalist coloniality itself by repositioning immanently our thought and our imagination. We need new concepts (tidalectics, *Relation*, creolization…) and the rearrangement of old ones (island, light, coast, sea, vision, time, space…). We need creation and imagination. We need awe and rhythm. We need an
expanded sensory range and the transformation of our vision. The Historical reality of the Caribbean archipelagoes, which we have shown to be that of devastating exploitation under different guises for over five hundred years and which seems to be almighty, will not be fundamentally transformed only by measures, however urgent and crucial, in so-called public policy. These must be informed by an equally indispensable transformation of the very way in which we perceive, understand, and imagine ourselves.

Several essays included in a posthumously published collection by Antonio Benítez-Rojo reveal such desire. In “Reflexiones sobre un archipiélago posible” (“Reflections on a Possible Archipelago”) Benítez-Rojo writes: “la población de las Antillas carece de una conciencia antillana” (“the Antillean population lacks an Antillean consciousness” 96). In “La proyección caribeña de Luis Palés Matos,” he suplements the previous claim with the following: “aunque en mi concepción lo caribeño fluye mucho más allá del archipiélago de las Antillas, pienso que hay un costado nuestro que expresa la ansiedad del aislamiento insular, de que en nuestras islas, fuera de la plantación controlada por el capital extranjero, no ocurre nada que valga la pena” (“The Caribbean Projection of Luis Palés Matos” 158).1 Finally, “El último de los archipiélagos” ends with the following call: “Y es que, para no exiliarnos, necesitamos la idea de que pertenecemos a una gran patria, de que no navegamos solos; necesitamos la certidumbre de que individualmente hemos hecho parte de una gran historia y cultura colectivas; necesitamos, en fin, saber más de nosotros mismos, los Pueblos del Mar” (“The Last of the Archipelagoes” 109).2

These statements point to another fundamental issue that requires study and investigation beyond Imagined Islands, namely what kinds of relationships are fashioned in the diaspora and in exile with the question of insularity and with the associated concepts this project has explored. As is

1 “although in my conceptualization of it, Caribbeanness flows much further than the Antillean archipelago, I think there is a side of us that expresses the anxiety of insular isolation, of the idea that in our islands, besides the plantation controlled by foreign capital, nothing worthwhile takes place” (“The Caribbean Projection of Luis Palés Matos” 158).
2 “And in order not to exile ourselves, we need the idea that we are part of a great homeland, that we do not navigate alone; we need the certainty that, individually, we have been part of a great collective history and culture; we need, in a word, to know more of ourselves, the Peoples of the Sea” (“The Last of the Archipelagoes” 109).
evident and we touched upon in Chapter 1, diaspora and exile (forced, voluntary, or, perhaps more
often, a difficult mid-way adjective between the two) are one of the most enduring, even
foundational, forms of movement in and out of the Caribbean. Indeed, diaspora, exile and
“transnationalism” have been, in the last few decades, privileged problems for “Caribbean Studies.”

*Imagined Islands*, in contrast, sought to pay consistent attention to the question of those who stay,
which I believe has not been sufficiently thought about. But it should be clear that my emphasis on
the immanent logic of “within” does not seek to become a gatekeeper of boundaries that never have
been (nor should they begin to be) operative, or even recognizable. I agree with Benítez-Rojo that
“cualquier novela escrita desde la experiencia caribeña es necesariamente caribeña” (“Notas para una
taxonomía” 132), and, therefore, diasporic texts should also be studied using the immanent
tidalectics explored here.

But Benítez-Rojo’s quotes above spur yet another crucial question with which I would like to
close (and re-open) *Imagined Islands*. To “know more of ourselves, the Peoples of the Sea,” to forge an
“antillean consciousness,” to refuse the self-fulfilling clamp of History, to transform our
imaginations, to stress our interinsular connections and creations, to further give credence to the fact
that the “unity is submarine,” those are certainly common desires between *Imagined Islands* and the
essays by Benítez-Rojo. But I do not share the lingering geographical determinism that finds in
insularity itself the motive for our “anxieties,” nor do I care for the bent of nationalistic apotheosis in
such phrases as “gran patria” and “gran historia y cultura.” Nothing of the basic contemptuous

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3 See, for instance, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s *Caribe Two Ways: cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico*; Silvio Torres-Saillant’s *El retorno de las yolas: ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad*; Micheline A. Crichlow’s *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation*; Kezia Page’s *Transnational Negotiations in Caribbean Diasporic Literature: Remitting the Text*; the edited collection by Ruben Gowricharn *Caribbean Transnationalism: Migration, Socialization and Social Cohesion*; Jorge Duany’s *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*, among many others.

4 “Dado que es imposible determinar no ya los límites socioculturales del Caribe, sino cualquier tipo de límites incluyendo los geográficos . . .” (“Notas para una taxonomía de la novela latinoamericana, caribeña y afroatlántica” 129). (“Given that it is impossible to determine any kind of limit of the Caribbean, not even the geographical one, let alone the sociocultural one . . .” [“Notes for a Taxonomy of the Latin American, Caribbean and Afroatlantic Novel” 129]).

5 “any novel written from the Caribbean experience is, necessarily, Caribbean” (“Notes” 132).
premises that sustain the relentlessly exploitative relationship with the rest of the world fashioned by "big," "great" countries, by imperialism and capitalism, changes if we are to understand ourselves as part of a "great homeland" among others. Rather, *Imagined Islands* "believes," with Édouard Glissant, "in the future of 'small countries'" (*Caribbean Discourse* 255). It believes in a "Caribbean imagination."

Caribbeanness, an intellectual dream, lived at the same time in an unconscious way by our peoples, tears us free from the intolerable alternative of the need for nationalism and introduces us to the cross-cultural process that modifies but does not undermine the latter. What is the Caribbean in fact? A multiple series of relations. We all feel it, we express it in all kinds of hidden or twisted ways, or we fiercely deny it. But we sense that this sea exists within us with its weight of now revealed islands. The Caribbean Sea is not an American lake. It is the estuary of the Americas. In this context, insularity takes on another meaning. Ordinarily, insularity is treated as a form of isolation, a neurotic reaction to place. However, in the Caribbean each island embodies openness. The dialectic between inside and outside is reflected in the relationship of land and sea. It is only those who are tied to the European continent who see insularity as confining. A Caribbean imagination liberates us from being smothered. (*Caribbean Discourse* 139)

Furthering that "Caribbean imagination," let us know and imagine more of ourselves with the modesty that sparked Pissarro’s work (Chapter 2), with the modesty that the ever-changing coast inspires (Chapters 3 and 4), with the modesty that the unfathomable sea causes us to experience (Chapter 5). Let us, furthermore, measure ourselves against our own proportions:

Ours are not cities in the accepted sense, but no one wants them to be. *They dictate their own proportions, their own definitions* in particular places and in a prose equal to that of their detractors, so that now it is not just St. James but the streets and yards that Naipaul commemorates, its lanes as short and brilliant as his sentences; not just the noise and jostle of Tunapuna but the origins of C.L.R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary*, not just Felicity village on the Caroni plain, but Selvon Country, and that is the way it goes up the islands now: the old Dominica of Jean Rhys still very much the way she wrote of it; and the Martinique of the early Césaire; Perse’s Guadeloupe, even without the pith helmets and mules; and what delight and privilege there was in watching literature—one literature in several imperial languages, French, English, Spanish—bud and open island after island in the early morning of a culture, not timid, not derivative, any more than the hard white petals of the frangipani are derivative and timid. This is not a belligerent boast but a simple celebration of inevitability: and this flowering had to come. (Walcott, “The Antilles” 72-3, emphasis added)

Finally and firstly, let us transform the deep-seated logic of domination with practices of “Caribbean imagination” that might actually “cherish our insignificance.”

if there is such a thing as imagination as opposed to the collective memory of our race... as grateful a joy and a blessed fear as when a boy opened an exercise book and, within the
Now, words of both Walcott and Glissant, written in apparently different contexts and quoted, respectively, to open and close *Imagined Islands*, can resonate dialectically together: “Let’s walk;” “we need to live it differently.”
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Biography

Carmen Beatriz Llenín-Figueroa was born in Puerto Rico in 1984. In 2006, she received a bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, where she was awarded a full fellowship for academic merit (2002-2006) and a one-semester fellowship (Fall 2003) from the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). A graduate student in the Literature Program at Duke since 2006, Llenín-Figueroa has received Conference Travel Fellowships from the Graduate School (2009) and from the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) (2008), a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship during the 2009-2010 academic year for the study of Haitian Kreyòl, and a Summer Research Fellowship from the Graduate School in 2011. In 2009, she published an English translation of texts by the Argentinean collectives Colectivo Situaciones and Universidad Transhumante in Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics. With Lissette Rolón-Collazo, she published in 2010 an introductory manual on literary and cultural theory entitled ¿Quién le teme a la teoría?: manual de iniciación en críticas literarias y culturales.