The Rumor of the Earth: Anti-nuclear Ecologies in Lam and Char’s *Contre une maison sèche*

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**The End of Which World?**

In early 1968, Trinidadian socialist C.L.R. James made the following assertion: “The world ushered in by Christopher Columbus and Martin Luther no longer exists. Lenin, Gandhi, Nehru, Mao Tse-tung, Nkrumah and Fidel Castro have shattered its foundations.” The radical transformation of human life on a world scale lay at the heart of anticolonial movements of the 1960s. In this way, colonial intellectuals like James understood themselves as coming from the end of the colonial world. But the end of one world and the beginning of another necessarily evokes a cultural imaginary of apocalypse, one doubled by the atmosphere of the Cold War playing out across what we called the first, second and third worlds. The destruction of Columbus’s world through global decolonization coincided with the near destruction of the world itself by nuclear means. Much recent scholarship has emphasized the worldmaking power of mid-century anticolonialism and rarely considers its cultural products in relation to the world-breaking potential of nuclear war. The work of philosopher Malcom Ferdinand, and in particular his elucidation of the “double fracture coloniale et environnementale”, is an exception to this trend. But links between imaginaries of post-imperial existence and imaginaries of nuclear apocalypse have rarely been considered from a literary-historical perspective, despite the contemporaneity and political imbrications of both historical processes. In a 1982 essay, Marxist historian and social theorist, Mike Davis, proposed that nuclear deterrence be understood primarily as a geopolitical strategy aimed at the containment of Third World revolution. Imperialism, for Davis, had itself become nuclear during the post-1959 phase of anticolonial liberation struggles. Indeed, if one returns to the history of Bandung, Non-alignment, Nkrumah’s “positive neutrality”, or the late texts of Frantz...
Fanon, one is struck by the importance of nuclear imperialism for questions of post-colonial sovereignty. Third World militants, politicians and intellectuals were lucid to the reality of building a new world of human relations against the backdrop of planetary apocalypse. If these connections have been obscured since the “end” of the Cold War, research into the cultural politics of the Atlantic World must not overlook the significance of nuclear catastrophe within the historical trajectory of militant aesthetics.

In this essay, I propose that we look to the collaborative projects of Cuban artist Wifredo Lam and French poet René Char as exemplary of the historical imbrication of the end of the colonial world and the end of terrestrial life in nuclear war. This connection, I argue, is pursued by Lam and Char through a set of socio-ecological commitments in which the relation between humanity and the earth heralds an apocalyptic vision of planetary crisis. I proceed to my argument by reconstructing Char and Lam’s investments in a political aesthetics of inter-species and earthly habitation, beginning in the 1950s. By the mid-1960s, the threat of nuclear destruction, I maintain, transforms the meaning of the earth, especially in Char’s poetics. At the center of my analysis is their collaborative book, *Contre une maison sèche*, which I read in continuity with late 1960s anti-nuclear struggles. Finally, I suggest that we think formal decolonization and anti-nuclear ecology together as a point of historical reference for the current ecological crisis. What I call “the rumor of the Earth,” after Lam’s 1950 painting, names the possible but as-yet undiscovered forms of inhabiting the Earth and of making new relations at all levels of the general ecology.

**Chthonian Habitats**

A preoccupation with worldmaking begins early in both Lam and Char’s work. Their respective practices of the 1940s, forged in exile and resistance, produce what often feels like an entire planetary schema, with its own occupants, architectures and ambiances. Not only do Lam and Char construct a symbolic space that resembles a place—or what some scholars have referred to as Char’s “pays”—in this period, but both forsake the airy world of transparency and illumination, generating places chthonian in nature. In Lam’s paintings and Char’s poetry of the early 1940s, we have the sense that another scene of existence is operating, with its own ecology of human and non-human subjects; a world constituted by a night, woods, smoke, and light that are like ours on Earth but happening elsewhere. Often, it is as if Char and Lam speak to us from the dead of night or from beneath the surface of the earth. Any light that penetrates these worlds comes from a candle, ceremonial for Lam and George de la Tourian for Char. If one were to emerge from their cavernous underworlds, it would be to take refuge in the sunless canopy of a dense wood. For both Lam and Char’s wartime works, the forest catalyzes the potential of action and revelation. As trees live equally above and below the ground, the forest forms an axis of connection, a liminal zone both over and under the surface. The ecological worldmaking undertaken by Char and Lam should be understood as a properly socio-ecological endeavor, insofar as the worlds generated by the two artists involve the reciprocity of relations between humans, their cultures and the Earth.

The early 1950s would see the first collaboration of the poet and the painter, as the latter’s engraving practice was just beginning. According to Char’s account in his text...
De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse, the two men saw each other “en 47 ou 48” at Pierre Loeb’s gallery on the rue de Seine. However, as Kora Véron observes, the exhibition in question took place in July 1946 upon Lam’s return to Paris after five years in Cuba. Char and Lam would bond over their recent antifascist militancy, Lam on the side of the Republicans in Spain and Char in the maquisard resistance in southern France. In 1952, Lam illustrated Char’s handwritten text, “À la santé du serpent”, which featured watercolor drawings made across the recto and verso sides of the book. This first collective project would be the only one in which Char’s text and Lam’s images cohabitate the page. In February of the next year, Char wrote a preface for the exhibition catalogue of Lam’s show at the Galerie Maeght. That December, Louis Broder published their collaborative book, Le Rempart des brindilles, containing five color etchings by Lam. The poem, though confessional and amorous, develops Char’s ecological commitment to the “arrière-pays” of Provence, strongly marked by his experience of the maquis. Opening with the poem entitled “Vers l’arbre-frère aux jours comptés”, Char writes:

Harpe brève des mélèzes,
Sur l’éperon de mousse et de dalles en germe
—Façade des forêts où casse le nuage—
Contrepoind du vide auquel je crois.

The void to which Char gives his allegiance is a counterpoint to the smooth façade of the forest. But by what force is the depth of the forest transformed into a mere façade, the surface fiction of a deeper phenomenon? In his preface for Galerie Maeght, Char writes of Lam:

Je ne vois pas de forêt habité, quoique jamais rejointe, sur la mappemonde terrifiante des hommes, qui nous hèle mieux que celle où Lam rassemble ses créatures amaigries par la nervosité de l’art, cependant rafraîchies par l’expansion naturelle du peintre passant la barrière de l’air.

5 Here, the poet again distinguishes the living, three-dimensional forest from the two-dimensional representation of it; a terrifying vision of the Earth that Char claims is unique to humans. The human world of surfaces confronts the depths of a possible inter-species inhabitation. In relation to Char’s preoccupation with temporality in Feuillets d’Hypnos, he writes later in Le Rempart des brindilles:

Nous vivons collés à la poitrine d’une horloge qui, désespérée, regarde finir et commencer la course du soleil. Mais elle courbera le temps, liera la terre à nous; et cela est notre succès.

Like what Char calls Lam’s “expansion naturelle”, the time of the “arrière-pays” encounters the natural cycles of the planet, and the “success” of human life would be to follow the parabolic trajectory of the sun, aligning ourselves with the Earth. In the same period, Lam illustrated Édouard Glissant’s collection of poems, La Terre inquiète, which pursues parallel ecological themes. Char, at the same time, concerns himself with Lascaux, elaborating his passion for the subterranean and the cavernous, as well as his inter-species fascination with the “homme-oiseau” of the first poem of his Lascaux series.

6 In Char’s second and more substantial text on Lam, De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse, the poet returns to his meeting with the painter in the 1940s. Published as a short artist book by Point Cardinal in 1976, with a frontispiece by Lam, the text again evokes the vegetal and chthonian aspect of Lam’s wartime work:

[...] je songeai à Lam, au berceau forestier que sa peinture m’avait désigné l’avant-veille comme étant celui de sa longue famille écartelée dont j’ignorais les visages.
ascendants. Famille dépouillée, par des périodes cyclones, de ses pauvres biens. Famille dont Lam, avec raffinement et subtilité, avait peint le bouclier dans la personne successive des arbres derrière lesquels se tenait en même temps qu’une touffeur d’orage, l’espace futur d’une lutte de libération.

7 Char’s title alludes to Marx and Engel’s 1844 book, The Holy Family as well as Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue’s 1880 manifesto against the value of work. No direct references to either text appear in Char’s prose here, though allusions to a sort of “holy family” can be found. Char’s description of Lam’s world—with its forests, cyclones, thunderstorms and human struggles—would align with the (then believed to be) dying world of Caribbean colonialism. The “espace futur d’une lutte de libération”, in this interpretation, would suggest a literal evocation of the Cuban Revolution and other liberation struggles in the hemisphere. As Char’s text proceeds, however, Lam’s “famille” takes on another valence. The poet writes of the “Famille animal-humaine issue de la sève prémonitoire de Lam. Dans le cérémonial de l’espace les gestes seraient multiples, les poses indolentes.” Here, the family is an inter-species collectivity arising out of Lam’s prophetic, vegetal world-scape. Further down, Char writes: “Le radium même, dans une telle réunion, serait le grand scarabée de l’humus fiévrueux, beau joueur cuivré et inoffensif.” Indeed, the metamorphosis of radium into an inoffensive and playful beetle suggests that we are not within the world of the human 1970s, menaced by this and other radioactive substances in the form of nuclear weaponry. In Char’s estimate, Lam’s worldmaking powers are such that even radium is released from its world-breaking potential. To return to James’s assertion that opens this essay, the end of the world of Christopher Columbus, when considered in the context of the global Cold War, implies more than the destruction of the colonial lifeworld and the emergence of new emancipated peoples in decolonization. It also names the destruction of the “animal-human family” and the geological landscapes—both Lam’s and Char’s—into which nuclear missile silos were sown. Char’s evocation of radium in his 1976 homage to Lam is not coincidental. De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse was conceived and published on the occasion of releasing their collaborative work, Contre une maison sèche, which, as we shall see, elaborated concerns about the place of radioactivity in the world to come.

La Provence Point Oméga

8 After an intense collaboration in the 1950s, Char and Lam would not produce a collective project for another two decades. In August 1970, the editor Jean Hughes approached Lam about an artist book to be published by Point Cardinal. The text would be Char’s poem, Contre une maison sèche, written between July 1969 and July 1970. As gathered from the correspondence between Lam and Char, the long, five-year timeline of the collaboration generated tension. Char’s letters are explicit that the relevance of the text will be mitigated with the passing of time. One reason for the book’s tardiness was the elaborate choice of format; unlike Le Rempart de brindilles, the book was designed in a “format de planches,” with a landscape orientation for the typesetting and images. At thirty-eight by fifty-five centimeters, the final product was double the size initially conceived for the project. The book, as sold by Point Cardinal at the time, came with a suite de gravures of the same size, but in color, to be framed and hung separately. In this way, the sheer size of the book adds an otherworldly sense to the work, as if the object itself comes from a world of beings larger than humans, massive
creatures like those portrayed by Lam. But what event, beyond the poet’s own desire for a punctual publication, might bind *Contre une maison sèche* to the time of its composition in late 1969?

9 Char’s 1971 book, *Le Nu perdu*, collects his poetry written between 1964 and 1970, including *Contre une maison sèche*. This sequence is the last of the collection and the only part of the book written in the aphoristic style reminiscent of his 1940s work in *Fureur et Mystère*. The poem, like his other aphoristic works, follows in the imperative mood, and hence with the second person pronoun: “S’il te faut repartir, prends appui contre une maison sèche. N’aie point souci de l’arbre grave auquel, de très loin, tu la reconnaîtras.” When encountering the text of Char’s poem, the reader is initially struck by a shift in the writer’s conceptual relationship to the Earth. Here, the Earth is no longer a refuge, but a space contaminated by death. This sentiment is developed most strongly in the aphorism, “La terre est meurtrière, la lune désolée” but lines such as “Quand le masque de l’homme s’applique au visage de la terre, elle a les yeux crevés” instantiate the same transformation of perspective. What has taken place in Char’s “pays natal” to have produced such a significant change?

10 Across the precise period of the composition of *Le Nu perdu* Char engages in a campaign against the implementation of a nuclear missile site on the Plateau d’Albion, less than sixty kilometers from his hometown of l’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. This campaign will produce two important documents both entitled *La Provence Point Oméga*. The first is a hybrid propaganda poem in book form from 1965 and the second, a poster from 1966 in collaboration with Picasso. “Point oméga” is a concept found in the texts of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and names the last stage in the developing complexity of the universe. Teillard de Chardin’s Christian evolutionism places humanity in relation to the “geosphere” and the “biosphere”, and as such, attends to the status of the human species within nature’s milieu. In the context of the mid-1960s, “point oméga” comes to represent not the absolute synthesis of development and consciousness, but the final stage of human evolution in which the intelligence of the species has generated its capacity to destroy the Earth through nuclear technology. Char’s two *La Provence Point Omégas* chronicle nuclear war as a problem of the general ecology, rather than simply the end of the human civilization. This fact is underscored by Char’s dedication of the book “aux oiseaux migrateurs de Pierrelatte, de Cadrache, de Marcoule, d’Apt, de Fontaine-de-Vaucluse.”

11 The book *La Provence Point Oméga* incites the citizens of villages near the Plateau d’Albion to protest the military project promoted by Apt Mayor Georges Santoni, claiming, “Aptésiens / Vous avez un maire à tête thermonucléaire. Lui ne risque rien. Mais vous ?” Themes and language from *Contre une maison sèche* appear first in *La Provence Point Oméga* despite the formal differences between the two texts. The latter weaves a Charian poetics into the language of political protest, such as in the line, “APTÉSIENS, ne prenez pas la peine de creuser votre abri sous la Pharmacie Santoni.” Like the shared imagery of dwelling found here and in *Contre une maison sèche*, “nature”, which “n’aime plus à se cacher”, will also be personified—or anthropomorphized—in the later poem. But it is in this 1965 book that the reader perceives the transformation of Char’s chthonian space from one of refuge to one of danger: “Je vous prédis, missiles, dans un sol qui vous refuse, des éboulements sans remède.”

12 This shift in the meaning of the subterranean is also thematized in Char’s brief text for the poster, “La Provence Point Oméga” illustrated by Picasso. Here, he writes:
Que les perceurs de la noble écorce terrestre d’Albion mesurent bien ceci : nous nous battons pour un site où la neige n’est pas seulement la louve de l’hiver mais aussi l’aulne du printemps. Le soleil s’y lève sur notre sang exigeant et l’homme n’est jamais en prison chez son semblable. A nos yeux ce site vaut mieux que notre pain, car il ne peut être, lui, remplacé. (Février 1966)\textsuperscript{16}.

René Char, “La Provence Point Oméga” (poster), illustrated by Pablo Picasso, Paris, Imprimerie Union, 1966

While Santoni represents the agent of destruction in the 1965 book, here Char names the “piercers” of Albion’s earthen crust who stand opposite “nous” in the struggle over the landscape. The poet détourne the language of the state which has converted the geological plateau into a site for military construction and use. Unlike the 1965 propaganda poem, this short text returns to a Charian regime of metaphor, mobilizing symbols such as snow, winter, wolf, alder tree, spring, sun, blood and man. This imaginative ecology of symbols is also be found in the drawing Picasso created for the poster, which features a sun, an eagle and a third menacing, human-like figure that may stand for the “piercers” of Albion. The eagle of Picasso’s drawing recalls the dedication of the 1965 book to the migratory birds of the region. Char’s La Provence Point Oméga poster text demands that those who would destroy the earth for the sake of nuclear deterrence take account of the irreplaceable non-human world. He further notes that the raison d’être for the missile site is based on a political, even metaphysical, miscalculation, as “man” is not constrained to destroy his own habitat for the sake of national security. As with Char’s 1965 book, the symbolism of a deep ecology found in this short poster text will reappear in Contre une maison sèche, where, for example, the poster’s “sang exigent” will be transformed into “sang convulsif”\textsuperscript{19}!”
Lam’s Apocalyptics

For Lam’s part, the mid-1960s also saw intense artistic activity concerning questions of nuclear war. Lam’s collaboration with Ghérasim Luca on the book *Apostroph’ Apocalypse* (1967) would go on to inform the content of his printmaking into the mid-1970s. According to Dominique Tonneau-Ryckelynck, “the theme of nuclear arms already treated in *Apostroph’ Apocalypse* was taken up again in 1972 in *Croiseur noir* by André Pieyre de Mandiargues.” *Croiseur noir* refers to “a ship carrying nuclear weapons” according to André Libéraï’s comments published in Lam’s catalogue of complete engravings. In a letter to Lam, concerning *Apostroph’ Apocalypse*, Luca writes:

> [t]he economically weak were the apocalyptically strong but the Earth, having your island at its epicenter, still trembles in all its limbs. Ever since, the world has been living against the backdrop of its own end, an end which desperately needs to be formulated.\(^{47}\)

Luca’s comments here reference how Cuba’s Cold War alignment confronts the eschatological reality of nuclear catastrophe. Lam’s geographic origins, so often mentioned in the literature around his 1940s and 1950s paintings, made of him a voice from the tropics active in the European avant-garde. But by the mid-1960s, Lam’s Caribbean roots take on new valences, influenced by the socialist revolution as well as Cuba’s place at the center of global nuclear conflict during the 1962 Missile Crisis. This second valence is little remarked upon in the literature on Lam’s status as a giant of Third World art. Following Luca’s assertion, the possibility of terrestrial annihilation constituted an apocalyptic “backdrop” to the worldmaking relations exemplified by anticolonial revolution. He proposed that this destruction be brought conceptually into the foreground in order to formalize and express a catastrophe that appeared incommensurable to thought.

In 1970, between working on Luca and Pieyre de Mandiargues’s books, Lam produced at least fifteen plates for his collaboration with Char. \(^{49}\) When one analyses Lam’s engravings in both *Apostroph’ Apocalypse* and *Croiseur noir*, one finds a style and series of forms that correspond to his etchings for *Contre une maison sèche*. For Luca’s text, Lam produced fourteen engravings that feature brown, black and white figures on washed-out taupe, violet and auburn backgrounds. Most prominently, we find a series of large horse-like figures, with objects protruding from their long mouths. These objects are occasionally other creatures, but more often have a weapon-life quality. For Pieyre de Mandiargues’s 1972 book, Lam again employs the taupe and violet watercolor background washes, as well as black and white figures, smaller but similar to those in *Apostroph’ Apocalypse*. Importantly, *Croiseur noir* contains mask-like floating diamonds that will be significant for an analysis of *Contre une maison sèche*. One is struck by the sense that, in addition to etchings such as “Danse des fusées” (1966) and “Secret du souffle” (1969), the three artist’s books discussed here form a unified rumination with a shared visual language. For example, the first engraving in *Contre une maison sèche* contains two horse-like, maternal figures, one black and one white. From its long mouth, the white figure shoots a diamond-spaced object, much like a harpoon. In the upper right-hand corner, a black and a white diamond are flying into space. Resonances with Luca and Pieyre de Mandiargues’s books are present already in the first page of Char’s book, as one can find these diamond-spaced objects there as well, either coming out figures’ orifices in Luca’s book or free-floating and menacing across Pieyre de Mandiargues’s. In the *suite de gravures* for the book, the white figures take on
the same orangey-brown color as the first horse figure of Luca’s Apostroph’ Apocalypse, who also has a weapon-like object coming out of its snout. But the projective, soaring nature of these diamonds in this first engraving, shot out of the long mouths of the figures, suggests a much more literal reference: missiles. The similarity between the long snout of Lam’s horse-women and the often-white ballistic missile silo is striking. Unlike Lam’s other anti-nuclear projects, and unlike anything across his printmaking oeuvre, in Contre une maison sèche, we find these flying, projected diamonds, these missiles, released from the slender canons of his figure’s faces.

René Char, Contre une maison sèche, illustrated by Wifredo Lam, Paris, Point Cardinal, 1976

Connections between Apostroph’ Apocalypse and Contre une maison sèche abound: an identical diamond protruding from the hoof of one of the horse-women on the second engraving in Apostroph’ Apocalypse can be found on the eighth and penultimate drawing in Contre une maison sèche. Here, again, we find the flying diamonds from the first page of the book, shot out of the hooves of a slender, white, horse-like figure. A bold line in the right corner of the etching gives the viewer a sense that the figure and its projectiles exist within a landscape. Such indications of landscape are rare in Lam’s printmaking, which situates a repertoire of anthropomorphic figures within a series of symbolic functions. By this, I mean that a figure often stands in for elements of a landscape. This use of an organic repertoire of figures is not unlike Char’s own engagement with socio-ecological symbolism in La Provence Point Oméga. The large black bird to be found in the eleventh engraving of Apostroph’ Apocalypse reoccurs precisely in the same form in the sixth etching of Contre une maison sèche, though in the former text the raven is covered in a bright red wash and accompanied by another flying figure in
the background. In the 1975 book with Char, the raven has a transparent quality and flies over a two-headed skeleton-like horse with breasts and fins looking up to the sky. These fins are again employed in the etching that follows, which contains two black seahorses—one with a harpoon coming out of its snout—and a diamond shaped mask floating at the seahorses’ side. The same seahorse can be found in the engravings of *Apostroph’ Apocalypse*, this time set against a violet washed background.

I contend that the image-content shared across the two books is not incidental. Further, the repetitions, I hold, are not simply the effect of Lam’s printmaking style of the period. Luca and Char’s texts, as well as Pieyre de Mandiargues’s, differ stylistically from the more colorful and boldly lined etchings made for Dominique Agostini’s *Le Regard vertical* (1973), for José Pierre’s *Pleni Luna* (1974) and for Joyce Mansour’s *Orsa Maggiore* (1975).

The shared content of apocalyptic feeling found across the three books is orchestrated through a set of formal choices that revolve around earth tones in terms of color and around a shared language of violence incarnated in the weaponry that often appears to the viewer as missiles and rockets. While *Contre une maison sèche*, unlike *Apostroph’ Apocalypse* or *Croiseur noir*, is not known to be a work in explicit dialogue with the question of nuclear armament, both Lam’s images and Char’s text betray precisely that influence. Considered alongside Lam’s diamond projectiles and horse canons, Char’s line “La terre est meurtrière, la lune désolée” comes into focus as a statement on Cold War ecology. Antoine Coron’s catalogue of Char documents asserts that half of the poem:


Indeed, an interpretation of this verse as linked to the so-called Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union is salutary. But the moon’s regret here must be considered in relation to the murderous earth. The “terre meurtrière” is none other than the earth embedded with surface-to-surface [sol-sol, in French] ballistic missiles.

### Surface-to-Surface

In both English and French, the expressions “surface-to-surface” and “sol-sol” refer to missiles fired from subterranean silos, destined for surface targets elsewhere. In this sense, the Earth itself is put at the service of human destructiveness. Char’s line “Quand le masque de l’homme s’applique au visage de la terre, elle a les yeux crevés”, prefaced by ”Avenir déjà raturé ! Monde plaintif !”, manifests the conversion of the Earth into a murderous force. Man, according to Char, has laid his mask on the face—or the surface—of the Earth, blinding it; the future is already crossed out and the world aggrieved. These lines strongly suggest the continued influence of the Plateau d’Albion anti-nuclear campaign on Char’s poetics. However, Char’s verse in *Contre une maison sèche* cannot be read as a straightforward anti-nuclear text, in the same way that Lam’s images both signify and resist a symbolism of nuclear arms. Such significations and resistances can be found across Char’s text, which develops a socio-ecological poetics without entering the activist mode of *La Provence Point Oméga*. For example, the second text page of *Contre une maison sèche* reads: “Espace couleur de pomme. Espace, brûlant compotier. / Aujourd’hui est un fauve. Demain verra son bond.” When one consults...
photographs of the Plateau d’Albion, home to the Base aérienne 200 Apt-Saint-Christol from 1971 to 1996, a "pomme" colored space unfolds before the viewer. Where one can now see lavender fields, images of the eighteen missile silos implanted in the plateau suggest a homogenous, taupe and bowl-like space. According to Char, the wild animal of today lies in wait to strike tomorrow, and its leap echoes the logic of flying rockets.

These speculative connections to anti-nuclear ecology continue throughout the text, such as when Char writes:

Ils vont nous faire souffrir, mais nous les ferons souffrir.
Il faudrait dire à l’or qui roule, « Venge-toi ». Au temps qui désunit
« Serais-je avec qui j’aime ? Ô ne pas qu’entrevoir !

The logic elaborated in these lines resembles the Cold War military doctrine of “Mutually Assured Destruction”, itself part of the strategy of deterrence. The future tense construction of “[i]ls vont nous faire souffrir, mais nous les ferons souffrir” lends itself to this interpretation as policies of deterrence, as they were held by states with nuclear arsenals, implied equilibrium based on the potential of nuclear retaliation. Char’s lines, “Au temps qui désunit / « Serais-je avec qui j’aime ? Ô ne pas qu’entrevoir ! », relate the epochal problem of human connection in apocalyptic times.

In a world of human sentiments structured by the potential for total destruction, one asks: “will I be with the one I love?”, when the end is nigh. Such an imaginary recalls Chris Marker’s 1962 short film, La Jetée, which explores questions of human intimacy in a post-nuclear apocalypse. The protagonist’s trips to the past where he spends time with his lover contrast the psychic alienation of the destroyed future. The dis-unification of time in Contre une maison sèche joins Marker’s time-traveller, who like Char’s narrator, is only able to briefly “entrevoir” into another temporality.

The question of civilizational annihilation transforms the discourse of death found in Char’s text from one of classic poetic symbolism to a grounded and specific relation to the time of the Cold War. In this connection, Char writes:

Nous passerons de la mort imaginée aux roseaux de la mort vécue nûment. La vie, par abrasion, se distrait à travers nous.
La mort ne se trouve ni en deçà, ni au-delà. Elle est à côté, industriouse, infime.

While such passages could be read in relation to Char’s own advanced age at the time of composing Contre une maison sèche, the use of the third-person plural pronoun suggests a collective phenomenon. Death is “neither above or beyond” but nearby and working industriously, recalling the less than sixty kilometers between the Plateau d’Albion and l’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The binary forces of life and death are found near the poem’s end, where Char writes:

Nous ne sommes tués que par la vie. La mort est l’hôte.
Elle délivre la maison de son enclos et la pousse à l’orée du bois.
Soleil jouvenceau, je te vois ; mais là où tu n’es plus.

Again, the third-person plural pronoun generates the sense that Char speaks for the species at large. While more hermetical than the previous passage, “death delivering the house from its enclosure and pushing it into the woods” can be read alongside questions of habitation found across Char’s anti-nuclear writings. The sun here recalls the sun of Picasso’s poster, which rises, according to Char, upon our “exacting blood”. But this young sun, which Char sees but is no longer there, touches upon the reality of his defeated campaign against the military installation. Contre une maison sèche,
composed during the successful construction of the missile silos, bears the mark of the state’s victory against the general ecology of Provence.

23 An air of defeat can be read in lines such as: “J’aurais pu prendre la nature comme partenaire et danser avec elle à tous les bals. Je l’aimais. Mais deux ne s’épousent pas aux vendages.” The deployment of the past conditional when linked to the personification of nature implies nostalgic regret with respect to ecological concerns. Furthermore, the narrator’s assertion that: “[n]ous éprouvons des insomnies de Niagara et cherchons des terres émues, des terres propres à émouvoir une nature à nouveau enragée”, brings us directly to the interface of human and non-human relations. Here, Char calls for emotive lands, lands suitable for emotionally moving a newly enraged nature. The distinction between the Earth and nature is established within Char’s texts of the 1960s, and relies on the shift in the meaning of the Earth’s geology with the advent of nuclear implantation. The conclusion of Char’s text, when read through the prism of his anti-nuclear sensibility, alludes to the political modalities of socio-ecological thinking. He writes:

Tout ce que nous accomplirons d’essentiel à partir d’aujourd’hui, nous l’accomplirons faute de mieux. Sans contentement ni désespoir. Pour seul soleil : le bœuf écorché de Rembrandt. Mais comment se résigner à la date et à l’odeur sur le gîte affichés, nous qui, sur l’heure, sommes intelligents jusqu’aux conséquences ? Une simplicité s’ébauche : le feu monte, la terre emprunte, la neige vole, la rixe éclate. Les dieux-dits nous déléguent un court temps leur loisir, puis nous prennent en haine de l’avoir accepté. Je vois un tigre. Il voit. Salut. Qui, là, parmi les menthes, est parvenu à naître dont toute chose, demain, se prévaudra ?

24 Departing from the brevity of early aphorisms, Char’s poem concludes with a much longer text cut into two paragraphs. The opening two sentences follow in the logic of political defeat, commenting on the foreclosed horizon of struggle in which whatever can be accomplished within this moment of closure will be without joy or desperation. Speaking of the present, Char’s narrator asks how to resign ourselves to the ambiance of the cottage, our dwelling, if at this very moment we find ourselves “intelligent” to the point of creating grave consequences. The disastrous consequences of technological intelligence are a major leitmotif in the literature on nuclear war. Here, Char draws together the benevolent maison sèche with the ramifications of human evolutionary development alluded to through the title of La Provence Point Oméga. Our own habitats are endangered and it is only our own doing, giving new meaning to the lines “Nous ne sommes tués que par la vie. La mort est l’hôte. / Elle délivre la maison de son enclos et la pousse à l’orée du bois.”

25 The second paragraph treads heavily in the type of imagistic symbolism discussed above. The “simplicity taking shape” is composed of four elements with eschatological valences: fire, earth, snow and human relations, many of which were deployed in Char’s anti-nuclear writings. The “rixe” seems tied to the bellicose aspect of Char’s Cold War present. Geographically out of place in the landscape of the Plateau d’Albion, however, is the tiger hailed by the narrator. Curiously, the tiger also makes an appearance in La Provence Point Oméga, wherein Char writes: “Paysan, mets un tigre dans ton tracteur. C’est un noble animal.” In the final lines of the text, the poet asks if there is anyone to be found among “the density of mint” able to be born out of that which can cause the future to prevail. Despite Char’s daunting syntactical complexity, the lines disclose a number of ecological concerns. The vegetal depths mentioned here recall the distinction between surface and depth crucial to Char’s image repertoire.
importantly, Char asks if the conditions for the future to come into being actually exist in the present. I would argue that these lines be read as interrogating potential futures, in particular, the future as a victory of the general ecology over and against human species hegemony.

**Politic of Futurity**

Such a series of interpretations is made, no doubt, in light of the current ecological crisis. Social and political conflicts before the age of nuclear war have been defined as struggles over the capacity to control the future\(^7\). By contrast, anti-nuclear campaigns of the twentieth century and ecological activism today represent struggles to bring about the future of the Earth itself. The durable contamination visited upon our habitat in the form of radioactive waste make imagining a de-contaminated world the stuff of speculative realism. In this sense, human social life adapts itself to the ever-augmenting dystopia of bio-systemic collapse. Our science-fictional scenes of existence have much in common with Cold War scenarios of technological destructiveness. Indeed the outcomes of the Cold War, including the Stalinization and eventual isolation of Cuban socialism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are intimately linked to the peregrinations of global capitalism that have brought us the current climate crisis. To put it another way, if US and USSR Cold War strategy had not been successful in containing the Third World revolution and its non-aligned, anti-nuclear politics, would ecological catastrophe in the twenty-first century be the same? For theorist Sabu Kohso, writing about the 2011 Fukushima disaster, nuclear fallout is contiguous with an “apocalyptic capitalism” whose generalization globally reveals the fundamental reciprocity between life-forms and forms of political existence\(^7\). Such a relation has often been transcribed poetically, as when Chilean poet Cecilia Vicuña wrote after the US-backed coup against the Allende government, “Socialismo y tierras salvajes (poesía) es lo único que nos puede salvar?” (“Socialism and wild lands (poetry) are the only things that can save us”). The severity of the climate crisis, and the mass extinction it augurs, is a direct index for thinking the dystopic actuality of infra-human relations under late capitalism. The quality of these relations in political terms is isomorphic with the quality of our non-human relations.

The title of Lam's 1950 painting “La rumeur de la terre”, with its bone-white phantom-like figures foregrounding massive, knife wielding shadows, is often translated as “The Rumbling of the Earth”. “Rumeur” in French, like the verb “remuer” (to shake), signifies physical trembling, evoking seismic activity. “Rumeur” as “murmur”, however, designates a more human, or human-like expression, eliciting an image of the gods speaking to us in the language of natural cataclysm. In contradistinction to the “correct” translation of *rumeur* as rumbling, I have often imagined the ghostly scene as calling forth the *hearsay* of the Earth. The rumor of the Earth, in this sense, would suggest a world that is spoken of but whose existence is uncertain or inactual. Following this interpretation, Lam's chthonic scene would conjure a landmass of unsubstantiated legend. Legendary but unverifiable lands are a major trope of the modern genres of fantasy and science fiction; the possible existence of these lands is often the object of a journey and their discovery, the content of species redemption. Against this salvific vision, the rumor of the Earth might be understood as a spectral relation between a land and a people, a socio-ecological connection that has been severed and whose
restoration remains incomplete. In this vein, Sabu Kohso asserts: “la décomposition du Monde présiderait à une redécouverte de la Terre”, the latter being his name for the possible planetary revolution arising from current ecological struggles. The rumor of the Earth resides in that untimely interval between the decomposition of the World and the rediscovery of the Earth. It is a way of speaking in the present about “l’espace futur d’une lutte de libération”, as Char writes of Lam’s work in De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse. If our terrestrial engagements have the quality of eschatological legends or science fiction, it suffices to remember that the tradition of anticolonial thought reimagined the dystopia of colonialism through the worldmaking potential of new social forms. It did so, in a certain sense, by giving content to the rumor of the Earth, as links between people and land are indeed to be reinvented.

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NOTES

4. Scholarship on this matter is largely divided between, on the one hand, a First and Second World vision of Cold War literary aesthetics and, on the other, social science research that centers the Third World within this conflict. For an example of the former, see the edited volume Understanding the imaginary war: Culture, Thought and Nuclear conflict, 1945-90, edited by Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016. For an example of the latter, see Odd Arne WESTAD, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

5. Mike DAVIS, “Nuclear Imperialism and Extended Deterrence”, Exterminism and Cold War, edited by the New Left Review, Verso, 1982, p. 42. Here, Davis writes: “... I shall argue that the Cold War in its wider sense is not an arbitrary or anachronistic feud staged essentially in Europe, but a rationally explicable and deeply rooted conflict of opposing social formations and political forces, whose principal centre of gravity has been for some thirty years now the Third World.”


9. Here, I employ philosopher Fred MOTEN’s concept of the general ecology in “Blackness and Poetry”, Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics, n° 55, July 2015, www.thevolta.org/ewc55-fmoten-p1.html. As part of a growing literature that recognizes links between the subordination of peoples and the subordination of land, Moten theorizes modern slavery as a catastrophe whose proportions involve ramifications within “the general ecology”. The general ecology, in this sense, is not simply the combination of the human and more-than-human world, but the dialectical site in which the human as category takes on phenomenal meaning. Moten writes: “[G]iven how the category of the human has been put under the severest pressure by the terrors of colonialism and imperialism, particularly when these are the forces the first world and its others turn upon themselves, black thought, which is to say black social life, remains a fruitful site for inhabiting and soliciting the human differential within the general ecology” (no pagination).


12. See, in this connection, Alvan A. IKOKU, “Forêts del Sur and the Pretexts of Glissant’s Tout-Monde”, which theorizes Lam’s work on the forest as “a parallel vegetational space” to the plantation, “elucidating the dynamics of world making” against colonialism, p. 4, 18.


14. SDO Wifredo Lam, the Lam family archive, contains handwritten correspondence between the two artists. This correspondence is entirely apropos of book collaborations between Char and Lam or possible collaborations with others in their milieu.


17. According to Antoine Coron’s catalogue, the Lam and Char most certainly met before and during the war, “à Paris, sans doute et puis à Marseille sûrement”, during the Occupation, p. 225.


19. René Char, Le Rempart des brindilles, illustrated by Wifredo Lam, Paris, Louis Broder, 1953. The size of the book is 21 x 15.5 cm, a relatively small format for an artist book. It contains five color engravings by Lam, including one on the cover.


24. René Char, Œuvres complètes, p. 351-3. Char’s Lascaux series was published in La Parole en Archipel, in the section “La Paroi et la Prairie”. In this connection, see Daniel Fabre’s article, “Le poète dans la caverne, Georges Bataille à Lascaux”, Imaginaires archéologiques, edited by Claude Voisenat, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, ministère de la Culture, 2008, p. 127-82, in which he discusses Malraux’s juxtaposition of the Resistance and the Lascaux cave—particularly the cultural myth that arms for the Resistance were hidden there—observing that Char made links between two events much earlier than Malraux (p. 128).

25. René Char, De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse, no pagination. The text can also be found in René Char, Œuvres complètes, p. 592.

26. René Char, De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse, no pagination.

27. René Char, De La sainte famille au Droit à la paresse, no pagination.

28. Correspondance Lam-Char, consulted at SDO Wifredo Lam.

29. As Dominique Tommeau-Ryckelynck remarks, “Contre une maison sèche is considered one of the finest examples of the French livre d’artiste, and this is surely because of the almost spiritual complicity that was shard among the poet, artist and publisher. Each phase of production had been carefully thought out to ensure the upmost harmony: the cover in raw silk, handmade Richard de Bas paper, a landscape format chosen in order to make the figures stand out, drawn very freely as they are, the use of the two printer’s font to compose Char’s poem and the sober, precise, almost transparent colors so expertly chosen by the artist”, p. 26.

30. René Char, Le Nu perdu, in Œuvres complètes, p. 421-483


32. René Char, Contre une maison sèche, p. 9.

33. René Char, Contre une maison sèche, p. 17.

34. About this campaign, Antoine Coron’s exposition catalogue notes that: “Cette nouvelle [« une base de lancement du fusées atomiques allait être installée sur le plateau d’Albion »] toucha Char doublement : elle faisait de son pays natal une cible nucléaire prioritaire ; elle dénaturait un site qu’il affectionnait et auquel le rattachaient de nombreuses amitiés issues du maquis Ventoux. Lui, qui depuis vingt ans, se tenait éloigné de l’action politique, s’y laissa entraîner avec fièvre...” (p. 175). I would argue that the reemergence of the aphorism in Char’s writing is linked to his re-engagement, after thirty years, with political activism.


37. René CHAR, La Provence Point Oméga (book), no pagination.


41. René CHAR, La Provence Point Oméga (book), p. 20. Michel AULUS, in “Entailles & signes : le Dictionnaire René Char”, Acta fabula, 16.6, Notes de lecture, 2015, discusses continuities between the Lascaux series’ chthonian themes and those around Char’s anti-nuclear writings. In contradistinction to my argument in this article, however, for Aulus, the chthonian space remains the same in quality between the two periods. Aulus writes: “Dès les années 1950, sa méditation sur l’homme de « Lascaux » soutint la dénonciation de la conquête spatiale et, en 1965, Char appela à la mobilisation contre l’implantation de fusées nucléaires dans le sous-sol du plateau d’« Albion », notamment par la plaquette La Provence point oméga : se trouvait ainsi réactivée mythe chtonien de la France-des-Cavernes, issu de la « Résistance ». Et, à partir de La Nuit talismanique (1972)—recueil influencé par la lecture de « Novalis »—mais surtout d’Aromates Chasseurs (1972-1975), avec la figure d’« Orion », l’espace charien, initialement clos (vallis clausa), s’ouvre sur un « Cosmos » infini” (no pagination).


46. Eskil LAM, Wifredo Lam, catalogue raisonné: prints, p. 405


48. In The Global Cold War, Westad writes of “The Cuban Missile Crisis, in which a conflict over Soviet nuclear weapons installed by stealth on the island had led the superpowers to the brink of war, reminded Moscow leaders of the dangers involved in intervening in conflicts that could not be easily controlled far from home ... the refusal of the Cuban leaders to put a good face to the Soviet climbdown over the missiles scared many of the Kremlin leaders and meant that there was opposition to getting directly militarily involved in Third World affairs for some time to come” (p. 168).

49. Four etchings for Jacques Dupin’s La nuit se découvre, published in 2011, were drawn from unused plates produced by Lam for Contre une maison sèche. For these engravings see, Eskil Lam, Wifredo Lam, catalogue raisonné: prints, p. 305.

50. Lowery Stokes Sims discusses the ubiquity of the diamond form across Lam’s œuvre. She writes: “Diamond shapes (as well as crisscrosses and triangles) represent the four directions or the ‘four-point boundaries of the soul’s orbit’ in west and central African art forms. In his 1976 monograph on Lam, Max-Pol Foucchet writes that the rhomboid form represents an opening to
admit ‘chthonian forces’ and that in Chinese symbology a similar lozenge form was a symbol of victory.” The diamond shape is also considered “a key element in Afro-Cuban symbology and ritual.” See Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde*, 1923-1982, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 58, 60.

51. For these prints, see Eskil Lam, *Wifredo Lam, catalogue raisonné: prints*, p. 297.


54. For these prints, see Eskil Lam, *Wifredo Lam, catalogue raisonné: prints*, p. 297.


56. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 17.

57. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 10.

58. For images of the remains of the site see Guillaume Origoni, “Le plateau d’Albion : du fracas de l’atome aux chuchotements souterrains,” in Slate.

59. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 22.


63. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 37.


65. Indeed, the transformation into “Ruine d’Albion” of the title of the poster text “La Provence Point Oméga”, when republished in *Dans la pluie giboyeuse*, further confirms the sense of anti-nuclear defeat in *Contre une maison sèche*. See Antoine Coron’s exhibition catalogue, p. 176.


68. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 41.

69. Exemplary in this regard is Günther Anders, *L’Obsolescence de l’homme*, t. 2 *Sur la destruction de la vie à l’époque de la troisième révolution industrielle*, translated by Christophe David, Paris, Fario, 2011, which argues that our capacity to produce nuclear technology, and the need to continue producing it within capitalism, occurs within a context that has replaced “morality” with “irrationalism”. This is the paradox of what Anders calls our “nuclear situation”. See, especially, Chapter 27 “The Obsolescence of Evil”.

70. René Char, *Contre une maison sèche*, p. 37.


ABSTRACTS

This essay considers the collaborative projects of Cuban artist Wifredo Lam and French poet René Char as thematizing an imbrication between two different ends of the world: the end of the colonial world through decolonization and the end of terrestrial life in nuclear war. This connection, I argue, is pursued by Lam and Char through a set of socio-ecological commitments in which the relation between humanity and the earth heralds an apocalyptic vision of planetary crisis. I proceed to my argument by reconstructing Char and Lam’s investments in a political aesthetics of inter-species and earthly habitation, beginning in the 1950s. By the mid-1960s, the threat of nuclear destruction transforms the meaning of the earth, especially in Char’s poetics. At the center of my analysis is their collaborative book, Contre une maison sèche, which I read in continuity with late 1960s anti-nuclear struggles. Finally, I suggest that we think formal decolonization and anti-nuclear ecology together as a point of historical reference for the current ecological crisis. What I call “the rumor of the Earth,” after Lam’s 1950 painting, names the possible but as-yet undiscovered forms of inhabiting the Earth and of making new relations at all levels of the general ecology.


INDEX

Keywords: René Char, Wifredo Lam, anti-nuclear, Cold War, decolonization, ecology, earth, habitation, apocalypse, artist book

Mots-clés: René Char, Wifredo Lam, lutte anti-nucléaire, guerre froide, décolonisation, écologie, Terre, apocalypse, livre d’artiste

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