“Colombes et Menfenil” in Text and Image: Taking Flight From Conquest in Aimé Césaire and Wifredo Lam’s Collaborative Aesthetics

Katerina Gonzalez Seligmann
In Aimé Césaire’s essay on Wifredo Lam’s art from the mid-1940s, he signals both the universal reach and particular location of Lam’s work. He first describes the universal gift of Lam’s work as follows: «Dans une société où la machine et l’argent ont démesurément agrandi la distance de l’homme aux choses, Wifredo Lam fixe sur la toile la cérémonie pour laquelle toutes existent : la cérémonie de l’union physique de l’homme et du monde.» In this formulation, Césaire ascribes to Lam’s painting a reparative quality to the alienation imposed by modernity. Lam’s art as ceremony restores the unity fractured by modernity. Lam’s particular location (or locus of enunciation) for this kind of work is as important, and Césaire positions it in a poetic formulation: «Et que c’est au nom de ces hommes, au nom de ces rescapés du plus grand naufrage de l’histoire, que parle Wifredo Lam.» The move is subtle, and Césaire is not specific here about which peoples exactly Lam paints in the name of, but the context of Césaire’s reading of Lam includes the history of empire in the Caribbean that shapes both artists, including the history of chattel slavery, the lack of restitution for the formerly enslaved upon abolition, the regime of indentured labor that succeeded from it, and the continued racialized character of dispossession throughout the Caribbean and beyond. While Césaire writes about Lam, we might also understand Césaire’s work as a universal restoration of the world enacted in the name of the survivors of history’s greatest shipwreck. The ceremony of Lam’s work, like that of Césaire’s, starts from the alienation of the survivors of history and takes flight from the distortions of history’s violence to the edge (au bout) of its beyond, where the fundamental unity between the human and the world may be found.
Between Césaire and Lam we have evidence of a highly impactful original encounter that necessarily touches each other’s work and a lifetime of collaborations, but even this evidence does not permit us to pinpoint exactly who thought what first and who built on who, or what missing references may be present from those among them. There is a presumption recorded in the scholarly record, however, that Césaire greatly influenced Lam. The inexact work of characterizing collaboration and a genealogy of influence necessarily relies greatly on speculation, on dreaming up connections in the space between the works, about the conceptual lives implied by the records, in dialogue with the works. In one of their understudied shared projects between text and image, I argue that their work pushes a Western structure of hierarchical and oppositional thought related to the history of conquest to its edge, or takes flight from: takes flight from conquest. I refer with this argument to their work on the text and image figures of “colombes” (doves) and the “menfenil” (a bird of prey found throughout the Americas) that recur in both the poet and painter’s work. My analysis of Césaire and Lam’s collaborative work on “colombes” and the “menfenil” positions the meaning-making of their work on these two bird-figures, as a reciprocal production demonstrating a great aesthetic affinity between both artists, even as each artist’s work is distinct from the other’s.

Eskil Lam introduced me to his father’s 1947 painting “Menfenil” in Paris in 2012, when I first started researching the relationship between painter and poet, just weeks after I had the chance to study typescript and manuscript versions of Césaire’s early collection of poems “Colombes et menfenil” in Martinique. The painting made a strong impression on me as I thought through it in relation to Césaire’s little-known poetry title. These works have been latent in my process of thinking through the values of conquest in contemporary discourse, including positive values associated with whiteness and negative values associated with darkness, and I fold that thinking process back into the research and writing of this essay. The “colombe” and the “menfenil” as prey and predator are both overdetermined in value through Western symbolism as bird types, and both are also more complicated than the symbolic value-laden images they evoke as the white dove of peace and the dark-ominous bird of prey and war. By “overdetermined in value”, I mean that there are multiple axes of value that converge on the birds that unconsciously align with the racialized social order of the Americas constructed by the history of conquest. I propose with this essay a critical dialogue with Césaire and Lam’s work on these birds to diffuse the conquest-thinking that informs the symbolic economy and contributes to normalizing the persistence of racialized hierarchies embedded in the history of colonial dispossession, extraction, and labor power. In their collaborative aesthetic recasting of these archetypal bird figures, I argue that both poet and painter take them over and demonstrate how to fly the mind out of conquest.

Poet, Meet Painter; Painter, Meet Poet

Lam would meet Césaire in 1941 on a stopover in Martinique on his way to Cuba—he was notably on the same boat with his friend, the poet and theorist of surrealism André Breton, and the not-yet famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss for that stopover. Lam, the Cuban painter of African, Chinese, and European descent, was one of many artists who fled Vichy-occupied France after the Nazi German defeat of French forces.
As the story goes, Breton found a copy of *Tropiques* in a bookstore in Fort-de-France, and he was so impressed by it, he arranged to meet the group behind the magazine through the bookshop owner. Lam and his wife at the time, Helena Benitez (then Holzer), would love meeting Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, and they would stay connected. According to Holzer’s memoir of her time with Lam, he was deeply moved when he heard Aimé Césaire read his famous poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. Back in Cuba, she would support the poem’s translation by Euro-Cuban writer and ethnographer Lydia Cabrera, who was a close collaborator of Lam’s. And Lam’s love of the poem would manifest in illustrations for the resulting book.

When Lam met Césaire, he had recently had his first Paris exhibition, in 1939 at the Pierre Loeb Gallery, and just three years later, he would debut in New York and catapult into international circulation as a highly regarded surrealist painter from a circle of friends and comrades that included Breton and Pablo Picasso. His work of abstract imagery drawing on African aesthetic forms and rooted in Afro-Caribbean religiosity and Caribbean landscapes would become iconic in Cuba and beyond, and his paintings are currently held in many museums around the world. Césaire in turn had published in August 1939 the first version of the *Cahier* in the Paris-based magazine *Volontés*. He left France soon after this publication and returned home to Martinique where he became a schoolteacher and began editing the literary magazine *Tropiques* with a group of collaborators including those who along with him were its most frequent contributors, his wife Suzanne Césaire and René Ménil. During the 1940s he would also grow international recognition by publishing in literary magazines in New York, Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, Alexandria, and Havana. Aimé Césaire had not yet published a book by this time, and in fact the 1943 Cuban *Cahier*, whose publication Lam instigated, would become the first published volume of his poetry. Lam’s Paris-based archive, the SDO Lam, holds an annotated typescript version of the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* that was most likely used for this edition. The resulting book, a boutique, 300-copy edition, was rendered all-the-more valuable by Lam’s three illustrations for it. Césaire would go on to become a poet, playwright, and political writer of great international acclaim and influence; and many dissertations, articles, books, and documentaries have been dedicated to his work. Much of Césaire’s later claim to fame may be attributed to his linguistically reformulating blackness in French through coining the term “négritude”, first in 1935 and more famously in the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. When Césaire and Lam met, they were both in an incubating phase, however. They were on the rise as artists, but they had not yet added to their persons the aesthetic reputations that would accompany them for the rest of their lives. To what extent did their encounter in Martinique, at a time of great rupture for both men, brought on by the tragic circumstances of Nazi victory over France, impact both of their becoming acclaimed and monumental artists during this time?

The mutual enchantment caused by the meeting of these two great and kindred artists is understandable. In their life’s work we can observe a corresponding aesthetic commitment and practice: while both artists counter the work of the history of slavery and empire in producing a racist structure of knowledge and symbolic representation, neither sought to intervene aesthetically through observably realist representations, preferring to refract their visions into text and image in ways that have been readable through the framework of surrealism, but which are also close in many ways to the aesthetics of the “neo-Baroque” that would be applied to other Caribbean artists who...
elaborated beyond-realist work. Because both artists would be written about by surrealism’s central theorist and practitioner André Breton who facilitated their encounter, it has become the most dominant structure for understanding both of their works, but it is important to note that their aesthetic aims were distinct from those of French surrealists, as their work excavated the psyche in order to diffuse the distortion of reality imposed by the history of empire and its attendant racial ideologies.

In their meeting and after, Césaire would also demonstrate the extent of Lam’s impact on him. He would gift him a tiré à part, a signed and dedicated limited edition of the Volontés publication of the poem (also held in the SDO Lam). The dedication to Lam in this gift edition of the poem unites the two artists through their shared Afro-Caribbean origins as well as the aesthetic affinities they shared in their unique approaches to poeticizing Afro-diasporic and Caribbean-located experience. The dedication in verse style thus reads:

à Wifredo Lam
un témoignage d’amitié
et d’admiration
un poème de nos vérités
de nos espoirs
de notre ferveur.

The “nous” he articulates there with “nos” and “notre” envelops Lam into the collective subjectivity of expression (Afro-diasporic, colonial, and Caribbean-located) implied by the Cahier, but I suspect that it is also a smaller “nous” that articulates even more specifically the truths, dreams, and fervors Césaire imagines himself to already share with Lam at this time.

Colombes et Menfenil: Archetypes of Transformation

Césaire’s first installment or version of the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal from 1939 already figures a prominent “menfenil” and a “colombe” before he would put the two together in the title of the much lesser-known collection of poems, “Colombes et menfenil” would later become one of the collections of poetry in the larger volume for Césaire’s 1946 book Les Armes miraculeuses. The André Breton archive housed at the Schœlcher Library in Martinique holds a typescript and manuscript collection of Césaire’s poems that were sent to Breton during the 1940s for consideration. The typescript set of poems, with handwritten corrections, include the poems “Au delà”, “N’ayez point pitié de moi”, “Survie”, “Poème pour l’aube”, “Soleil serpent” (although this poem remains untitled in Breton’s typescript copy), “Tam-tam de nuit”, “Femme d’eau”, and “Batouque”. There is one poem in manuscript form held in this collection, the poem “Simouns”, which is dedicated to Wifredo Lam.

“Simouns” would not be published in Les Armes miraculeuses in its entirety. Much of the poem, with several changes including cuts of approximately one-third of the poem would appear in revised form as “Les oubliettes de la mer et du déluge”, which is not dedicated to Lam in the published volume. Instead, a very short poem “Tam-tam II” appears with a dedication to Lam. “Simoun” in the singular, has a double meaning that indexes both Africa and Europe: the word comes from the Arabic to refer to sandstorm winds. The “Caudron Simoun” was also a four-seat monoplane developed during the 1930s and used by Air Bleu to transport mail. In the plural, Césaire likely
expressed both his and Lam’s art as “Simouns”, both winds and planes, articulating the hybrid legacy in their work drawing on both African and European traditions. The cutting of this title and the dedication to Lam in what remains of this poem in “Les oubliettes de la mer et du déluge” with a title connoting forgotten losses, would imply a significant shift of meaning-making. The cut title, “Simouns”, with its double meaning, more closely approximates the work of poeticizing in text and image the multiple meanings of other flying beings at issue here: doves and birds of prey.

A collection of Césaire’s poems with the title “Colombes et menfenil” would also be published in the French-language literary magazine edited by Ivan Goll, Hémisphères (vol. 1, n° 4, 1944), with an illustration by Wifredo Lam. This publication included seven of the poems held in the Fonds Breton, or seven out of those Breton presumably had been sent by Césaire for potential publication: “Au delà”, “N’ayez point pitié de moi”, “Survie”, “Poème pour l’aube”, “Soleil serpent”, “Tam tam de nuit” and “Femme d’eau”. Lam’s one-page illustration that accompanies this collection happens to be identical to the most elaborate of the three illustrations Lam included in the Cuban Cahier.

Figure 1: Aimé Césaire, “Colombes et menfenil”, Hémisphères, vol. 1, n° 4, 1944, p. 24
The coincidence of Lam’s illustration, for both this series and the Cahier, indicates the high likelihood that the bird images in it are indeed abstractions based on a “colombe” and a “menfenil”. Lam would then go on to name three paintings in relation to Césaire’s “Colombes et menfenil” title from 1947 to 1959: “Menfenil” (1947); “Lunguanda Yembe” (colombe lunaire) (1950); and “La colombe noire” (1959). Lam’s work on these bird-figures functions visually in a similar way to Césaire’s poetic approach to them: both intervene and reformulate existing archetypes.

Carl Jung, who was a highly influential thinker during the 1940s and 1950s, may be helpful for understanding the role of the dove and the menfenil as archetypes in Césaire and Lam’s work. Jung explained that the sense-making that happened in dreams often consisted of images whose symbolic value were based on archaic material, which he called “archetypes”. While Jung reproduced a “primitive” and “civilized” dichotomy (although like many European modernists he participated in the dichotomy by undervaluing rather than overvaluing “civilized” society), several of his theories have nonetheless become embedded in academic, aesthetic, and lay understandings of psychology and the relationship between art and society. One of these is the power of excavating and reformulating archetypes, observable in Césaire and Lam. According to Jung’s explanation of the work of dreams, the unconscious “seems to be guided chiefly by instinctive trends, represented by corresponding thought forms, that is by archetypes”22.” For this idea, Jung draws on Freud’s idea of the unconscious part of the brain as organized by “archaic remnants”23.” These archaic remnants correspond to a historically and generationally produced order to unconscious thought forms of the kind that could apply to the values of conquest that connect to racial hierarchies in
colonial history. Jung himself suggested that the cultural symbols made up by archetypes “evoke this psychic charge that makes them function much the same way as prejudices.” If archetypes function like prejudices, archetypes are also powerful forms for intervening in structures of value that psychically enforce racial prejudice.

Lam would also discuss the aims of his painting in terms that resemble Jung’s ideas on the role of archetypes in dreams:

“I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. I knew I was running the risk of not being understood either by the man in the street or by others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time.”

The “hallucinating figures” with the power to surprise are those I understand as archetypes at work in Lam’s paintings. Max-Pol Fouchet would use the term “avenging figures” to translate Lam’s sense of his work as a “Trojan horse” that might “disturb the dreams of the exploiters”. Rather than turn to social realism, Fouchet tells us that Lam “preferred to entrust his message to great avenging figures, rising out of the country’s unhappy subconscious and imposing their presence like specters in order to work on the demolition of the prisons and hovels of contempt.” I am particularly interested in this idea of “great avenging figures” and the idea of disrupting dreams when I examine the work both Lam and Césaire do on the archetypes of doves and birds of prey. Césaire did, after all, note their shared “dreams” in his dedication to Lam.

If, as Jung indicates, archaic thought forms present themselves to the unconscious mind as archetypal images, the imagery of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices utilized by Lam could also have the effect of evoking African cosmologies and systems of value that might challenge or re-route the spiritual and intellectual work of psychic conquest. For Lam, the regular use of imagery associated with the orishas or pantheon of god-spirits of the Lucumí or Yoruba religion (often called santería) practiced in Cuba functions as something other than worship. Lowery Stokes Sims suggests in relation to Lam’s aesthetic use of Afro-Caribbean spiritual symbols that during the 1940s Lam was “devising a way to depict metamorphic and metaphysical entities”. Odette Casamayor-Cisneros also explains that Lam’s allegorical references to symbols of sacred African origin indicate “a continuous and total metamorphosis that Lam expresses in his paintings”. I am interested in metamorphosis in his work that dialogues with Césaire through the use of the orishas, and in particular Elegguá, as an archetype of transformation.

To what extent does Césaire’s work similarly intervene in and construct archetypes poetically? Jung suggests that in dreams archetypal symbols have the function of “attempts to reconcile and reunite opposites within the psyche”. In Césaire’s poetry we often see a poetic parade of opposites united, sometimes even in the same word. Poetry, like the dream and the painting, lends itself well to excavating unconscious realities. And Césaire understood poetry as the realm in which “rien n’est jamais plus près de rien que de son contraire”, implicitly ascribing to poetry itself the function that psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung ascribed to dreams. In the essay, “Poésie et connaissance,” he builds on Breton’s work on the surrealist image as best exemplified by bringing together the most disparate of elements, but Césaire extends the power that Breton ascribes to surrealist practice to the whole of poetry. In Suzanne Césaire’s earlier essay, “1943 : Le surréalisme et nous,” she elaborates a related idea about
surrealist poetry. According to her, it has the power to transcend “les sordides antinomies actuelles: blancs-noirs, européens-africains, civilisés-sauvages”. Surely, Suzanne Césaire had Aimé Césaire’s exemplary poetic practice of approximating opposites in mind when she offered this proposition. In turn, Aimé Césaire would go on to explain in very similar terms that precisely because the poetic image exceeds (dépasse) what is perceived, “la dialectique de l’image transcende les antinomies” in “Poésie et connaissance”. The difficulty in following this poetic theory, I think, is in the idea of “transcendence”. In my reading of Césaire and Lam’s work on oppositional images, the result is not the transcendence of hierarchical binaries as peaceful communion, but rather transcendence as elevating beyond the constraints imposed by the hierarchical oppositions that naturalize the history of conquest. Embedded into the colonial history of the West, there is a tradition of producing oppositions through the framework of good /evil and right /wrong on the side of conquest, a tradition that Césaire would go on to connect to the force of Nazism in Europe. Aimé Césaire and Wifredo Lam’s collaborative aesthetic work on doves and raptors, as I will go on to demonstrate, would thus use poetic methods to fly our minds beyond the hierarchical structure of oppositional thought produced by the history of conquest and bring the world into new light.

Aimé Césaire’s title “Colombes et menfenil” exemplifies exactly the aesthetic strategy of bringing opposites together for poetic inquiry. The title engages a multiplicity of meanings in dialogue with a highly overdetermined one, that of the colombe, or the dove. If a colombe is a dove, it is important to note that it is of the same family (columbidae) as the pigeon, a bird that in urban contexts especially loses the meaning usually ascribed to doves. Not all languages include the difference between doves and pigeons, however; and in Spanish, for example, they are both known as “paloma”. Only the white dove, or the “paloma blanca” in Spanish, retains the imagery of the dove associated with peace and holiness, due to its function to symbolize Pentecost in Christianity.

In English, as well as French, from which the English for “pigeon” derives, the perceivable difference between the two birds is one of scale: doves are much smaller than pigeons. But the symbolic difference between the two birds is nonetheless great. Whereas doves come in many colors, white doves are overrepresented, dominating the imaginary of the “dove”. White doves of the “mourning dove” variety also have a religious significance, at least in Judaism and Christianity, as consolatory offerings to those who are mourning. In fact, a group of doves in English is called a “dule” after the French word for mourning, deuil. Because the mourning ritual calls for a group (or dule) of doves, the plural form “colombes” is important in Césaire’s title, for it is likely to function, at least in part, alongside the “menfenil”, as a post-mortem image associated with mourning. When we establish that doves are associated with peace and purity but also death, what comes into view is how close the symbol of the dove is to death, as it relates to the process of renewal in mourning and the afterlife. In other words, Césaire’s notion of the proximity of opposites becomes visible in the white dove’s archetypal proximity to death as a facilitator of souls for reaching the after-life.

The presence of “colombe” in an anticolonial poetics such as Césaire’s also recalls the Genoese explorer named Cristobal Colón in Spanish, Christophe Colomb in French, and Christopher Columbus in English. The infamous navigator, who until the present in some contexts is revered for his achievement of stumbling into the Caribbean on a
voyage to shorten the trading route to Southeast Asia by traveling southwest from Europe, finds himself implicated ironically in Césaire’s image of the colombe. Kora Véron has elaborated this reading of Césaire’s title. As she indicates, the Genoese navigator’s writings would also serve as the reference for the title to Césaire’s first play, *Et les chiens se taisaient* (*And the dogs were silent*), which he was also writing during this period and would publish alongside the volume of poetry in the book *Les Armes miraculeuses*. Césaire likely read several diaries of the conquerors of the Americas, and in the title to the play he draws specifically on the fact that in his diaries, Colón (Colomb) was struck by the island dogs who did not bark. Ernstpeter Ruhe has examined Césaire’s work to reverse what Alex Gil also calls Paul Claudel’s “obscene redemption” of Colomb in *Le livre de Christophe Colomb*. When we consider that the symbolic image of “colombes” recalls the overdetermined image of Colomb the man, a perfect example emerges for the contextual work of meaning-making in Césaire. Colomb’s value is encoded by perspective: those who identify with colonizers and those nations that implicitly ask their citizens to identify with colonizers have revered the “discoverer,” but those peoples and nations who identify with those who were colonized, enslaved, and/or dispossessed in the wake of Colomb’s transitional moment in the shaping of modernity have mourned the “conquest” of the Americas that he inaugurated. From the latter vantage point, the symbol of peace coinciding linguistically with the man “Colomb” is certainly ironic, as he would perhaps be represented more appropriately with a bird of prey associated with war. The world is not of course so neatly divided, for many of us are in fact ancestrally shaped by both conquerors and conquered, oppressors and oppressed, enslavers and enslaved, predators and prey. Raptors are also more complex, as they are associated with beauty in addition to war. As Sylvia Wynter argues, Colomb’s 1492 voyage was also more complex, for it transformed the European worldview by confirming the universal habitability of the earth: “In the wake of Columbus’ voyage across the Atlantic some half a century after the Portuguese rounded the Cape, it was the same recognition of the earth’s homogeneity that was to strike his contemporaries most vividly.” Bringing the Americas into view for Europe, added to the experience of traveling to Africa, produced the conceptual possibility of imagining the universal human from the perspective of Europe and also inaugurated a historical progression of colonial violence and dispossession that would divide the world order. In this sense, Colomb, as a historical figure and symbol, can be deployed for thinking in multiple, imbricated, and even conflicting directions.

When the menfenil is considered in both Césaire’s and Lam’s work, some doubt arises about whether the bird is a hawk or a falcon. While there is quite a bit of variation among Césaire scholars annotating this bird, there seems to be a consensus among those scholars with strong local vernacular knowledge that Césaire refers to the *Buteo platypterus rivieri*, a broad-winged hawk. But this bird resembles the *Falco columbarius* (merlin in English, *épervier* in French) which only inhabits the Caribbean in the winter (and eats doves and pigeons). The *Falco columbarius* has triangular falcon wings, but both birds are predominantly brown with some white in coloring, and from a distance with wings outstretched, they would be easily confusable. The *épervier* is also present in the *Cahier* however, and it is unlikely that Césaire referred to it with “menfenil,” even if it would be the true opposite of the dove as a predator of doves. Furthermore, while the *Buteo* hawk is a relative of the eagle, it is significantly smaller than the eagle. While there may be a proximity between the eagle used as a symbol in Nazi Germany
and that which is also used as a national symbol in the United States and Mexico, the "menfenil" is a different raptor altogether.

Another complication can be found in the spelling of "menfenil." "Menfenil" appears to be sui generis to Césaire, except in Lam’s own follow up usage. The spelling in regular use is “mansfenil”. Furthermore, the “mansfenil” is also known as the “malfini”⁴⁴. Why then would Césaire opt not to use “mansfenil” or “malfini” in the case of the cahier and the “Colombes et menfenil” title? I have the following hypothesis: Césaire does not evoke the “bad ending” of the “malfini” in this image of the raptor, or at least not exclusively. Instead, he forwards the mansfenil/malfini as “menfenil” to intervene in this bird of prey as an archetype. Elodie Jourdain notes that “fenil” in “mansfenil” derives from “phoenix”⁴⁵. And the Latin prefix “mens” refers to thinking and intelligence. Even if “menfenil” and “mansfenil” are close, Césaire appears to have chosen his own spelling of the word, and he employs it several times instead of other obvious options; and Lam chose to follow his usage. It seems to me that it would be worth considering, in addition to which bird he means, what the significance may be of his particular choice for naming this bird. In my reading, “menfenil” proposes something beyond the Buteo: something like phoenix thought or phoenix intelligence, or the possibility of thinking rebirth out of death, or more figuratively, out of mourning, a meaning that itself offers a new archetype, positioning this figure that is more than a hawk closer to the colombe’s function of spiritual rebirth than one might imagine from a more representational reading. Césaire’s poetics take us to a place where “colombe” and “menfenil” may both be themselves and something more than what they usually symbolize as archetypes.

Menfenil and Colombe, Meet Text

A look at the context for Césaire’s usage of “menfenil” expands my reading that the “menfenil” functions as an archetype renovated in meaning through Césaire’s poetic choices. The figure appears in a stand-alone verse of the cahier that reads: “Mon étoile maintenant, le menfenil funèbre⁴⁶”. Here, the bird of prey becomes further detached from its physical reference as a hawk through its personification as a guiding star, or an orientation. In its description as “funèbre” it also becomes associated, like the mourning dove, with a mourning ritual (the funeral). The image here also calls up Toussaint L’Ouverture’s death from the earlier stanza that begins with “Ce qui est à moi aussi: une petite cellule dans le Jura”. In this earlier stanza, Césaire also reconfigures the darkness usually associated with death by proposing L’Ouverture’s death as white: “c’est un homme seul qui défie les cris blancs de la mort blanche⁴⁷”. But the mourning aspect of the “menfenil” also pertains to the history of slavery evoked in many parts of the poem, including those references to the sounds of the terror of the enslaving ship several stanzas before the introduction of this bird of prey: “J’entends de la cale monter les malédictions enchaînées, les hoquètements des mourants, le bruit d’un qu’on jette à la mer⁴⁸...". The menfenil of the cahier is poised to mourn as much as to prey on the dead as a figure that has fused with a star: the very light, but of the night, required for mourning.

As a guide for the possibilities of rebirth and transformation the poem goes on to enact, the menfenil serves as a “mens-phoenix” image for thinking out of the ashes of conquest and oppression, material and figurative. The kind of phoenix-thought I refer
to emerges several stanzas later in a series of anticolonial and antiviolen affirmations that revise negations imposed onto those colonized and conquered from European perspectives aligned with conquest. This series persists with some variation in future revisions of the poem. The first Cahier’s version of this series, however, the one Lam met in Martinique and illustrated in translation, may more clearly express the ideas to which opposing values may be ascribed depending on the “light” of value that illuminates them, that of modernity-as-conquest or the nonviolent guiding light that restores the ceremony of the human-in-the-world.

Eia pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien inventé
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien exploré
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien dompté

26 The cheers are for not inventing, not conquering, not taming, not being responsible for carrying out the kinds of death and destruction that are born of imperial domination. Whereas even among peoples who have been conquered, those individuals often glorified on the scale of value that exults conquest are those who exceptionally enact the values of conquest. Césaire’s “Eia”, readable from an oppositional scale, lifts up instead all of those who would not be valued by the colonizers, those who do not participate in the colonial ruse that symbolically makes doves out of rapacious conquerors and renders those they prey on as rapacious hawks. In this part of the poem that is set up by the menfenil as a guiding star, the poetic subject experiences a shift in consciousness that turns the values of conquest around and creates the possibility of formulating pride even out of the (racialized) judgments hurled by those who glorify conquest as modernity and progress. The Césairian menfenil as a figure of phoenix-thinking guides the rewriting of the self-in-community of this poem. Césaire innovates in his employment of the bird of prey as “menfenil” in a manner akin to his rewriting of Blackness as “négritude” to convey a new and resistant Black consciousness before the forces of anti-Blackness. As bird of prey, the “menfenil” devours the values of conquest delivering their downfall (malfini). The “menfenil” as funèbre and a guiding star may also alight power-in-mourning towards rebirth, igniting the power of phoenix-thinking embedded in the name. Césaire thus follows the hawk as menfenil precisely to reformulate the values of non-conquest in the “ceux qui” series.

27 And the Cahier will not end without enlisting the dove as a guide as well. In the final stanza of the poem, the dove appears, capitalized, and on the rise. After an injunction to the wind for an embrace that becomes a capture, and a strangling, a dove is invoked:

Puis, m’étranglant de ton lasso d’étoiles
monte, Colombe
monte
monte

28 Here, the dove may be read as the Pentecostal dove of peace, the dove of mourning, and in a simultaneous and oppositional way, the capitalization indicates the conqueror. Like the menfenil, it is a mixed archetypal figure the lyric subject will follow, such that this dove also becomes more than the image of peace and mourning and more than the conqueror, but a guide of transformation, leading to another phoenix image as the poetic subject goes fishing for the “langue maléfique de la nuit”, which may refer to Césaire’s excavation of French and Western tropes of conquest that render blackness, darkness, and the night on the side of negativity. If the menfenil may devour the values of conquest and lead the way out of them, the colombe works similarly in Césaire’s poem.
as an archetype of healing to restore life and thought out of their asphyxiation by conquest and its values, including those values embedded into its *very name* through the history of colonialism.

**Menfenil and Colombes, Meet Image**

Figure 3: Wifredo Lam, illustration for Aimé Césaire, “Colombes et menfenil”; and 2nd illustration for Aimé Césaire, *Retorno al país natal* (left). Wifredo Lam, 3rd illustration for Aimé Césaire, *Retorno al país natal* (right).

© Adagp, Paris, 2022 - with kind permission from Eskil Lam

---

29 Lam would also intervene in the *colombe* and *menfenil* figures in his work on them. In the 1943 *Retorno al país natal* book edition of Césaire’s poem, the second and third (of three) illustrations by Lam both include abstract images of Césaire’s menfenil, and the second illustration also includes an amalgamated bird, which combines the dove and the hawk. This second illustration also accompanies Césaire’s “Colombes et menfenil” collection published the following year. The menfenil figure in both illustrations fuses a bird and a star in direct response to Césaire’s image of the menfenil as “mon étoile”. In the second illustration, this menfenil-star hovers above a dove-hawk merged with a horse-bull and two other figures. Lam’s rendition of the menfenil-star hovering above the other amalgamated figures is very close to the stand-alone menfenil-star in the single image of the third illustration. In the third illustration, the figure even more obviously seems to indicate the menfenil-as-star, as it flies with the broad wings of the *Buteo*, whereas its other version appears more starlike than birdlike. He also adds breasts to the stand-alone menfenil, depicting the gestating properties of rebirth and transformation that both colombe and menfenil become associated with in the poem.

30 If in Césaire’s poem the *colombe* serves a similar guiding purpose through death to rebirth as his reformulated *menfenil*, Lam takes their proximity in Césaire further by fusing the dove and the hawk in this image. This bird that sits atop the horse-bull has
two sets of wings, the smaller wings of the dove and the larger wings of the hawk. The wingspan and the broadness of the larger pair of wings look like those of the broad-winged hawk (the *Buteo platypterus* or mansfenil/malfini), but its round head is closer to the dove’s than a hawk’s. Admittedly, the face on this bird is much rounder than any dove’s, and its face, though not quite human, is more like a human face than that of any other figure in the illustration. The roundness of this face also approximates the face in the figure Lam calls a “colombe noire” in his later painting, suggesting the likelihood of seeing the dove in addition to the hawk in this image.

Furthermore, one of the dove-hawk’s wings appears to be part of the bull-horse figure, in a gesture that relates to the complex interconnectedness with contradictions internal to itself of the Black and Antillean-located community-writing Césaire does in the poem illustrated with this image. The horse-bull, something like the trojan horse that Lam wished his paintings to be, also recalls Picasso’s “Guernica”, which includes both a horse and a bull that this image fuses in a two-headed amalgamation of both of that painting’s figures of war. The horse, associated with spirit mounting, or possession in Lam’s work, is also connected to a bull with the horseshoe that symbolizes Ogún, the metalworker orisha in this image. As Julia Herzberg explains about the significance of recurring images of the horse in Lam’s work,

> its presence alludes to an important religious phenomenon, the process of being possessed. In sacred ceremonies the practicant, who is referred to as the “horse” (*caballo*), goes into a trance, at which time he or she is overcome by both the personality and characteristics of the particular deity who is being honored during the ceremony.

If the horse is the mounted subject possessed in this image, he is taken over by both Ogún and Elegguá. The horse-bull’s tail has a face that is identical to that of the baby figure just below the image’s dove-like figure, and both faces approximate Lam’s other images of Elegguá (also known as Legba and Eshu), the trickster orisha who is responsible for communication between the human and spirit realms, and the possibility of cleansing or renewal. Elegguá’s presence as both gestating baby and tail-end may very well indicate the healing property of the painting, but it also references its transformative intentionality. The baby Elegguá is gestating from a small pair of breasts on the dove-hawk figure. Lam’s illustration adds the mounting, or possession, by Ogún and Elegguá to Césaire’s work on the dove and the menfenil, presenting all the figures together as guides of an embattled transformation.
Lam’s 1947 painting, “Menfenil,” directly follows Césaire’s shift of the hawk’s name. The painting appears horizontally, as if a vertical image has been turned on its side. In it we have two crossed birds, each bird’s head on each side, one left, one right, and four wings total appear visible. Whereas the Elegguá heads of each bird in the figure are white, one pair of wings is also light and the other pair (belonging to the bird facing left) is dark. Importantly, these are not wings like the Buteo’s on either side: they crease into the triangular shape of the falcon family rather than curving like the broad winged hawk. Perhaps, Lam’s “menfenil” may be even less representational than Césaire’s, as it deviates here from the form of the mansfenil/malfini. There is also one pair of breasts on the figure with dark wings, recalling the breasts on the menfenil-star and dove-hawk in the *Cahier* illustrations.

Two more wingless shadowy figures also appear within the doubled-menfenil, one horned and faceless but with a single breast, evoking a devil or demon. The other figure has an obscured face, like that of a spirit. The multiplicity of images and the meeting and togetherness of white and dark, demonstrate the contiguity of opposites. The total of four figures together may suggest what Paget Henry has identified as the “four world model of existence” found in many African cosmologies that position “the spirit world as the fourth and most important world in this model of existence.” The coexisting presence of these four figures, in the singularly named painting seems to offer a pathway for the work of the menfenil as phoenix thinking. The horizontal direction of the painting is important for this practice of thought, for if it were turned vertically on either side, a hierarchy would emerge that would value one of the Elegguá-birds over the other and raise up either the spirit or the devil-demon and turn the other upside down, figuring the hierarchical workings of oppositional structures of value. But the
horizontal choice inverts the hierarchical tendency that would proceed from a vertical version of this painting. Instead, we may see Lam proposing the inversion of hierarchies and the reformulation of structures of thought. The effect is not a reversal of the binaries of value (including racialized value) encoded into the values of conquest observable in the Western episteme. Rather, the painting seems to propose a horizontal inversion of the vertical propensity to hierarchy in value. If Lam’s “menfenil” is an avenging figure (to recall Fouchet’s notion), it avenges verticality and hierarchy itself, refusing to choose between, and refusing to separate or order white and dark, spirit or demon. In light of this painting, if we return to the oppositionality in “colombes et menfenil,” we might consider emphasizing, with Lam, the and of horizontality rather than the vertical, or hierarchical sense of the binary also embedded in the figures.

Figure 5: Wifredo Lam, “Lunguanda Yembe”, oil on canvas, 1950

Lam’s “colombe” paintings also intervene in the symbolic value of the dove. “Lunguanda Yembe” (colombe lunaire, in French) (1950), like the “Menfenil” painting, has a singular title and consists of a multi-figure image. This painting, along with several other paintings by Lam, was named by Lydia Cabrera. Cabrera also produced a dictionary of the Congo language as it was spoken in Cuba, preserved through the Palo Monte spiritual practice and other practices of African cultural continuity. In the Congo language dictionary that Cabrera also produced, “lungonda,” which is very close to the painting’s name of “lunguanda” appears as the name for “luna” (“lune” in French, and “moon” in English) and “yembe” appears as the name for “paloma”. Recall that in Spanish, a dove and a pigeon are both palomas, and that it is their types and colors that differentiate them. There is also a Congo word for a white paloma, or dove, listed in this dictionary. It is “yembe diampembe wampembe”. According to the
In this painting Lam intervenes in the symbolic force of the white dove by highlighting other variations of the dove, since the dove in “Lunguanda Yembe” is grey. It also has the face Lam paints as Eleggúa, and one of its wings opens up onto a double-sided spear, the spear wielded by Changó, the orisha ruler of thunder who is also a warrior. This colombe or “yembe” is contorted, in an inverted position, and weighed down by the force of Changó’s weapon. The spear appears to keep the contorted colombe in place, unfree, and unable to fly away. The spear also almost touches what approximates a torso and a mantle made by folded arms, including the presence of one hand with long fingers on it. There is also a dark shadow figure behind the colombe, and from it extend chords in red and grey that appear to tie it up, further forcing it into place. These chords recall Césaire’s evocation of the dove in the Cahier’s finale, which follows an abstract image of strangling by a noose of stars: “Puis, m’étranglant de ton lasso d’étoiles/ monte Colombe”. In this rendition of a darker Eleggúa-colombe, there is a struggle keeping it from rising to its purpose, one that recalls the conflict out of which Césaire invokes the dove.

This painting is part of a series from the same year that all include the same figure with three white spikes on the edge that functions here as the tail of the grey Eleggúa-dove. This recurring figure re-appears as the head in the painting “Horse-headed woman” (1950), then again in another horse-woman image facing the opposite direction in the painting “Zambezia, Zambezia” (1950), and similarly in several other images from the same year. If we open up the reading of this painting through the series, the unfree colombe of “Lunguanda yembe” appears able to transform easily into the possessed horse-woman. In the invented space of the painting and in grey rather than white, the mourning dove’s symbolic contextual space is taken over in “Lunguanda yembe”.

Figure 6: Wifredo Lam, “La colombe noire”, oil on canvas, 1959

© Adagp, Paris, 2022 - with kind permission from Eskil Lam
In “La colombe noire” (1959) the eponymous black dove figure has a face that is somewhere between the enlarged dove-hawk in Lam’s 1943 illustration of Césaire’s poetry and his prototypical rendition of Elegguá. While this dove has the horns and eyes of many of Lam’s other Elegguá figures, its large open mouth deviates from them. The roundness and largeness of its face also recalls the 1943 dove-hawk from the Retorno illustration. In this figure, the wings appear separated from the bird, connected to its head. In fact, the separated wings seem to figure another bird altogether, as there seems to be a pointed beak at their center with an eye on it, suggesting the side of a bird’s face. This other bird holding up the black dove is different from the menfenil in earlier paintings, however. This one bears a striking resemblance to the *Fregata magnificens*, or magnificent frigate, whose males are predominantly black, which is also found throughout the Caribbean and as far east as Cape Verde. This seabird has an extensive wingspan and feeds on prey stolen from other seabirds. In this painting, the *Fregata* appears to be carrying away the black dove from a latticework of spikes, and these spikes recall the chords tying up the dove in “Lunguanda Yembe” and the strangling noose of stars that precede the introduction of the dove in the *Cahier*. Here, the dove is free from the structure, but it is attached to the *Fregata*. The painting is from the same year that began on January 1 with the revolutionary guerrilla movement led by Fidel Castro taking power over the Cuban state and forming a new revolutionary state after the flight of the dictator, Fulgencio Batista. The *colombe noire* has an ambivalent expression, suggesting a more complex sentiment than victory. But the political transformation seems key to the doubling of birds in this particular image.

Desiderio Navarro has related the repeating images of birds connected to human heads in Lam’s paintings to the Yoruba myth of the *eyie ororo* or “the bird of the head”, in dialogue with Robert Farris Thompson. Thompson explains that for the Yoruba people this bird is placed by God “in the head of man or woman at birth as the emblem of the mind. The image of the descent of the bird of mind fuses with the image of the coming down of God’s *âše* in feathered form.” This bird of the mind, according to Thompson, is also regularly represented as white. The *eyie ororo* as an image of birth connects to the symbolism of the (white) dove in Christianity. In *La colombe noire* Lam practices what Navarro calls his tendency to "rhyme visually" between humans, nature, and myth, by transforming the *eyie ororo* motif into an image of an Elegguá-black dove with another black bird perched on it, or even carrying it away. The “rhyme” at work here also calls forth the famous speech of Fidel Castro’s on January 8, 1959 at none other than the Columbia barracks in Havana, in which, as if magically, a white dove perched on his shoulder, and two others joined him at his side. In Lam’s rendition, however, the dove and the bird perched on it are both black, drawing attention to the underrepresented colombe noire, “yembe diandombi” in Congo. Lam’s proposal in this painting, an abstract colombe noire that is also attached to a figure like a frigate, offers the *eyie ororo* transformed with the help of Elegguá, in black.

**Taking Flight from Conquest, a Conclusion**

In Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, the *menfenil* acts both as a bird of prey that may devour the moribund system of thought that undergirds and naturalizes the history of conquest and as a “mens-phoenix” figure that rises out of the ashes left by that history. Césaire’s *menfenil* serves as a guide for a poetics that both excavates the
violence of conquest (including slavery and its legacy in anti-Blackness) and writes a new self-in-community. He calls upon the dove’s uplifting and healing powers for this task as well, but the abstract configuration of images at the end of the Cahier demonstrates just how difficult it may be for the dove to do this work, especially when the name colombe evokes the man who initiated the violent history of conquest of the Americas. Lam, in readings of Césaire that draw on his experience and knowledge of Yoruba and Congo spiritual practices, adds imagery from African cosmologies to Césaire’s work, offering new archetypes for the shared project between him and Césaire. Their proposals are different, but both offer phoenix thought to fly the mind out of conquest.

---

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Kora Véron, Alex Gil, Fredo Rivera, and an anonymous reviewer for reading earlier versions of this essay and offering key insights that have made it stronger. I would also like to thank Erika Renée Williams, Alex Gil, Martin Tsang, Gregson Davis, Eskil Lam, Jackqueline Frost, Paloma Duong, Raj Chetty, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner for conversations and correspondence that made this work stronger. Thanks to Ingrid Robyn, Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, and Mneesha Gellman for connecting me to people with expertise on birds, and thanks to Tom Gannon, Gary Markowski, and Steve Gellman for corresponding with me about falcons and hawks. Thanks to Tulasi Srivinas for suggesting I visit the Vermont Raptor Center, to the staff there for sharing their expertise and introducing me up close to numerous raptors, and to my nephew Nelson Eduardo Engstrom for accompanying me on my trip there to better understand the “menfenil” in Césaire and Lam.


3. Ibid.


6. Some Lam scholars suggest specifically that Lam was influenced by Aimé Césaire’s hybrid human-plant and human-animal writing". See Samantha A. NOËL, Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism, Duke University Press, 2021, p. 66; and Robert LINSLEY, “Painter of Negritude”, Race-ing Art History: Critical Dialogues in Race and Art History, ed. Kimberly Pinder, Routledge, 2002, p. 291. Lowery Stokes Sims points out, however, that to some extent Lam was already doing this hybrid work before his trip to Martinique and return to Cuba. See SIMS, Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982, University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 41. Poeticizing the points of contact between African traditions and Afro-Caribbean people subjected to slavery and continued forms of dispossession in colonial, neo-colonial, and Euro-dominated societies appears to have become central to Lam’s work through a fusion of factors including his relationship with Césaire and interest in his work as well as his relationship with Cuban ethnographer of Afro-Cuban religious culture and folklore Lydia Cabrera and the shock he has testified to upon re-absorbing the level...


10. As Sims has noted, there is evidence in Lam and his wife’s correspondence with André Breton that Helena Holzer collaborated with Lydia Cabrera in her translation of Césaire’s *Cahier*. See Sims, op. cit., p. 69. Kora Véron also notes that Holzer surely collaborated on the translation. See Kora Véron, *Aimé Césaire, Configurations*, Seuil, 2021, p. 61. Helena Holzer Benitez would also translate Césaire’s poem “Batouque,” published as “Batuco” for *Orígenes* n° 6, July 1945, p. 22-24. *Orígenes* was the Havana-based highly influential high modernist magazine edited by neo-baroque poet and literary theorist José Lezama Lima and translator and literary critic José Rodríguez Feo. Lam would also contribute several cover images for the magazine.

11. Aimé Césaire, *Retorno al país natal*, trans. Lydia Cabrera, Ucar García, y cía, 1943. It’s worth noting that this book is often misdated for 1942. This has to do with the fact that the book itself is undated. It was probably translated by 1942, but one of Lam’s illustrations in the book is dated 1943, which suggests that the book could not have been printed before 1943.


13. Odette Casamayor-Cisneros has suggested a greater approximation than might otherwise be gleaned between surrealism and neo-Baroque aesthetics in her discussion of Lam’s aesthetics in dialogue with those of Cuban poet Virgilio Piñera that are both usually considered in opposition to those of Cuban poet and editor José Lezama Lima. See Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, “Piñera, Lam y los origenistas: suspenso, tragedia o comedia de enredos con fondo tropical,” *Una isla llamada Virgilio*, ed. Jesús Jambrina (Stockcero, 2015), p. 18. I am adding a corollary here in my suggestion that while the Afro-centric motivations and inspirations we find in Césaire and Lam may have deviated significantly from those of Lezama Lima’s poetics, the conception of “neo-Baroque” art, and in particular Lezama Lima’s own interest in the power of the poetic image to become a forceful reality, are closer to the work of Césaire and Lam than it may seem. See, for example, José Lezama Lima, “Las imagenes posibles”, *Analejcta del reloj*, Letras Cubanas, 2010, c. 1953, p. 114-137.

14. Paget Henry outlines in dialogue with Fanon how the colonial context disrupted the Afro-Caribbean psyche and “relocated the Afro-Caribbean in an antiblack world from which he or she must be extricated”. See Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean philosophy*, Routledge, 2000, p. 3. Julia Herzberg notes about Lam that his work “imparts a significance that is greater than that connected with Surrealist ideas through their allusions to Afro-Cuban celebrations”. See Julia P. Herzberg, “Wifredo Lam: The Development of a Style and World View, The Havana Years, 1941-1952”, *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries 1938-1952*, ed. Maria Balderrama, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992, p. 35.

15. According to the document, it was one of fifty copies given to Césaire for distribution.

16. See Kora Véron’s online exposition of the “Colombes et Menfenil” typescript collection: https://www.andrebreton.fr/work/56600100037610.

18. In Lam’s case, it is important that the legacy of his Chinese father also complemented the ethnic and aesthetic legacies ascribable to his mother of Spanish and African descent. Sims explains that we can see the Chinese aesthetic legacy in his paintings when he uses calligraphy and in the way that in traditional Chinese painting included “tacit political commentary” such as that we find in Lam’s work, op. cit., p. 64.


20. While the poem and its genetic evolution certainly deserve more attention as a crucial component of the aesthetic relationship between the artists, that study exceeds the scope of the present essay.

21. I am grateful to Alex Gil for locating this publication and identifying the coincidence of the illustrations. Personal Communication, November 2021.


23. Ibid., p. 57.

24. Ibid., p. 87.


26. Ibid.

27. Although it is not the same argument I make here, it is worth drawing attention to the compelling case made by Grégory Pierrot for the recurring narrative of the “Black Avenger” as an archetypal historical figure, including Toussaint Louverture. See Grégory PIERROT, The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture, University of Georgia Press, 2019.


29. CASAMAYOR-CISNEROS, op. cit., p. 31 (my translation).

30. JUNG, op. cit., p. 90.


34. Aimé CÉSAIRE, op. cit., p. 167. For an earlier approach to this dialogue between the Césaires, see also Katerina GONZALEZ SELIGMANN, Writing the Caribbean in Magazine Time, Rutgers University Press, 2021, p. 41-42.


39. Michel-Rolph Trouillot discusses the ideological values of these naming practices. See TROUILLOT, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, Beacon, 1995, p. 115. As Jung would suggest about introverts versus extroverts that also applies to this much more politicized context, “the value of one is the non-value of the other”, p. 47.

40. Véron describes this irony and indicates that Césaire also surely drew on Apollinaire’s Calligrammes : Poèmes de la guerre et de la paix which features a dove and a bird of prey as images of
peace and war. See VÉRON, op. cit., p. 208. I am also grateful to Véron for reminding me of the presence of the eagle as an emblem of the Nazi party (private correspondence, Jan. 2022).


42. According to René Hénane, the Buteo platypterus rivieri is also knowns as the “manger-poulet.” See HÉNANE, Glossaire des termes rares dans l’œuvre d’Aimé Césaire (Nouvelles Éditions Place, 2004), 84, 89. For a list of usages of “mansfenil” as well as the raptors the “menfenil” in Césaire has been associated with, see André THIBAULT, “L’œuvre d’Aimé Césaire et le ‘français régional antillais’”, Aimé Césaire à l’œuvre, ed. M. Cheymol et P. Ollé-Laprune, Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2010, p. 70-71.

43. See Herbert A. RAFFAELE, A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, Princeton University Press, 1989, for comprehensive descriptions and images of birds found throughout the Caribbean region. I am grateful to Gregson Davis for recommending Raffaele’s work and for a helpful correspondence on the question of the menfenil in Césaire and Lam.

44. While some Césaire translators, including Cabrera, have chosen not to translate “menfenil” and use the same word in their renditions of the Cahier, Alex Gil and Kahlama Glover use “malfini” in their recent translation. Available: https://via.hypothes.is/https://cahier1939ms.github.io/texts/translation/.

45. Jourdain said that the “mansfenil” was the Falco spaverius (or sparrow hawk), which seems to deviate significantly from the perspective of those whose local knowledge points to the Buteo, for the Falco spaverius is a very small falcon that would not be easily confused with the Buteo. Even if Jourdain appears to be mistaken about the kind of bird she associates with the “mansfenil,” she is right to note the proximity of “fenil” to “phoenix.” Élodie JOURDAIN, Le Vocabulaire du parler créole de la Martinique, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1956, p. 31.


47. Ibid., p. 33.

48. Ibid., p. 37.

49. I am drawing here on Audre Lorde’s suggestion that poetry has the potential to reformulate the very light by which we illuminate our lives: “The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt”. Audre LORDE, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Sister Outsider, Penguin, 2004, p. 25.


51. See IRELE, p. 246-247 for commentary connecting this section of the poem and the introduction of the “menfenil.”


54. Eleggúa’s presence is also central to the Afro-diasporic aesthetic tradition of performatively intervening in language that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls “signifying.” See GATES, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism, Oxford University Press, 1988. Desiderio Navarro also explains that the humanoid faces with round eyes like these in Lam’s paintings represent Eleggúa. He explains that sculptures of the deity often have a face like this and lists several paintings by Lam that name the presence of Eleggúa in their title. My reading of these figures as Eleggúa is also based on seeing the face in Lam’s paintings that name Eleggúa in their title. See Desiderio NAVARRO, “Para leer a Lam: Cosmovisión afrocubana y Occidente judeo-

55. It is no coincidence then that Césaire would figure Eshu, another version of this orisha, in his reformulation of Shakespeare’s Tempest, Une Tempête. See Aimé CÉSAIRE, Une Tempête, Seuil, 1969.


59. Odette Casamayor-Cisneros notes that in her unpublished interview with Helena Holzer Benítez, she verified that several of Lam’s paintings were named by Cabrera, p. 31-32. Cabrera is also credited as the author of this painting’s title in the complete catalogue of Lam’s paintings compiled by Lou-Laurin LAM, op. cit., p. 420.

60. Lydia CABRERA, Vocabulario Congo (El Bantu que se habla en Cuba), Ediciones Universal, 2001, p. 292. I am grateful to Martin Tsang for collaborating with me to decipher this title and for providing me with selections of Cabrera’s dictionary. For his work on Lydia Cabrera, see for example, Martin TSANG, “Write into Being, The Production of the Self and Circulation of Ritual Knowledge in Afro-Cuban Religious Libretas”, Material Religion, vol. 17, n° 2, 2021, p. 228-261.


62. Herzberg tells us that Lam was a devotee of Changó in his youth. See HERZBERG, “Wifredo Lam”, op. cit., p. 31.


64. This painting has appeared in the exhibition, Opere recenti di Lam, 1959, Milano, Galleria Pagani del Grattacielo. See Lou-Laurin LAM, op. cit., p. 481.

65. See Herbert RAFFAILE, op. cit., p. 34-35. When some Césaire scholars have assumed that the “menfenil” is a large and black bird of prey because of the adjective “funèbre” that accompanies it in the Cahier, this may be the bird they meant.


68. NAVARRO, “Para leer a Lam”, op. cit., p. 287.

69. I have Paloma Duong to thank for the reference to this famous moment in Cuban revolutionary history. See the Cuban revolutionary state’s official newspaper, Granma, for a commemorative article including one of the iconic photographs of this moment in Castro’s speech by Paco Altuna: https://www.granma.cu/granmad/2009/01/09/nacional/artic03.html.

70. Lydia CABRERA, Vocabulario Congo, op. cit., p. 292.
This essay examines a little-studied aesthetic collaboration between Aimé Césaire and Wifredo Lam to depict doves and a bird of prey (called “menfenil”) in text and image. “Colombes et menfenil” was the title of a selection of poems by Césaire that was published in *Hémisphères* magazine in 1944 with an illustration by Wifredo Lam. Both birds also appear in Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* and Lam’s illustrations of the of the Spanish translation of this poem published in Cuba the previous year. They go on to recur in later paintings by Lam: “Menfenil” (1947), “Lunguanda yembe” (1950), and “La colombe noire” (1959). The birds in question have archetypical significance as symbols of peace and war that connect to the history of colonialism. I propose with this essay a critical dialogue with Césaire and Lam’s work on these birds to diffuse the conquest-thinking that informs the symbolic economy and contributes to normalizing the persistence of racialized hierarchies embedded in the history of colonial dispossession and exploitation. In their collaborative aesthetic recasting of these archetypal bird figures, I argue that both poet and painter symbolically take them over to take flight from conquest.

Cet essai analyse une collaboration esthétique peu étudiée, celle d’Aimé Césaire et de Wifredo Lam, à travers des colombes et un oiseau de proie (appelé « menfenil ») présents à la fois dans leurs textes et leurs images. « Colombes et menfenil » est le titre d’un groupe de poèmes de Césaire publié dans la revue *Hémisphères* en 1944, avec une illustration de Wifredo Lam. Les deux oiseaux apparaissent également dans le *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* de Césaire et dans les illustrations offertes par Lam pour la traduction espagnole du poème, publiée à Cuba l’année précédente. Ils figurent aussi dans les peintures ultérieures de Lam : « Menfenil » (1947), « Lunguanda yembe » (1950) et « La colombe noire » (1959). Ces oiseaux représentent une figure archétypale de la paix et de la guerre liée à l’histoire du colonialisme. Je propose dans cet essai un dialogue critique avec l’œuvre de Césaire et de Lam concernant ces oiseaux pour examiner une pensée de la conquête qui a produit une économie symbolique contribuant à accréditer des hiérarchies raciales persistantes ancrées dans l’histoire de la dépossession et l’exploitation coloniales. Dans leur commune refonte esthétique, le poète et le peintre utilisent tous deux ces oiseaux archétypaux comme moyen pour s’envoler loin de la conquête.

**INDEX**

**Mots-clés:** Aimé Césaire, Wifredo Lam, archétypes, collaboration esthétique, colonialisme, négritude

**Keywords:** Aimé Césaire, Wifredo Lam, archetypes, collaborative aesthetics, colonialism, négritude

**AUTHOR**

KATERINA GONZALEZ SELIGMANN

*Katerina Gonzalez Seligmann* est professeur d’espagnol et d’études caribéennes à l’Université du Connecticut et membre du groupe Aimé Césaire de l’équipe Manuscrits francophones de l’ITEM.