

THE “WHITE DARKNESS”

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THE “WHITE DARKNESS”

considering modernist investments in the “primitive” through maya deren’s work in haiti (1947–53)

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Given primitivism's quest for the timeless and ahistorical, it is ironic that each example of this aesthetic project speaks so richly of its historical context, whether that might be anxieties surrounding the waning of European imperialism; anti-colonial or anti-capitalist struggle; or the search for a society free from the confines of Western convention. Such motivations and contexts are often quite opposed, and rather than considering primitivism as a singular, monolithic aesthetic, we should instead seek to unravel how each instance of primitivism tells its own story. Primitivism has mostly been considered in relation to its earlier, European expressions, or in some cases its expression in the *Négritude* and New Negro movements – each in their different ways a response to late nineteenth-century European imperialism. The case of Maya Deren shifts the focus to US imperialism, and specifically to the post-US-occupied Haiti of the mid-twentieth century.

Maya Deren (1917–61) was a pioneering Ukrainian-born, American avant-garde filmmaker, as well as an influential film theorist. Her innovative use of 16 mm film and essays setting out her aesthetic philosophy explored various modernist concerns including experiments in non-linear time (what she termed “vertical” as opposed to “horizontal” time), as well as disjointed space through experimental techniques such as the jump cut. Deren was particularly interested in how these experiments with time and space could allow film to work together with dance in a way that exceeded the possibilities of the theatre stage. She was also interested in ethnography,

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working as an assistant to the African American anthropologist and choreographer Katherine Dunham. Through these twin interests, Deren became fascinated with Haitian dance, particularly Voudoun ritual. Winning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947 allowed Deren the funds to travel to Haiti, and her initial plan motivating the trip involved creating a “visual fugue” exploring commonality between rituals across cultures (Jackson 140); specifically, she intended to combine ritual Balinese dance, Haitian ritual dance and children’s games. In a further (unsuccessful) application to the

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Guggenheim in February 1947, she stated her intentions as follows:

It is upon these three ritualistic forms – children’s games, Balinese and Haitian ritual – that I wish to build the film, using the variations between them to contrapuntally create the harmony, the basic equivalence of the idea of form, common to them all. (Deren qtd in Jackson 140)

Deren’s choice of subject matter is explicitly motivated by her modernist investment in the “primitive,” and indeed her written works explore this at length. But Deren’s notion of the primitive is complex and overdetermined. This article will consider Deren’s footage alongside her written accounts, including diary entries recounting her first experiences of Haiti and Voudoun. I ask: what does Deren’s particular primitivist project tell us about its context and historical situation? The article explores, through Deren’s work, the fraught and multiple representations of Haiti in the US imaginary. Deren’s own project, flanked by black nationalism and communism resistant to the US occupation, as much as by modernist aesthetics, was nonetheless affected by (and is in many ways a response to) the US cultural products bound up with imperial propaganda in the service of financial gain. Deren negotiates all of this as a white, US citizen but also as a Ukrainian refugee, a diasporic Jew who does not feel herself to be American.

Deren’s primitivism is the flash point here: it is this that both resists US imperial discourse, and is also most likely to be complicit in it. It is also this which allows Deren to give voice to her disidentification with the United States in favour of her own, Slavic “blood memories.” As part of this complex negotiation of material situation and aesthetic philosophy, Deren rejects her original film project and recognises serious problems with a formalist aesthetic gaze, shifting to a personal mode. After a third trip to Haiti, by 1951, and having shot 18,000 feet of film documenting Voudoun ritual on her Bolex camera, Deren abandoned her artistic project in favour of what has been termed a “personal ethnography” (DeBouzek):

the book published in 1953 as *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Rather than simply distraction, or a change of course, this was described as a conscious refusal on the part of Deren to, in her words, “manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art” (*Divine Horsemen* 6). Deren’s refusal speaks to the legacy of colonial ethnographic film, as she negotiates the dislocation of her own gaze. Finally, shifting to contemporary Haitian work allows us to perceive that the legacy of – and resistance to – Western imperialism and voyeurism informs artistic works today, not only through financial parameters but also via anti-colonial artworks contesting the Western gaze, and the policies of the Geto Byenal (Ghetto Biennale), held in Port-au-Prince from 2009 onwards.

Manifestations of primitivism have generally been understood to be causally tied to modernist suspicions of Enlightenment ideals of human progress. Such suspicions and anxieties related, variously, to: the pace of technological advancement; the globalising of Western economic and social systems through capitalist expansion; ideas of societal decline and degeneration; and a perceived brutality inherent within the rationalism of Enlightenment thought. Modernist primitivists sought to look “outside of” what had become an increasingly hegemonic Western culture through imperialist expansion: either towards societies *preceding* it chronologically, or those seen to be *exceeding* it culturally and geographically (Geertz).

The logic of modernist primitivisms generally held that “less developed” cultures, untrained artists or minds, may offer Western (usually European) culture a view of humanity that is “stripped back,” or freed from the weight of Western cultural “progress” run riot. As such, primitivist investment can be seen in the cultural production of the “mad”; the art of non-Western cultures; the lives of rural “peasants”; or the games of children. In short, primitivism was invested in the activities of those pushed out of European Enlightenment rationalism, as Foucault would later argue in his *Madness and Civilization* (1961), who were similarly thought to offer a

more “authentic” and less alienated glimpse of humanity as it had been, and as it perhaps could be again.

An uneasy paradox therefore appears to lie at the heart of much primitivist logic: while value is placed on non-Western cultures, this is precisely because they are “undeveloped,” “untrained” and “primitive.” This draws unfortunate parallels with the discourse of the Western civilising mission, which claimed that colonial subjects needed the “guidance” and “help” of Europe because they were childlike in their lack of “development,” or fundamentally incapable of reason (Eze). Many primitivist works tended to draw on non-Western cultures and art with the principal concern of reinvigorating Western culture, rather than out of any genuine interest in those cultures themselves. For this, primitivism has been charged as more or less violently extractionist in its lack of concern for, or attention to, non-Western cultures beyond taking from them for the express purpose of enlivening and rejuvenating Western modes of thinking or aesthetics.¹

Within art history, specifically, the “primitive” often featured centrally within modernist art as a stand-in for “otherness,” “replacing the figure of ‘otherness’ embodied by classical antiquity for the Renaissance and by medieval Europe for the ‘arts and crafts movement’” (Marcus and Myers 14). One might think of Pablo Picasso’s African-inspired works and the aesthetics of Cubism; of Henri Rousseau’s Naive painting; the Surrealist fascination with the extra-rational subconscious; or Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that Paul Gauguin is frequently seen as “the founding father of modernist primitivism” (314). She writes that:

On a biographical level [...] Gauguin’s life provides the paradigm for primitivism as a white, Western and preponderantly male quest for an elusive object whose very condition of desirability resides in some form of distance and difference, whether temporal or geographical. (314)

Gauguin’s “escape” to the French colony of Tahiti, not famously enough, saw him take a

series of adolescent girls as his *vahines* while himself a man of almost fifty, and boasting to friends in Europe of how he had “a 15-year-old wife [...] who cooks my simple every-day fare and gets down on her back for me whenever I want” (Gauguin qtd in Solomon-Godeau 326). Gauguin’s clear and criminal abuses of his position of relative power – not only as a man, but as a white man from the economic Centre – are glaringly evident. While Solomon-Godeau at times notes that this is Gauguin’s particular incarnation of primitivism, at other times she makes more universalising claims:

There is, in short, a darker side to primitivist desire, one implicated in fantasies of imaginary knowledge, power and rape; and these fantasies, moreover, are sometimes underpinned by real power, by real rape. When Gauguin writes in the margin of the *Noa Noa* manuscript, “I saw plenty of calm-eyed women. I wanted them to be willing to be taken without a word, brutally. In a way [it was a] longing to rape,” we are on the border between the acceptable myth of the primitivist artist as sexual outlaw, and the relations of violence and domination that provide its historic and its psychic armature. (323–24)

While I agree that *primitivisms* should be situated within such “armature,” and while I do not dispute the powerful reading of the entanglement of Gauguin’s life and work that Solomon-Godeau offers, I do dispute the notion of a singular “primitivism”; one that is understood as a singular, monolithic concept or project. When she asks whether primitivism could be understood as a gendered discourse (319), for example, I would argue that the answer will be “yes” (as all discourse would seem to me to be), but that various primitivisms will manifest this in different ways.

Solomon-Godeau goes as far as to write off all primitivist projects as colonial and patriarchal, describing “primitivism’s constituent elements, notably the dense inter-weave of racial and sexual fantasies and power – both colonial and patriarchal – that provides its *raison d’être*” (315). But even within the male, white and European modes of

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primitivism of the early twentieth century, there are diverging emphases and foci. While Gauguin’s included critique of the drudgery attendant to Western society, it may indeed be primarily understood as relating to a desirous fetishisation of power imbalances; that is, to the erotic (Mathews).² Many Surrealists’ investments in primitivism, however, could be argued to lie primarily in a resistance to Western capitalism. Consider the following quote from a Marx-inspired André Breton’s 1925 manifesto: “Wherever Western civilisation is dominant, all human contact has disappeared, except contact from which money can be made – payment in hard cash” (318–19). Perhaps more than incidentally, Breton was an associate of Deren’s following his exile to New York where they both lived.³ He was himself fascinated by Voudoun and visited Haiti in 1945, invited to give a series of lectures by Pierre Mabille, who had stocked the French embassy with Marxist literature for the Haitian revolutionaries then active in protests which would eventually overthrow the Lescot government (Geis).⁴

More fundamentally, Ben Etherington’s recent work in *Literary Primitivism* (2018) rightly acknowledges that many key primitivist works were created from “colonized peripheral societies,” whose artists and writers, he argues, “were the ones who most keenly felt the loss of unalienated social worlds” (xii). Writers of the *Négritude* movement, including Aimé Césaire, therefore wrote the “most intensely primitivist works” (xii). Etherington goes as far as to argue for certain strands of primitivism’s “decolonial horizons”: the primitivist project is “aligned with the *ideal* of decolonization insofar as historical decolonization was motivated by the hope for a social world other than that brought into existence by the worlding of capital” (165). His argument situates the aesthetic project of primitivism, both in Western and non-Western contexts, in relation to, and as a reaction against, Western imperialist expansion and the march of Western capitalist hegemony: “Primitivism was an aesthetic project formed in reaction to the zenith of imperialist expansion at the start of the

twentieth century” (xi). Primitivism, then, is related to aesthetic modernism in being a response to the explosion of industrialisation and colonialism in and from the West: as Paul Gilroy rightly states, we cannot talk of modernity without imperialism, and neither can we understand modernity as a singularly white or European phenomenon. Primitivism is not solely an enterprise of the white or Western gaze simply characterised by colonialist fetishisation; as Etherington argues, some primitivisms amounted to a social project turning to “the remnants of noncapitalist societies conceived as self-sufficient totalities” (33).

What, then, would be the “armature” surrounding Deren’s primitivism? Deren’s own investments in the “primitive” would seem to be manifold. Firstly, herself an active Trotskyist in her earlier years – having organised for the Young People’s Socialist League, meeting her first husband at a socialist protest against racial discrimination (Jackson 21) – Deren was certainly concerned with looking outside of the seeming hegemony of Western capitalism.

Secondly, Deren was influenced by Katherine Dunham, who had published *The Dances of Haiti* (1947) after field research in Haiti in the 1930s. Specifically, Deren helped to edit Dunham’s essay, “The Negro Dance” (1941) (Fischer-Hornung 348). Dunham was an anthropologist working at the same time as Zora Neale Hurston, and shared Hurston’s interest in African diasporic culture in the Caribbean (which Hurston also located in the Southern states of the United States). Dunham was inspired by the New Negro movement of the 1920s and 1930s. As the first liberated Black republic, the New Negro movement had looked to Haiti as a way to connect with a more authentic Black experience, one which had been stripped from African Americans through enslavement, segregation and violent inequalities (Lamothe). Indeed, Langston Hughes had visited Haiti in 1932, and the volume he co-edited with Arna Bontemps, *Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949*, published much later in 1951, incorporated the works of fourteen Haitian poets including Jacques

Roumain, Ignace Nau and Toussaint L'Ouverture himself. This concern with identifying "authentic" African culture through the (supposedly) less alienated Black populations of the Caribbean is ultimately a primitivist project, despite being politically antithetical to a primitivist project such as that of Gauguin's. In *Dances of Haiti*, as Dorothea Fischer-Hornung summarises: "Dunham constructs herself as a potential mediator between the more 'primitive' forms of African diasporic culture in Haiti and the lost brothers and sisters in North America who have been cut off from their roots" (356). Throughout her work, Dunham used the term "primitive" as a synonym for "authentic" (Fischer-Hornung 360).

While Renata Jackson considers the modernist aesthetics Deren inherited from T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme and Henri Bergson, she ultimately claims that it was Dunham's influence that led Deren to Haiti (30).⁵ Deren's interest in Haiti specifically, and in the primitive more generally, was informed at least as much by the New Negro movement as it was by these white modernist figures. Indeed, Deren's work was embedded within the African American artistic avant-garde via her work for Dunham, which inspired her substantive collaborations with various dancers from Dunham's troupe including Talley Beatty (in "A Study in Choreography for Camera" (1945)) and Rita Christiani (in "Ritual in Transfigured Time" (1946)). To ignore the entanglement of Deren's work with that of Black and Caribbean artists and intellectuals would be to propagate the kind of essentialism Gilroy argues against in *The Black Atlantic*.

Deren's relationship to both whiteness and American identity was itself complex. As pale as Deren was, she certainly did not embody the hegemonic ideal of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, and neither did she ever feel herself to be American (Fischer-Hornung 356). She was personally acquainted with the diaspora through her experience as a Jewish migrant, her family having fled Kyev for the United States in 1922, when Deren was five years old, amidst a wave of anti-Semitic pogroms and

after the formation of the Soviet Union. The family name was changed from Derenkowsky to Deren, following the familiar protective strategy of assimilation in eroding or minimising difference. While Deren's family name had been anglicised, Deren later chose to reverse this strategy, not by reclaiming any sense of Jewishness, but by changing her first name to the Sanskrit "Maya" after the Hindu concept of "illusion" (Nichols 3). Indeed, Deren found no particular connection to Judaism, seeing little value in religion in part due to her Marxist beliefs (Jackson 15).⁶ She surrounded herself with artists and friends who had themselves fled Eastern Europe, including her second husband Alexander Hammid (the Czech filmmaker, who had also anglicised his name from Alexandr Hackenschmied) and the Lithuanian artist Jonas Mekas. Deren even talked of "blood memories" of her roots in Ukraine (Fischer-Hornung 360), of embodied memories of folk songs (356) and described "racial traits of Slavic temperament, inherent within me [...] such a part of me that it cannot be a memory" (Jackson 15). Deren's approach to her own identity, then, was primitivist, claiming as she does an internal Slavic "essence" as her own. This also, undoubtedly, informed Deren's approach to the "primitive" in Haiti.

Deren's modernist aesthetics, which she explored in great depth through her complex series of essays *Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946), offers insight into the ways in which she incorporated primitivism into her aesthetic philosophy. Deren's interest lay in ritualistic practices, which she claimed are a way of accessing a common sense of humanity which has been lost in Western modernity from the seventeenth century onwards, eclipsed by individualism. This individualism has overtaken common ideas of what art is or should be. Art is now understood as the expression of the individual focusing on subjective emotion (as in Romanticism); subjective impression (as in Impressionism); or, she argued, most dramatically, in Surrealism's inward-looking fascination with the workings of the artist's mind: "encouraged by the benediction of psychoanalysis [...] The artist could

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indulge in the ecstasies of surrealist confession” (Deren, *Essential Deren* 57). By way of contrast, ritualistic form, which can be found in “anonymous primitive ritual,” “is not the expression of the individual nature of the artist” and is therefore able to offer a different idea of art than that of modern self-expression (57). Deren’s analysis is comparable to Peter Berger’s assertion, as summarised by Jacob Olupona, that

Modernization has entailed a progressive separation of the individual from all collective entities, and as a result has brought about a contra-position between individual and society. This trend towards anomie comes from the simultaneous institutional trend towards abstraction and the resulting alienation of people who interact with these institutions. (2)

Another association Berger makes with modernity is secularisation, and it seems as though, for Deren, ritual is a way of combatting the alienation of modern individualism by connecting with a greater whole.

Asking what art could be, other than “the ‘expression’ of the artist,” Deren turns to a list of figures evoking the primitive:

once the question is posed, the deep recesses of our cultural memory release a procession of indistinct figures wearing the masks of Africa, or the Orient, the hoods of the chorus, or the innocence of the child-virgin ... [...] And we recognize that an artist might, conceivably, create beyond and outside all the personal compulsions of individual distress. (*Essential Deren* 55)

Here, Deren displays both chronological and cultural primitivism (Geertz), looking both to Africa and “the Orient” as well as to pre-modern Western artistic expression, such as the Greek chorus. It is specifically through ritual, though, that Deren sees the potential of transcending the dominance of the individual through what she terms “depersonalization.” She writes:

ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as

a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endows its parts with a measure of its larger meaning. (Deren, *Essential Deren* 58–59)

Through ritual, then, something of an essence of humanity, a commonality connecting us all and transcending cultural differences may be accessed: the “dynamic whole” of all humanity. The notion of depersonalisation comes, Jackson argues, in part from T.S. Eliot’s modernist aesthetics (134), specifically his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in which he argues that the artist must “surrender himself [...] to something more valuable”; and engage in “self-sacrifice” and even an “extinction of personality” (Eliot qtd in Jackson 134).

In contrast to other modernist investments in the primitive, then, Deren’s notion of primitivism emphasises sameness, wholeness and commonality, rather than otherness. This seems to be a pattern throughout Deren’s work: later in *Divine Horsemen*, for instance, with the purpose of debunking the myth of a “primitive mentality” (herself writing the term within inverted commas), which had been characterised as fundamentally incapable of abstract concepts, and confined to immanence, she would write that: “in effect, the deities to which the ‘primitive’ addresses himself [...] are analogous to the Catholic saints” (55). Here, as in her aesthetic philosophy, Deren emphasises similarities and congruences rather than difference and otherness, following a strategy familiar to her: a more or less assimilationist strategy of acceptance through eroding or minimising difference. Similarly, returning to Deren’s designs for the fugue film, she uses the ritualistic forms found in the “primitive” (“children’s games, Balinese and Haitian ritual”) in order to emphasise “the harmony, the basic equivalence of the

idea of form, common to them all” *despite* their variations (Deren qtd in Jackson 140).

In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin gives an account of his primitivist motivations in visiting Tahiti. When describing Tahitians, especially Tahitian women, his objectifying gaze accentuates otherness. In his meeting with Vaïtūa, a princess whose uncle was the recently deceased King Pomare, he emphasises his whiteness as “a European only recently landed on the island in his white helmet” as opposed to her sexualised otherness (Gauguin 14):

her slight, transparent dress stretched taut over her loins to bear a world. Oh, surely, she was a princess! Her ancestors? Giants proud and brave. Her strong, proud, wild head was firmly planted on her wide shoulders. At first I saw in her only the jaws of a cannibal, the teeth ready to rend, the lurking look of a cruel and cunning animal, and found her, in spite of her beautiful and noble forehead, very ugly. (14–15)

This gaze is inseparable from his gaze as an artist. He describes the queen, Maratiū, as possessing “the majestic sculptural form of her race” (10); another woman’s “traits combined in a Raphaellesque harmony by the meeting of curves. Her mouth [...] modeled by a sculptor” (33). Such otherness, however, is what Gauguin sought: he rejects one companion (Titi) because of her “half-white blood” (20), and journeys through the jungle following a guide he describes as possessing “the suppleness of an animal and the graceful litheness of an androgyne” (45). This guide is the incarnation of the jungle, described as “wild” and “impenetrable” (44): “I saw incarnated in him, palpitating and living, all the magnificent plant-life which surrounded us” (45). This primitivist association of Tahitian bodies with “wild” and vital vegetation is likewise reflected in his artist’s gaze, and surely evident in each of his Tahitian paintings: “The dull tones of their bodies form a lovely harmony with the velvet of the foliage. From their coppery breasts trembling melodies arise, and are faintly thrown back from the wrinkled trunks of the coconut-trees” (36). After the episode in the

jungle, Gauguin writes: “I was, indeed, a new man; from now on I was a true savage, a real Maori” (51). This is what Etherington terms “emphatic primitivism,” something “more than an expressed affinity or preference for the primitive. It is the urgent desire to become primitive” (33).

Conversely, Deren emphasised sameness *despite* difference; a human unity transcending the individual, accessed through ritual. Deren was in fact particularly critical of those she termed “modern primitives” whom she described as disengaged recluses, ignorant of social reality, and fundamentally misunderstanding or ignoring the role of artists within a “primitive society.” She argues that the artist’s role here was to communicate knowledge and principles within “his” community: “He stood half in the human world and half in the world of the super-natural powers; much was demanded of him by both; he could not afford the luxury of ignorance or impressions” (Deren, *Essential Deren* 51). She also singles out Henri Rousseau, noting that “modern primitives” fail to overcome Western modernity’s individualism: “contemporary primitive painting is a style of personal expression, a curiously naive and individual system of ideas” (52).

Of course, Deren’s terminology of “primitive” was derived from anthropology, but it was derived from the work of Dunham as much as it was from Margaret Mead or Gregory Bateson. Deren did consult Mead’s and Bateson’s work on dance in Bali in *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1936), and in particular was in conversation with Bateson, who encouraged her trip to Haiti (Jackson 142). Deren was not uncritical of their conclusions though, and just as in *Anagram* she was at pains to state that the artists of “primitive cultures” were neither ignorant nor unskilled (on the contrary, they were able to “comprehend and realize a whole system of ideas within their forms” (*Essential Deren* 51–52)), in her notes on *Trance and Dance in Bali* she resisted Mead’s and Bateson’s pathologisation of Balinese society as inherently sick as a result of an alleged lack of parenting structures, of

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which the trance rituals they filmed were supposedly symptomatic (Russell 276–77). In contrast, Deren was adamant that there was nothing anti-social, abnormal or delusional in such rituals as performed in their specific cultural context (Russell 277).

If “Gauguin’s primitivism was not free-floating, but followed, as it were, the colonizing path of the *tricolore*,” Deren’s was no more abstract and must be understood in relation to the US occupation of Haiti of 1915–34 and the renewed interest in the country as a result of the *Négritude* and New Negro movements (Solomon-Godeau 320). Haiti famously won independence from French colonial rule (under which it was known as Saint-Domingue) after the rebellion of 1791–1804. During this period, Spanish and British forces both fought to maintain the status quo – that of an enslaved Black colony ruled from Europe – albeit by displacing specifically French rule. Even with the establishment of the first Black-led republic, and the first independent Caribbean nation, Haiti was economically strangled. Western states including the United States under Thomas Jefferson refused to acknowledge its independence, drastically limiting the possibilities for trade. France, perversely, demanded reparations for its “property” lost due to the Revolution, and incredibly this “independence debt” was only paid off in 1947.⁷ In 1915, the United States capitalised on instability in the country and began a military occupation that lasted until 1934. However, it would not relinquish direct fiscal control of Haiti until 1942, and would continue collecting debt until 1947 – the year Deren arrived.

The US occupation provoked an alliance between the New Negro movement in the US and Caribbean intellectuals united in the cause of Haitian self-determination (Lowney 414). The country’s history of revolution also became “an important point of reference for both black nationalist and communist radicals” (415), something which could have escaped neither Dunham nor Deren. On the other hand, primitivist ideas surrounding Haiti were dominant in the US cultural imaginary.

William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) is full of exoticisms such as the following: “the jungle mountain creeping down to the edge of the city, primitive and eternal, as if patiently biding its time to reclaim its own” (130). As Wendy Dutton notes, the period immediately after the US military withdrawal “was a time when books like *Cannibal Cousins* and *Black Baghdad* were being published, reinforcing the perception of Haitian peasants as primitive, or, more precisely, savage, largely through distortions of voodoo” (139–40). Dutton also notes that in her fieldwork during this period, Zora Neale Hurston felt that the “Haitian elite” and intellectuals, by way of reaction to these misrepresentations, had become “sensitive to any reference to voodoo” (Hurston qtd in Dutton 138). The representation of Haiti, and particularly Haitian Voudoun, then, was (and remains) particularly loaded. Deren was aware of sensationalising accounts, and prefaces her diary entries published as the provocatively titled “The Artist as God in Haiti” (1948) by noting that she went to Haiti with the intention of countering these “sensational accounts of ‘a wild voodoo’” (115).

In these diary entries, recorded as written within a month of Deren’s arrival in Haiti, between 28 September and 6 October 1947, Deren offers an account of her first visit to a dance ritual led by the Houngan Champagne,⁸ describing events in a way that is clearly and overwhelmingly filtered through her aesthetic philosophy. Human contact free from the individualism of Western modernity is suggested by the following: “it is a little crowded here on the edges and all bodies brush casually by each other. A shoulder rubs by mine. Someone else presses by” (Deren, “Artist” 116). Other descriptions perfectly outline her idea of depersonalisation: for instance, the dance she observes is not individual expression, but rather the dancers are described “as if they were marionettes tied to the drums by invisible strings of sound” (116). Deren refers to the design of the ritual by a “collective mind” (121), to “the dancers” as a “group congealed behind me” (124), and to the sweat “mingled

on the handkerchief” that had been tied around her neck by the *houngan* after removing it from his own (119). The aesthetic realisation of such ideas can be seen in Deren’s film footage (never edited and released by her): her focus is almost never on an individual dancer but on interactions within a group. There are also scenes of the jostling human contact she describes here as inherent to the ritual dances; of thronging crowds filmed in the secular Haitian festivals such as *mardi gras*, and footage of the “mirror dancing” I discuss below.

Returning to her diary entries, despite her associates “S.” and “C.” (“city Haitians,” as Deren describes them, who are positioned in the text as infected with Western modernity’s “obsess[ion] with progress,” and who are more concerned with intellectualising and analysing the ritual than experiencing it (“Artist” 115)) encouraging her to take a seat in order to “‘observe’ everything,” Deren feels “isolated on [her] chair” (116). She begins to dance, and eventually finds her way towards the *houngan*, by way of a parted crowd: on her account, she senses that she is required to “salute” him (118). They lock eyes, and begin to mirror each other’s movements:

I do not follow him, nor he, me. But so inevitable is each movement according to the logic to which we are both committed, that we are united in it ... as the distended legs of a triangle find, in the point of apex, some timeless, spaceless, singleness. (119)

Through their ritual movement, the “timeless” primitive is accessed, and commonality located: “suddenly our mirroring movements slip into the accord of complete unity” (119). Commenting on her interaction with the *houngan*, Deren is even more explicit: “This is not sound making of an anonymous and willing chaos [...] This is a greater triumph: that I – personal, individual, singular – return [...] back to the collective, the racial, the parent body” (119). What precisely Deren means by “racial” here is ambiguous – presumably relating to the primal human race. The ambiguity is telling, though. Deren identifies with Black Haitians in general not because she also has some

knowledge of the diaspora or because of her Jewishness, but (far less plausibly, and somewhat bizarrely) because she is an artist, because artists and “natives” are both exploited by the “‘white’ man – whether tourist, industrialist or anthropologist” (*Divine Horsemen* 8). Indeed, in her preface to *Divine Horsemen*, she emphasises the “human bond” (7) and “affinity” she feels between herself and the Haitian people, to the extent that she claims to be perceived by them “not [as] a foreigner at all, but a prodigal native daughter finally returned” (8). Deren here fails to comprehend the ways in which she is *not* native, and in this sense, there appear echoes of certain aspects of Gauguin’s primitivism. Through the ritual, Deren claims to discover within herself “an old knowledge, newly discovered” (“Artist” 117), which shares something with Solomon-Godeau’s diagnosis of Gauguin’s primitivism:

the structural paradox on which Gauguin’s brand of primitivism depends is that one leaves home to discover one’s real self; the journey out [...] is, in fact, always a journey in; similarly, and from the perspective of a more formally conceived criticism, the artist “recognizes” in the primitive artifact that which was immanent, but inchoate; the object from “out there” enables the expression of what is thought to be “in there.” (315)

However, when Deren travels to the ritual from the veranda of her hotel, when she arrives, hers is a movement from the outside, inwards: “I would linger on the outskirts [...] I would circle timidly about its edges” (“Artist” 116). And rather than the ritual being presented as strange, Deren emphasises her own strangeness: “I feel that if I stayed so, the strangeness would be rubbed from me” (116).

Despite her impulse towards sameness, there are clearly racialised descriptions within Deren’s accounts. In differentiating Deren’s primitivism from Gauguin’s, it is certainly not my intention to suggest that racialisation was not an important, complex part of Deren’s work. As examples, the sound of the drums that leads Deren and her companions to the

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ritual, in what is surely a racialised description, associates the primitive with darkness: this sound, “growing with the dusk as if this luminous blackness which is the Haitian night was indeed its color vibrated like the murmur of blood in the pulse of a body which was living through something” (“Artist” 115). Deren’s eventual description of her possession by the goddess Erzulie in *Divine Horsemen*, as I will discuss later, is also undeniably and complexly racialised: with her account describing it as “a white darkness” overtaking her body; “its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror” (259).

One clear point of contrast to Gauguin’s primitivism does, though, seem to be present in these diary accounts. Rather than Gauguin’s fantasised rape of Tahitian women and his fetishisation of unequal power, Deren’s mirror dancing first with the *houngan*, and then with the other people taking part in the ritual, is described as a measured reciprocity; a carefully yet effortlessly negotiated consent. Neither leads the movement (“I do not follow him, nor he, me”), and yet they are “both committed, [...] united in it...” (Deren, “Artist” 119). This kind of ethics is certainly what Deren presents, but it may of course be no less of a fantasy than that of Gauguin’s. Fantasy, though, often has material consequences, and while Gauguin’s played out in his “marriages” to Tahitian teenage girls, Deren at least tries to be unobtrusive and ethical in her conduct. Ultimately, though, we are only viewing one side of the story, and are left to imagine what might be the thoughts of the Haitian crowd, the *houngan* or indeed the “city Haitians” accompanying Deren.

At the point of writing her second application to the Guggenheim Fellowship outlining her plans for the fugue film, while Deren had published work on Haitian ritual dance (her 1942 essay “Religious Possession in Dancing”), she had never actually visited Haiti herself. When she finally did, it seems that the plans she had so carefully made – through her dense, modernist aesthetic philosophy; her scholarship on Haiti; and her study of Mead’s and Bateson’s work in Bali – entirely

fell apart. In her diary descriptions of the ritual previously discussed, Deren presents a neat package of her aesthetic philosophy. Yet in another diary entry only a few days later (which remained *unpublished*), she is confronted with the material reality of Haiti, namely its economic poverty and attendant suffering. In this moment, Deren is no longer able to focus on formal considerations and her aesthetic philosophy falls apart: as she writes in *Divine Horsemen*, “my original premise was destroyed” (7). After seeing a sick child, Deren wrote on 11 October 1947:

the whole religious ritual was acceptable only on a poetic level, as a myth [...] I was suddenly appalled by the impression that to make aesthetics out of the misery of human beings, or out of that which was attended by misery, was scarcely more excusable than to make science out of the same phenomena [...] I think that at about this point in my thinking I must have sweated buckets. If I insisted [...] that ethnography was a parasitic exploitation of culture, then was my aesthetics any less so? And if, as I added to myself later, such exploitation was particularly detestable when it was brought to a culture which was full of human misery (unlike Bali) and pursued in the face of that misery, then I ought to give myself a good, swift kick and get out [...] (Deren qtd in Jackson 146)

I want to focus on this moment – however fleeting – of conscious refusal in Deren’s diary entry. In this moment, Deren’s modernist formalism is destroyed, and she is forced to connect Voudoun to its social, economic and historical context. Deren’s words here demonstrate an acknowledgement of the white gaze, of colonial power dynamics, of extracting and taking from other cultures. Does Deren acknowledge here the necessity of fracturing that gaze? Does she conclude that the most ethical move she could make as a white filmmaker in Haiti at this period in time would be to “get out”?

Despite shooting thousands of feet in footage, Deren never made her film, explaining

this in the preface to her book, *Divine Horsemen*, as follows:

I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my own manipulations. (6)

Deren seems to differentiate her book from her filmic art (which she saw as defined by creative, conscious manipulation), not necessarily as objective documentary, but by turning to a very modernist notion of “disinterested receptivity,” with which she is equipped as an artist (and not as an ethnographer or documentarist) (7).⁹

The notion of “disinterestedness” is used by Deren to try to displace her objective, aesthetic gaze. In fact, though, *Divine Horsemen* offers a very personal and poetic account of Deren’s association with Voudoun, which has the effect of destroying any pretence of objective manipulation. This eventual text written instead of any film, and published five years after Deren’s diary account explored above, further outlines her ideas on primitivism as explored in relation to Voudoun, offering accounts of the Voudoun pantheon and rites to counter “exotic and sensational” misinterpretations of its culture (*Divine Horsemen* 16). It is neither “objective” ethnography, nor a formal, aesthetic study, but includes accounts from Haitian practitioners recounted by Deren alongside her own descriptions of attending ceremonies and indeed her own possession. Just as Deren recounts being overcome by the material circumstance of Haiti, the book, in some ways, could be read as a story of being overcome, culminating as it does in Deren’s account of her own possession by the *loa* Erzulie. This is Deren’s story of the “white darkness.”

Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* begins with poetic discussion of the place of origin stories across cultures, in a classic primitivist elaboration:

The metaphors of the diverse myths differ; the nature of the Cosmic Catalyst is the

same. It is an energy which, out of the anonymity of void, of chaos, of the wholeness of a Cosmic Egg, crystallizes the major elements, precipitates the primary areas, and finally differentiates the first androgynous life [...] This is the fiction of beginnings, couched in the past tense. But the chants are not *in memoriam*. They may be heard as a celebration of each contemporary recapitulation of that first creation. The microcosmic egg rides the red tides of the womb [...] the latest life, like the first, flows with the seas’ chemistry [...] its heart reverberates a lifetime with the pounding momentum of the primal sea pulse. The beginning, which no man witnessed, is ever present, ever before us. (22)

Even as Deren’s gaze (or, now, her voice) has shifted, her insistence on the primitive remains. On Deren’s account, Voudoun allows access to a primal life force via the ritual of summoning the *loa*. The *loa* are not only gods, but ancestors: “the very blood of the race” (31), and thus when they speak, it is with an “authority that booms as if from the bowels of the earth” (29). The world of the dead, the *loa*, the “Invisibles,” is “the soul of the cosmos, the source of life force, the cosmic memory, and the cosmic wisdom” (35). In these “waters of the abyss, the source of all life [...] is *Guinée*, Africa, the legendary place of racial origin [...] [where] the *loa* have their permanent residence, their primal location” (35–36). Expanding on this, Deren later adds that for “the Haitian, it is his heritage that is the source of his life force” (72). It is through ritual calling on the *loa*, Deren writes, that this primal commonality is preserved.

And yet, as with many primitivist projects, Deren recounts the urgency of a society on the verge of being lost, subsumed by Western capital (and specifically “modern technology,” which she charges with destroying a sense of commonality and community (*Divine Horsemen* 188)). She claims that the major *loa* do not visit as frequently, noting the common Haitian saying that “Big *loa* cannot ride little horses” (95). In one of the closest moments

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Deren gets to referencing the recent crisis of war and occupation,¹⁰ she writes that “Displacement, poverty, instability are effecting a gradual but certain demoralization” (95). It is as a result of this societal erosion by the West that the *loa* are retreating, that, as Deren puts it: “The psychic blood of the people is growing thinner” (95).

Deren is not entirely speaking in metaphors with this comment on “psychic blood.” She discusses blood in material, and scientific terms:

principles are handed down in the very blood that links one generation to another. Just as blood itself is constantly subject to glandular and dietary variations, so the psychic chemistry of these individual carriers [...] in turn affects the principles which it nourishes. (Deren, *Divine Horsemen* 90)

Deren, it seems, both here and in her comments on her own “blood memories,” was interested in contemporary scientific debate on “blood knowledge.”¹¹ In the context of Voudoun, the drums become aligned with this primal blood knowledge, with Deren describing how a Haitian infant is so immersed in such music that they “could not but come to know the drums’ beat as its own, blood-familiar pulse” (226).

And yet despite the encroachment of modernity, the *loa* appear to mount their own resistance. Deren recounts a story told to her by a friend, Titon, who had ambitions to become a *houngan* himself, and planned to raise funds for his initiation through employment as a dancer at the Haitian International Exposition (*Divine Horsemen* 79). The Exposition of 1949–50 sought to “transform the capital of Port-au-Prince into a visionary modern city” (Séraphin et al. 97) supplanting its negative representation as “underdeveloped and incapable” (98). This was at great cost to the Haitian economy (a reported \$4 million) and many overseas nations made their mark by contributing – perhaps the best example of this being the main street, which was named “Harry S. Truman Avenue” after the then US president. Part of the Exposition included cultural

performances, some of which were designed “to present Voudoun as a folklore attraction to tourists” (Deren, *Divine Horsemen* 79). While Titon decided to take part in a “folklorique troop,” his particular *loa*, Ghede, objected. Deren reports Titon’s account that “From the first moment of his appearance on the stage, his left eye began to close, by the will of Ghede” (79), resulting in his withdrawal from the troupe that very night. Ghede’s resistance to the white gaze is evident elsewhere, when in a footnote Deren notes that “nothing will more quickly provoke Ghede’s appearance and his defiant, overt obscenities than the presence of white visitors” (103).

As noted, then, *Divine Horsemen* ends with Deren’s account of her possession by Erzulie. She writes of being overcome by the primal, which is described repeatedly in watery imagery, as a “lavish arterial river of ancestral blood” (Deren, *Divine Horsemen* 247), as “cosmic surf [crashing] over one’s head” (252), with bodies dancing in “wave-like motion,” “blend[ing] into a slow serpentine stream,” like “the roll of the sea” (252). If ritual and Voudoun could be understood as Deren’s attempt to *locate* a lost sense of self in her own primal “blood memories,” her possession is described as a loss of identity: a “thinning out of consciousness” (253) where she battles to maintain a “certainty of self [and] proper identity” (256). But this, again, is the primitivist paradox: the self lies in the “other,” in the blood memories of the primal, and here in the loss of self to the “white darkness” of possession: “the white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising [... It is] a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin” (260). In possession, Deren feels that this “swift tide” of the primal will drown her, and her modernist philosophy of “depersonalization” undoubtedly returns here. And when Deren writes of possession that “its whiteness [is] a glory and its darkness, terror,” the racial dynamics seem stark (259). Only on the following page though, she writes of this overcoming as “too much, too bright, too white for me; this is its darkness,” signifying

something much more complex, layered and indeed paradoxical in its racialisation (260). We should also read this as a description of undoing, another fracture prompted by the Haitian context. The move from film to writing, from the aesthetic mode to the personal, also allows Deren to record the undoing she describes as the “white darkness,” a story of a subject engulfed by the other, a poetic illustration of emphatic primitivism.

Either through her convictions in challenging misconceptions of Voudoun, or to try to get funds to continue making work,¹² or both, Deren did later attempt to market her footage, writings and photographs to universities in the United States as an education package (Keller 175), or to various organisations such as the Parapsychology Society. Still, she never used the footage she shot in Haiti as part of her artistic films. Her discomfort seems to lie in “manipulating” the subject matter, in considering it on an aesthetic level.

After visiting Haiti, Deren describes ethnography as “parasitic exploitation,” but does her refusal of film suggest she recognises something particularly violent in the filmic gaze? Ethnographic film has a particular investment in the primitive, as Deren was aware through Mead’s and Bateson’s work. As Shankar summarises:

the earliest ethnographic films relied on the perceived difference between white, Western, “civilized,” “modern” filmmakers and non-white, “primitive,” tribal, backwards peoples rendered mute on-screen. This ethnographic film history was predicated on observing and salvaging the histories of the “primitive,” soon-to-be-extinct peoples through visual documentation and, in so doing, these ethnographic films neatly mapped race onto culture, unabashedly fixing “primitive” practices onto bodies. (125)

While Deren, as we observe from her diaries, explicitly does not *want* to be an observer or to be different, at least in this moment she recognises the inescapable dynamics of her aesthetic gaze as a white US citizen.

Within Deren’s footage, however, she filmed extraordinary scenes of Haitian agency which address the white, Western gaze. Robert Young writes of the move from object to subject that is a key action of post-colonialism: “To translate oneself from the perspective of the dominant to that of the subordinated, from being seen as an object to being a subject is the core structural and political move that postcolonialism involves” (138–47). It is precisely this move that can be seen on the part of the Haitian people who feature in Deren’s film reels. In addition to filming the Voudoun rituals and dance that took place in the *hounfours* outside the city,¹³ Deren also filmed the *mardi gras* festival in Port-au-Prince. Her shots capture thronging crowds, elaborate costumes (often satirical in nature), carnival floats and dancers. In one particular scene (see [Figure 1](#)), we see a group of young men “perform” as a camera crew on top of a *mardi gras* float, complete with a “camera” constructed from what appear to be wooden spools, tubes and boxes, propped up with the branch of a tree. The image should be understood alongside other anti-colonial acts at the festival and filmed by Deren: a rotund, ludicrous and mechanical figure of a “diplomate” in top hat and tails nods robotically (see [Figure 2](#)); a chef, complete with grotesque papier mâché white face and typically French turtle-neck references the French instrument of soft power in its cuisine, his apron reading “chimpanzé cuisinier” [chimpanzee chef] alongside devil-like clawed hands and feet (see [Figure 3](#)). These costumes and floats are all part of the carnival festivities, the performers part of the crowd of celebrants. The very obviously constructed camera, together with the gestures of the “film crew” operating it, exaggeratedly perform and deconstruct the voyeurism of Western film crews. Cinema was of course French in origin, invented by the Lumière brothers in 1895. Within five years, “a representative of the Lumière cinematograph made the first public projection” in Port-au-Prince (Antonin 87). In Haiti, the medium had colonial associations from the start.



Fig. 1. A group of Haitian men perform as a camera crew, as part of the Port-au-Prince *mardi gras* festival. Film still from Maya Deren’s Haitian footage, used as part of the film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Teiji Ito and Chere Ito, 1985, United States).



Fig. 2. A carnival float at Port-au-Prince *mardi gras* carries a bloated “diplomat.” Film still from Maya Deren’s Haitian footage, used as part of the film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Teiji Ito and Chere Ito, 1985, United States).



Fig. 3. A carnival goer at Port-au-Prince *mardi gras* festival dressed as a “French” “chimpanzé cuisinier” [chimpanzee chef] extends a clawed hand. Film still from Maya Deren’s Haitian footage, used as part of the film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Teiji Ito and Chere Ito, 1985, United States).

It seems that Deren understood, perhaps through the recognition of the limits of her own gaze, the need for Haitian-authored film. She had plans to create “a 16 mm avant-garde film industry and ‘Institute of Cinematography’ in Haiti” (Sullivan qtd in Nichols 229). These plans were never realised – Deren struggled throughout her life to fund her own artistic production let alone that of others. Then, and now, the possibilities for filmmaking by Haitians themselves remain relatively minimal. Turning to the legacy of colonialism and its effect on contemporary visual production, Haitians’ access to camera technology, to expensive film, and even to cinemas, has been limited (Antonin notes that cinemas and distribution have been controlled by French Caribbean companies (88); Posch noted only one functioning screening venue in 2015 (31)). In contemporary Haiti, while the cost of film production has fallen drastically with digital technologies, and access to cameras has become far more democratic via mobile phone technology, still the

economic situation prevents a thriving local film industry such as that of Nigeria. Posch notes the creation of a film school, the Ciné Institute, in Jacmèl in 2008, by the American documentary film-maker David Belle. The Institute, however, ceased taking on students in 2015 because there was simply no sustainable distribution for Haitian film-makers (Posch 30). Posch also notes the funding available for Haitian film reinforces neocolonial power dynamics, with “organizations and individuals providing funding promot[ing] and implement[ing] development-oriented actions, thereby shaping the educational agenda of the film school in Haiti” (33) or even the content produced, as in the case of the “NGO-(re)sourced film productions that predominantly serve an international humanitarian marketing purpose” (34).

As for visual and artistic production in contemporary Haiti beyond film, Prézeau-Stephenson emphasises the influence of Western finance not only on the scale but on the *content* of production: “In Europe and the



Fig. 4. Alex Louis, Steevens Simeon and Jean-Pierre Romel of “Tele Geto” introduce their project. Film still from “TeleGhetto Haiti Introduction,” with original English subtitles, from the US-based non-profit “Global Nomads Group” YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdmZJqkAMfg&t=107s).



Fig. 5. Alex Louis interviews a local man in Port-au-Prince using a home-made paper carton “microphone” for Tele Geto. Film still from “Tele Ghetto: The Return of Baby Doc,” from the US-based non-profit “Global Nomads Group” YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IINjbKh6HhU).

United States, most galleries specializing in the Haitian art market remain resistant to contemporary art [because] the profits obtained through the trade of naïve art cannot be beaten” (104). There is a Western market for Haitian art, but overwhelmingly only art of a certain kind; that is, “naïve” art, or more recently “art known as ‘brut’ ([...] spontaneous arts [*sic*] by autodidacts, but also by the mentally ill and even children) [...]”; art termed “outsider art” which sees the export of

“artifacts from the Vodou religion” supply the international “art brut circuit” consisting of art fairs and “a whole network of specialized galleries” (95). Evidently, Haitian culture, perhaps especially Voudoun, still figures in the Western cultural imaginary predominantly as “primitive.”

Material, economic factors shape and delimit the production of Haitian-authored artworks, then. One innovative means of shining light on the disparities between the Western art

world and Haitian artistic production is the Geto Byenal (Ghetto Biennale), held in Port-au-Prince from 2009 onwards. The Geto Byenal was conceived by André Eugène of the Port-au-Prince-based group *Atis Rezistans* (Resistance Artists) and the film-maker, photographer and writer Leah Gordon, who notes that the event was spurred by the “exclusion of Haitian-based, lower-class artists from the globalized, fluid, networked art circuit” due to restrictions on their mobility, both financial and political (Gordon 129).¹⁴ The Geto Byenal was also, partly, a way of countering the idea of Haitian art as “primitive”; the

unwelcome category of “outsider” or “naïve” artist, attributed to [Haitian artists] by Western audiences. By holding the Ghetto Biennale and inviting international contemporary artists, *Atis Rezistans* were refusing this positioning and embracing a repositioning by their association with contemporary international artists. (Gordon 137)

Furthermore, the Geto Byenal sheds light on the complex issue of the filmic gaze. After the first two events, and “in response to a number of incidents of predominately lens-based voyeurism,” the organisers decided to introduce a lens ban for visiting artists “hopefully to resist the exoticizing Western gaze and to alleviate the implicit technology-based power dynamics” (Gordon 145). Gordon has also stated that “to exclude the lens of the visiting artists will be one method of diverting certain ethnographic gazes,” and further, to counter the dependence on lens-based art which she felt to be stifling creativity. Such creativity was needed by visiting artists to find a way through the deconstruction of their plans precipitated by the environment:

The creativity of the Ghetto Biennale is as much about broken dreams as realised fantasy. It deals with the active deconstruction of artists’ proposals. There is a rapid entropy of ideas, projects, ideals that takes place on entry to the Ghetto Biennale and it is at this level creativity has to really

take place to struggle against the disorder and chaos.¹⁵

The destruction of Deren’s own plans spurred by the recognition of the power dynamics of her situation, and her subsequent refusal of lens-based art prompted the fracturing of her own gaze; moving from the formalist modern aesthetics she intended, inspired by ethnographic film, to the personal and poetic mode in which she writes not as an objective observer, but as participant.

I want to end by considering a performance piece from the Geto Byenal, called “Tele Geto” performed by the group *Ti Moun Rezistans* (see Figures 4 and 5):

the radical piece of performance art “Tele Geto” [...] was created and performed by three local teenagers. They had fashioned a pretend video camera from a plastic litre oil container and used a stick with gaffer tape at the end for a microphone. For three days they ghost filmed the Ghetto Biennale, mimicking the movements of foreign film-makers with uncomfortable accuracy. (Gordon 138)

The piece bears startling resemblance to the performance filmed by Deren decades earlier. Both are clear gestures of occupying the subject position *in front of* the camera, no matter what that camera is made of. Both performances highlight the inequalities of global capital and the persistence of colonial power within it. Both, however, are powerful actions to invert and fracture the colonial gaze even despite these inequalities, with any means available; ultimately making a powerful gesture of independence and authorial control through their artwork. It is this “discomfort” – the discomfort attendant to Deren’s first visit to Haiti, as well as that provoked by the powerful resistance to the colonial gaze – that must be held, recognised and cultivated.



disclosure statement

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notes

1 See, for instance, Torgovnick; or Hal Foster’s, Thomas McEvilley’s or James Clifford’s criticisms of the 1984 MoMA New York exhibition on Primitivism included in the anthology *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art* (Flam and Deutch).

2 Peter Brooks argues that Tahiti had become at the time, in the French imaginary specifically, “most remarkably a sexual paradise, a place where the surplus repression that had created the discontents of European civilization simply had no currency, and the pleasure principle dominated without censorship” (53). As such, he writes, for Gauguin “only the body of a woman untouched by European civilization will answer to the needs of the primitive myth” (62). This, Brooks argues, resulted in Gauguin’s representation of a “Tahitian Eve,” stripped of the shame inflicted on her by Western culture, as in *Delightful Land (Te Nave Nave Fenua)* (1892).

3 Despite this association, Deren “categorical[ly] reject[ed] surrealism” as self-involved and individualistic (Michelson 29).

4 Breton was invested in the Haitian revolution and in Voudoun, which he saw “as a ‘pure’ manifestation of the ‘primitive’” (Geis 60).

5 See Jackson for in-depth discussion of the influence of Eliot, Hulme and Bergson on Deren’s work.

6 This professed disinterest in religion would seem to be at odds with Deren’s fascination with Voudoun, and perhaps echoes the tension Breton felt at recognising the political power of myth and ritual in Voudoun, especially its centrality to the revolution, when coupled with his long-standing rejection of religion as a Marxist (Geis).

7 France received indemnity payments until 1893, then in 1911 the US government supplied funds to acquire Haiti’s treasury so that it could receive interest payments on the original debt. This “debt” was paid to the City Bank of New York, now Citibank.

8 A *houngan* is a Voudoun priest.

9 Jackson links this specifically to Bergson’s and Eliot’s aesthetics (164).

10 While Deren references the Haitian revolution, particularly in her section where she

describes the integral part Voudoun played in the Haitian resistance (*Divine Horsemen* 61–71), she does not directly discuss the very recent history of the US occupation. One footnote does briefly note the United States’ economic exploitation of Haiti: “the lack of Haitian capital forces a dependence on American capital, which is not above exploiting the situation” (170).

11 Martha Graham was also fascinated by the idea of blood memories, and, as Etherington writes:

Social Darwinism and eugenics are now notorious, but they were part of a much broader convergence of discourses around blood. The concept of “genes” was coined at this time [the early twentieth century], and with it came the notion that blood carries specific inherited traits. (107)

12 Deren never received a grant anywhere near the size of her first Guggenheim Fellowship again, nor was she successful in renewing it.

13 The *houngan* is the Voudoun place of worship.

14 Gordon notes that “In terms of visa restrictions Haiti is one of the most prejudiced against countries in the world, lying joint 79 in a ranking of 94 (Henley & Partners 2014)” (129).

15 From my own correspondence with Gordon.

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